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The Insistence of Art

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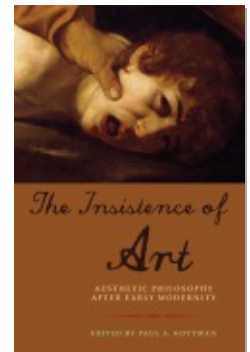
Published by Fordham University Press

Kottman, P. A..

The Insistence of Art: Aesthetic Philosophy after Early Modernity.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2017.

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Remembering Isaac: On the Impossibility and Immorality of Faith

J. M. Bernstein

Desire mediates between subject and object, and it annihilates the distance between them by transforming the subject into a lover and the object into the beloved. For the lover is never isolated from what he loves; he belongs to it. . . . Hence, in *cupiditas* or in *caritas*, we decide about our abode, whether we wish to belong to this world or the world to come, but the faculty that decides is always the same. Since man is not self-sufficient and therefore always desires something outside himself, the question of who he is can only be resolved by the object of his desire.

—HANNAH ARENDT, *Love and Saint Augustine*

Secular modernity is in retreat, its ideals, ends, and fundamental forms of self-understanding under a constant barrage of interrogation and challenge. Correspondingly, the goods of religion, the inevitability of political theology, and the necessity of faith are being offered a late veneer of legitimacy, a guilt-ridden acknowledgment that their intended destruction at the hands of rational modernity has been somehow undeserved. This reevaluation of religious modes of thought strikes me as deeply mistaken, a work of self-hatred and self-repudiation, as if secular modernity could be reduced to its most destructive movements.

Although the issues here are multiple and complex, my narrow focus in this essay concerns the resurgence of faith as the presumptively necessary complement to secular reason. Faith gets a good deal of its current acceptance through its contrast with reason, as if the only “other” to reason were faith, even reason requiring faith, at least in itself. The now all too familiar “reason needs faith” view assumes that if reason is left to its own devices it becomes totalitarian, transforming all ends into means. Although the idea of a wholly self-sufficient reason is indeed dangerous in its totalizing aspirations, there is no reason to think that only faith is truly other

to reason, or that faith is the paradigm of reason's other (although that thought hits on a significant historical moment, as we shall see). There are numerous others to reason: trust, love, commitment, loyalty, courage, the whole panoply of feelings, emotions, and affects.¹ Commitment to reason does not entail a wholly rationalized, calculating view of the world: Reason can be in the service of the love of others, of children, friends, and fellow citizens. Reason can orient trust in neighbors and strangers (doctors, teachers, politicians, plumbers, secondhand car salesmen). It can inflect our commitment to causes and ideals. What distinguishes these others is that they are not absolutely other to reason since each carries within itself norms of appropriateness and inappropriateness that make it available to rational evaluation. Trust, for example, can be earned or unearned, excessive or insufficient, sensitive or insensitive to evidence. Trust is indeed an attitude of acceptance; but for all that, it can be rational or irrational.² Faith is otherwise; by definition it exceeds the parameters of reason and evidence; that excess is constitutive of (modern) faith, in particular the concept of faith pioneered by Pascal that receives its definitive philosophical elaboration in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard.

It is only faith in its austere understanding, the kind of faith that Kierkegaard unflinchingly urges (and, arguably, belongs to both fundamentalism and many resurrected religious practices) that challenges the secularist self-understanding of reason. Arguably, it is this conception of faith that is at stake in the actual debates between religious and secular views of the fate of modern society, since only this notion of faith must dispute the restricting of faith to standing within the limits of democratic pluralism alone. (Religious beliefs that accept democratic pluralism and the claims of natural science as trumping the demands of faith are sufficiently secular in their outlook as to raise no problems requiring immediate address.) And it is certainly this conception of faith that has been used within philosophy for contesting the authority of secular reason, and hence this conception of faith which yields the radical self-doubt of secular reason underlying claims for our now living in a postsecular society, not just factually, but by right.

My argument is critical, diagnostic, and genealogical. In the first and third sections of the essay, I track the genealogy of secular reason in its scientific and moral constitution as arising from an explicit rejection of faith. The long middle section offers a reading of Kierkegaard's account of the nature of faith in *Fear and Trembling*, in which I argue that faith as faith is the *sacrifice* of reason, including moral reason, through being a sacrifice of love of the world. Sacrifice, I argue, belongs to the inner logic of faith. In my opening section I proffer a slightly heterodox reading of

Descartes, claiming that the founding gesture of the *Meditations* and the precise meaning of the cogito is the repudiation of faith as performatively contradictory and logically irrational. This critique of faith is constitutive of secular reason, a fact that Kierkegaard is all too aware of; his notion of faith is indeed constructed as the other of secular reason in this sense. In the final section, I argue that we can find *a* if not *the* counterreading to Kierkegaard's telling of the Abraham narrative in Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac* from 1603; arguably, moral modernity can be dated from that moment. Caravaggio's realist form of painting, his installation or inauguration or actualization of modern autonomous art achieves a definitive statement in *Isaac* by formally and substantially blocking the sacrificial movement of the Abraham narrative. In making us witnesses to Isaac's suffering rather than spectators, the painting transforms the terms from the religious to the ethical. Rational and moral modernity arrive through destruction of faith as a mode of world-relation in radical acts of self-affirmation and recognition. Secular reason is necessarily and emphatically other to faith. In pointing to the "arguments" of Descartes and Caravaggio against faith, I mean to be highlighting two pivotal moments in the constitution of secular reason; these moments belong to what is indeed a progressive learning process. I hear in the idea of the postsecular willingness to repudiate these genealogical touchstones of Western reason a despairing, self-lacerating doubt. The cogito and the pleading eye of Isaac were intended from their inception as counters to precisely such despair and self-doubt.

Faith Is Self-Sacrifice

Descartes is an appropriate first guide here since our situation is uncannily analogous to the one he faced, namely a world in which there were three fiercely competing certainties: the deliverances of the senses; mathematical and logical truths, with the sciences that followed from them; and religious faith. These three modes of certainty were then, and are now, accompanied by a sophisticated skepticism that insists that none of these certainties deserve allegiance.³ Mathematical physics contradicts the immediate evidence of the senses. The church's condemnation of Galileo in June 1633 for holding the doctrine that the earth moves—occurring just as Descartes was about to publish his *Treatise on the Universe*—made evident that there was a fundamental conflict between reason and faith. The writings of Montaigne give powerful expression to the skeptical tradition that holds that all human beliefs are partial, limited, and rationally open to refutation.

Descartes's goal is not to reconstitute the field of knowledge from the bottom up, but to provide a foundation sufficient to ground the structure of the sciences;⁴ and for this purpose, given the nature of the crisis, a plausible, indeed compelling skeptical procedure is to exam just "those principles upon which all [his] former opinions rested."⁵ Those principles, finally, correlate exactly with the three domains of certainty: sense, reason, faith. It should not go unmentioned that placing faith in this list tacitly makes it a kind of mental faculty, a source of object-relations. In reality, faith is an attitude (like trust), or a feeling (like conviction), or an act (like believing or willing) rather than a separate faculty of mind; but as the effort is made to separate faith from sense and reason, on the one hand, and these other attitudes, on the other hand, it begins to take on faculty-like qualities, as if it were via this faculty that the human mind contacted God, apprehending if not comprehending God. Given its setting and treatment not just in Descartes, but generally, the faith versus reason opposition is routinely construed as analogous to the senses versus reason opposition. Faith marks the relation of the believer to God; faith is how the God of the Jews and the Christians is beheld.

Although the method of radical doubt presupposes the modern idea of individual freedom whereby beliefs and epistemic commitments become matters of personal responsibility, where the individual holding a belief becomes accountable for it, Descartes's method is not viciously circular. This act of taking responsibility is not, in the first instance, metaphysically asserted; rather, it is instigated by the crisis itself; the crisis distances the subject from his or her core beliefs and places him or her in a reflective relation to those beliefs.⁶ In seeing the need to take individual responsibility for culturally sanctioned modes of certainty, Descartes is implicitly claiming that nothing is truly or rightfully certain unless "I take it, I judge it" *as* certain.⁷ This is equally Descartes's conclusion. The apperceptive condition entails that even modes of certainty are mediated.

The stunning strategy of the first *Meditation* involves bringing the three competing domains of certainty and their skeptical refutation into an orderly conversation in which the method of skepticism is employed to overcome skepticism and reason's opponents: sense-knowledge and faith. The first arguments from illusion establish that the senses never were autonomous claimants; sense awareness is always under the control of reason. Sensory cognition is always a matter of judgment; hence the sense doubt is not the senses being corrected by reason, but reason as the power of judgment "in the process of self-correction."⁸

The catharsis of sensory knowing via the dream doubt leaves the mediator with only the sciences that deal with the simplest and most general things, namely, arithmetic and geometry. Even dreaming we cannot doubt that a square has four sides. Descartes must now find a way to throw into doubt even the most irresistible of the deliverances of reason. His difficulty in doubting mathematical reason derives from it instantiating the rule of reason: What is clearly and distinctly perceived is indubitable. Hence, any doubt that could question mathematical reason would have to be supra-rational, nonnatural, or metaphysical, since any such doubts would necessarily run contrary to the nature of mind. The questioning of reason originates from a domain beyond reason, but not from a domain external to the certainties governing our belief system generally. On the contrary, the third source of certainty, namely faith in the creator God of traditional revealed religion, appears immediately as a source of beliefs not subject to the rule of reason. Could not an all-powerful God lead me to be deceived about even the simplest calculations? To imagine God could not would be equivalent to denying God's omnipotence. The claim that such a God is necessarily supremely good, and it would be incompatible with God's goodness to have made me constantly deceive myself is equally untoward: "It would," Descartes says, "also appear to be contrary to His goodness to permit me to be sometimes deceived, and nevertheless I cannot doubt that he does permit this."⁹

If I am right in postulating that the precise stakes and region of Cartesian doubt constitute the crisis of reason besetting the framework of beliefs in the light of the incommensurability among competing sources of certainty, then the original metaphysical doubt and its extension into the doubt of the evil demon is a reflective staging of the strife between faith and reason which exhibits, precisely, the disjunction between the demands of religion and the requirements of the new science, a staging that uses the method of doubt to overcome (cultural) doubt. That metaphysical doubt arises at just the moment where reason is reassuring itself with mathematical intuitions, thus focusing the faith versus reason conflict where the latter becomes necessary for the former to carry out its self-critical examination. Faith demonstrates that it is logically possible to doubt reason; faith becomes the doubt of reason. (This simply makes reflectively explicit what was already implicit in the cultural crisis of the time.) The demon doubt would be idle unless it generated a true either/or: "affirming the existence of the biblical God, which entails the uncertainty of all knowledge, [or] affirming the self-sufficiency of reason, which entails the denial of unqualified divine omnipotence."¹⁰

Descartes's procedure documents the sole conditions in which faith could be rational for us moderns, namely, if having faith were the necessary condition for a binding relation to the world because it was the sole means available for overcoming a culture-wide skeptical crisis concerning the conditions of world-relatedness. If faith does not concern a binding relation to the world, then it cannot be in any sense authoritative for the believer since it would have no leverage in relation to what does bind and orient existence. Said differently, if faith is not what grounds or founds the self-understanding through which the "I" determines his or her way through the world, then it becomes simply optional, but if optional then without sufficient authority to provide *overriding* grounds for the believer on which to base his or her decisions about his or her life and his or her treatment of. Nonbinding faith can be as weak as an inkling of there being "more" than this world or as strong as a fervent wish or passionate hope, but nothing that deserves constitutive social respect independent of the moral and legal respect-based tolerance owed its holders. Conversely, if faith were shown to be a necessary condition for relating to the world, then the deliverance of faith about, say, the age of the world and how it came to be, or the moral worth of human embryos could, at least in principle, trump other sources for determining them. What would give faith its power to trump the self-correcting common sense of everyday reason with its scientific supplement would be the skeptical discovery that reason lacks binding authority. This is exactly the possibility that the demon doubt raises. And if that doubt could not be answered, then it would be radical faith that was necessary: Only a leap of faith, that is, a surmounting of the claims of intellect and sense and the according of an unconditional trust in a benevolent as opposed to malevolent omnipotent deity, could now render the subject's relation to himself or herself, others, and the world coherent and tenable.

What the threat of an evil demon attempting to deceive me fully shares with the idea of faith is that both involve the effort to completely doubt the immanent authority of reason and judgment. The idea of the evil demon thus brings self-doubt to the highest pitch conceivable. Whereas the defeat of reason would require faith to answer skepticism, the defeat of the faith-based doubt would demonstrate that faith is impossible. And this is the profound meaning and point of the cogito: I cannot hand over or surrender my conscious existence to the other, consider it a gift, for in order for that to be possible *I* would have to do the handing over, the very act of so doing affirming what the intentional content of the act denies.¹¹

A simple objection to what I have just argued might run like this: From the fact that an act of suicide is a result of my agency that destroys my agency, it does not follow that I cannot destroy my agency. Descartes cannot be claiming that faith, as the mind's self-repudiation of its own primacy and authority, is impossible: In actively accepting the absolute authority of another, believers do that every day. The argument is rather twofold: first, that the act of faith is not what believers suppose it to be, namely, a founding of myself on the authority of another, but rather a perpetually disowned "I think," a disowned judgment that necessarily depends for its occurrence and effectiveness on granting to our powers of judgment the authority to judge what is or is not authoritative; this is the sense in which the content of the act opposes its formal conditions of possibility.¹² But given that is the case, then, second, the act can *only* be one of intellectual suicide.

One last variation on this idea: If every act of faith depends on a suppressed "I think," "I take," "I judge," then faith is simply another wholly human act of judgment. As an act of judgment it is not certain, but derivative, mediated, a work of reflection. But if faith is finally an act of judgment, then it is not what it has traditionally been conceived to be and what Kierkegaard will say it is, namely, an absolute relation (faith) to the absolute (God), hence something irreducibly singular, immediate, and grounding. Religious spirituality depends on the idea that there is an irreducible type of mental attitude that distinguishes my relation to God from my relation to ideas and sensuous particulars. What Descartes demonstrates is that there is no such attitude—there has never been, and there never could be a mental posture of faith, only a judgment, but an awful judgment because it is one that is performatively contradictory, self-repudiating, and self-denying. Faith is not a posture of the mind, but the imagining of such a posture, the imagining of what turns out to be an imaginary type of relation to an imaginary object. Once one understands the cogito, faith is finished.

Faith as Sacrificing the Other

Arguably, the Abraham-Isaac narrative stands very near the center of Western religious spirituality, and certainly so since the seventeenth century; it is, perhaps, even more central than the Moses narrative.¹³ Although the latter introduced a new content to religious belief—both the idol destroying invisibility of the one, unique God, and God's moral commandments—the Abraham narrative introduces and clarifies the necessary conditions for the

reception of that content: faith. Faith is the propositional attitude necessary for existence of religious meanings related to a certain kind of deity, the one circulating in the monotheistic religions.

Fear and Trembling presents an elaborate meditation on the sacrifice of Isaac. The work provides Kierkegaard's most explicit account of the nature of faith; it is not a complete account of faith because the episode belongs to the Old Testament, and the character and content of Christian belief is not identical with Jewish faith. Nonetheless, Abraham's ordeal does represent the paradigm case of what it is to have faith; one might even say that Abraham's faith *reveals* the meaning of faith—for Jews and Christians alike. The Abraham narrative installs a certain idea of faith as the attitude or posture requisite in order for one's sayings and doings to fully acknowledge the authority of a one, unique Godhead. The effort of *Fear and Trembling* is, through a series of failed analogies and failed contrasts, to make the revelation of the meaning of faith, what faith is and requires, more available, more inspiring and terrifying, more spiritually compelling.

In broad terms, Kierkegaard's approach focuses on the two most obvious aspects of Abraham's ordeal: the quality of his faith and that he was prepared to transgress the unshakable center of human morality by sacrificing his son. If his faith is stirring and remarkable, his willingness to murder his son is appalling. Our ordinary feelings of admiration and moral disgust are what any reading of this moment must address.¹⁴

The cogito marks the absolute limit of self-dispossession. Kierkegaard, rather than denying this, makes it the hallmark of faith: The transcendental impossibility of faith as demonstrated by Descartes becomes the necessary condition of its spiritual possibility.¹⁵ Kierkegaard underlines this gap between philosophical intelligibility and spiritual possibility by considering faith in terms of "the paradox," "the absurd," and "the incommunicable." Each of these terms attempt to both guarantee that faith remains beyond the precincts of unaided human understanding and turn that impossibility of comprehension into an affirmative characteristic. The issue here is not any particular religious content but the character of faith itself.

The notion of the absurd will bring us quickly into the center of Kierkegaard's thought. "All along he [Abraham] had faith, he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while still he was willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded. He believed on the strength of the absurd, for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of him should in the next instant withdraw that demand" (*FT*, 65).¹⁶ The absurd is the connection between two beliefs: that God has demanded the sacrifice of Isaac, and that

God will give Isaac back or Isaac will not, finally, be sacrificed. The position of faith is the unflinching, resolute acting on both those beliefs at the same time.

Abraham believes, despite the fact that God is demanding him to sacrifice Isaac, and despite the fact that he intends to unflinchingly carry out God's demand, and hence despite all the evidence that Isaac is going to die, right up till the very moment that he holds Isaac's head in his hands and draws out his knife, that nonetheless Isaac will not die. The former set of beliefs, the ones based on intention and empirical evidence, is what human reason requires; the latter belief is what faith licenses.¹⁷ Abraham must be *certain* that Isaac will not die. And it is this certainty that Kierkegaard is targeting with his conception of the absurd with its emphasis on receiving Isaac back here and now, in this life. Without certainty that Isaac will not die, Abraham's state would be something like a hope or wish that he not die, a desperate needing to believe that he will not die. But if Abraham's cognitive state were that of a mere hope, then his act would be worse than appalling. If it were a question of mere hope, we could not believe that Abraham truly, utterly, and perfectly loved Isaac. Faith is necessarily a form of certainty, a movement of making what can never be certain certain. It is the quality of certainty adhering to religious beliefs—faithing them—that makes faith operate like a mental faculty. Because faith is a making of the necessarily uncertain certain, then faith will routinely appear as dogmatic, fanatical, crazed. Kierkegaard's effort in part involves the attempt to make the apparent pathology of faith disappear.

The fundamental question raised by the Abraham narrative, a question both acknowledged and voided by Kierkegaard, is: Must the very idea of faith be placed in relation to the sacrifice of a beloved other? The drive and determining energy of Kierkegaard's study is to prevent acknowledgment of the relation to sacrifice from collapsing into a literal requirement. Nowadays no one believes in sacrifice; it is thus natural to suppose that the actual human and animal sacrifices of the Old Testament are a long superseded stage of religious practice. This raises a second question: If sacrifice cannot intelligibly be thought of as actually demanding blood-sacrifice, what is the meaning of sacrifice such that Kierkegaard feels compelled to place faith in relation to it as a necessary step in the elaboration of its meaning? I address this question below.

Because faith is an absolute relation to the absolute, it cannot be communicated. This is certainly part of what is at stake in Kierkegaard's contention that faith is beyond comprehension: What can be comprehended can be communicated, and what is communicable is comprehensible; if

faith is an existential relation of putting oneself into an absolute—direct, unmediated—relation to the absolute, then it cannot be comprehended, and therefore cannot be communicated. *Fear and Trembling*, whose subtitle is *Dialectical Lyric*, is presented as written by Johannes de Silentio. Although in some contexts, silence can be a form of communication (as in giving someone the silent treatment), generally silence is conceived as the opposite of communication, and keeping silent is a refusal of communication. Silence is all over *Fear and Trembling*: First, because faith itself cannot be discursively communicated, but only exemplified, shown—the text itself is an indirect communication; second, because the relation between Abrahamic faith and Christian faith remains unsaid throughout; third, because Abraham cannot communicate his faith; and therefore, fourth, because an explicit theme of the text, as taken up in the third of the “Problemata”—“Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his purpose from Sarah, from Eleazar, from Isaac”—concerns the ethical status of religious silence. Silence is the empirical reality of incomprehension: a severing of human communication.

What forces silence on Abraham in exact terms is that at the communicable, human level his direct intention is that he intends to murder Isaac. What is the difference between murder and sacrifice? Here is Kierkegaard’s explicit meditation on this question.

The moment he is ready to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical expression for what he does is this: he hates Isaac. But if he actually hates Isaac he can be certain that God does not require this of him: for Cain and Abraham are not the same. Isaac he must love with all his soul. When God asks for Isaac, Abraham must if possible love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him; *for it is indeed love of Isaac that in its paradoxical opposition to his love of God makes his act a sacrifice*. But the distress and anguish in the paradox is that, humanly speaking, he is quite incapable of making himself understood. Only in the moment when his act is in absolute contradiction with his feeling, only then does he sacrifice Isaac, but the reality of his act is that in virtue of which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer. (*FT*, 101–2; second italics mine)

Why must Abraham love Isaac all the more if his act is to be one of sacrifice and not murder? Because Abraham’s love of Isaac is his unconditional love of the world, his love of life, and hence constitutes his binding to the world as such. In order to have faith, Abraham must be willing to surrender everything that directly binds him to life and the world. Hence faith is

necessarily the sacrifice of the other, which is to say, the sacrifice of love of the world as orienting his being in the world. In human terms, faith is world hatred; in human terms, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is the murder of Isaac—something that Kierkegaard never disputes.¹⁸

The requirement of world hatred is, Kierkegaard insists, just as present in Christianity as it is Judaism. This is clearest in Luke 14:26, where what faith requires is expressed thus: "If any may come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." Kierkegaard refuses any reading of this passage that would soften the hardness of its demand. The thought that religious faith involves some form of world hatred is, of course, a staple of critiques of Christianity that emphasize its apparent hatred of the body, of sexuality, of worldly goods, of worldly flourishing. And, to be sure, one can interpret the various hatreds Christ demands, above all hatred of one's own life, as precisely requiring the utter dissolution of those forms of worldly attachment and enjoyment that have their source in human embodiment and feelings. But asceticism is a degraded understanding of Christ's teaching, nor what Christ is demanding. Christ's list should be read backward: Because one must sacrifice one's self, one must sacrifice all one's passionately loved others; holding on to love of them is holding on to self-love. But this view of the matter, which I take to be close to what is being thought in Luke, is almost certainly empirically false, an inkling of which circulates in Kierkegaard's praise of Abraham. For nearly all parents, the discovery of what being a mother or a father means is conveyed, often at the moment of birth, by a wrenching and unfathomable dissolution of self-love and its being supplanted by love of the child. Suddenly, one is stripped of one's naïve self-concern and self-absorption and delivered over to the protection and nurturing of the child. Children, especially in those years when they are most needy and most vulnerable, become the anchor of one's world-relation: I have a world and care about the world because I love this child; I would happily sacrifice myself for this child. And when this child is the promise that the earth shall have a future worth having, the promise that is the explicit content of Abraham's child and implicitly the content of every newborn, then one's willingness to sacrifice everything for the child is not an act of selfishness, but truly the exposition of love of the world. Kierkegaard knows this: The third of his sub-Abrahams—those all too human Abrahams Kierkegaard creates whose lack of faith helps reveal the actual Abraham's faith (*FT*, 45–48)—who could not go through with the sacrifice of Isaac, feels he has sinned by simply having formed the intention to sacrifice Isaac, knowing full well that his love for him was such

that he would “many a time have gladly laid down his own life” (*FT*, 47). There is no religious faith unless the child is sacrificed. This shows that the stakes are not self-love versus love of the other, including God (which would reduce the meaning of faith to morality), but love of the world versus love of God, as my opening epigraph from Arendt eloquently claims.

The sacrifice of the child to faith also means that the point of view of the child, of Isaac, is necessarily excluded. The Abraham story is unique because the experience of being required to sacrifice the child of one’s heart and go through with that sacrifice completely is made in the full presence of the sacrificial victim. Terrifyingly, Abraham and Isaac share the ordeal even though every account portrays the events as if they were Abraham’s alone. And in a sense, the events are Abraham’s alone because it is *bis* faith that is being tested and perfected; and because he does manifestly remain silent. And in a sense this is necessary because the very nature of the act of faith is *logically private*, beyond communication; hence, the very act that will determine forever the relation between Abraham and Isaac is one from which Isaac is excluded, yet done in his full presence and demanding his participation. Isaac’s role in these events makes him an object whose own subjective life is discounted. The work of faith can only include Isaac as sacrificial victim by excluding him as subject.

Abraham’s silence is a useful starting place for considering Isaac’s perspective. Abraham is silent in that he does not fully communicate to Isaac what is occurring. What would have happened if Abraham had attempted to be fully honest with his son? In the story of the first sub-Abraham, Kierkegaard tries to imagine exactly that.

And Abraham’s expression was fatherly, his gaze gentle, his speech encouraging. But Isaac could not understand him, his soul could not be uplifted; he clung to Abraham’s knees, pleaded at his feet, begged for his young life, for his fair promise; he called to mind the joy in Abraham’s house, reminded him of the sorrow and loneliness. Then Abraham lifted the boy up and walked with him, taking him by the hand, and his words were full of comfort and exhortation. But Isaac could not understand him. Abraham climbed the mountain in Moriah, but Isaac did not understand him. Then he turned away from Isaac for a moment. (*FT*, 45)

It is noteworthy that Kierkegaard, who lacked nothing in the way of imagination, does not attempt to imagine the words Abraham might have spoken in explaining himself to Isaac. What could Abraham say? What is plausibly imagined is that whatever words Abraham might have spoken, Isaac could

not understand him. And from everything that follows in the book, we are indeed meant to conclude that the very nature of Abraham's faith makes it incommunicable not because of who Abraham is but because of what faith is.

Inevitably, when Kierkegaard does consider the possibility of the actual Abraham directly addressing Isaac, he does so only to demonstrate that were Abraham so tempted it would be because of weakness, not strength, and worse, because addressing Isaac would amount to feeling a need to justify himself before Isaac, then in so doing Abraham would fall out of the paradox, out of faith altogether, and collapse back into the tawdry world of the ethical. If Isaac's understanding becomes the ethical measure, then God is displaced as ground, and faith proper evaporates. From the point of view of faith, the desire to justify oneself humanly becomes a temptation to not do one's duty to God, and hence exposes a failure of faith. What dignifies Abraham is that he is not so tempted. Here is the offending passage.

Were Abraham, at the decisive moment, to say to Isaac, "It is you who are to be sacrificed," this would only be a weakness. For if he could speak at all he should have done so long before, and the weakness consists in his not having the maturity of spirit and concentration to imagine the whole of the pain beforehand but having pushed it aside so that the actual pain proves greater than the imagined one. Besides, with talk of this kind he would fall out of the paradox, and if he really wanted to talk to Isaac he would have to transform his own situation into that of a temptation. Otherwise, after all, he could say nothing and if he does so transform his situation he isn't even a tragic hero. (*FT*, 142)

This is perhaps the most dissembling passage in all of Kierkegaard. Of course, the argument is circular: From the point view of faith, any falling away demands of faith will appear as weakness, temptation, vacillation, a wanting and needing to justify oneself in the (finite) eyes of the world rather than before the (infinite) eyes of God. But what is worse, the almost dismissive last sentence—"he isn't even a tragic hero"—reveals something that has been implicit from the outset: Much of what is at stake in the praise of Abraham is the creation of a certain *image* of Abraham. How else did we suppose that Abraham's actions might exemplify faith? In this particular case, it is just that image of silent steadfastness as a form of uncompromising virtue that is, finally, doing most of the work. Kierkegaard must make Abraham appear as neither dogmatic nor fanatical, but rather as noble; and his nobility, because it requires silence, an impossibility of intelligibly communicating with others, thus requires more than what is asked of the

tragic hero. To gather all this up demands constructing an image conveying superlative virtue, a virtuousness that is akin to but emphatically more magnificent than the highest ethical virtue. And in order for this to happen, then the ethical ideal of communication must be demoted, demeaned, come to be seen as something shabby and unworthy. And that is just the image Kierkegaard works to construct. Much of the glory of Abraham, and by extension the worthiness of the very idea of faith, derives from his silent image, the image of his carrying an impossible burden that is impossible to communicate with calm determination and unbending authority.¹⁹ If Abraham is so calmly sure, so noble in demeanor in the face of the unspeakable action he is about to do, then how can his faith be anything other than the highest virtue, a virtue beyond ethical virtue? Such is the image of Abraham. This is how we forget Isaac.

Much of the energy of *Fear and Trembling* is determined by the need to produce a certain image of Abraham, an image governed by a moral aesthetic that is borrowed from the tradition of Greek virtue ethics: In his solitude and noble bearing Abraham rises to an image of virtue incomparable with because beyond the exemplars of tragic virtue. Because the image of Abraham is so pivotal in the exclusion of Isaac from the events in which his entire being is at stake, then I shall need to return to the image of Abraham below.²⁰ For the present, I simply need to underline that Abraham, in truth, could not speak honestly to Isaac because there is no version of what Abraham might say to him that, morally speaking, Isaac *could* accept.²¹ The inwardness of faith requires concealment because its content is always the sacrifice of the other that the other could never agree to. From an ethical point of view, we inevitably construe the fact of Abraham's saying nothing to Sarah, and of dissembling before Eleazar at the foot of the mountain as acknowledgments of shame and guilt. Justifications by faith alone are incommensurable with worldly ethics, and Abraham's silence is a certain acknowledgment that before the eyes of humanity he is forever guilty.

And he is forever guilty at a higher level: He does not simply keep hidden from Isaac his intention of sacrificing him, but in the unbending of his intention *Abraham does sacrifice Isaac*. And this is the reason that the angel of the lord comes down and stays his hand: "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou has not withheld thy son, thine only [son] from me" (Genesis 22:12). Abraham was not required to complete the action because, given the complete nature of his intention, he had already sacrificed Isaac, giving his life totally over to God. Nothing was withheld; Isaac was killed, killed in the very heart of Abraham. In de Silentio's praise of Abraham's faith,

this is conceded when, in attempting to capture the relation between faith and the absurd, he presses the issue: “We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. His faith was not that he should be happy sometime in the hereafter” (*FT*, 65).

Abraham must remain silent because neither Sarah nor Eleazar nor Isaac could agree to his sacrificial act, an act that he, in his heart, completes. Could the fact that Abraham completes the sacrifice of Isaac in his heart but not in life make it acceptable to Isaac?²² If Abraham were to try to communicate this affective sacrifice to Isaac, could it be acceptable? So we might imagine Abraham saying to Isaac: “God has commanded me to sacrifice you to him. Be not afraid, for God will not require that I take your life, leaving you bloodied and dead on the sacrificial stone. Our God does not require blood sacrifices. What he is demanding is that I no longer base my life on my love for you. Indeed, I must sacrifice all my love of the world—for you, for Sarah, for those who are dearest to my heart—and make God the founding love of my life. If I do this, God will give you back to me, but changed utterly. From now on I will love you as God’s gift to me, you will be a sign of God’s love and grace, my love of you a further expression of his bounteousness.” Isaac is confused: “Father, *why* would you want to stop loving me, loving me as you do now, and only love me because God gives you this love, allows it or requires it? Why would you wish to love me as a *symbol* of your god rather than for who I am? I do not understand. What does God have to do with your love for me?” Abraham might reply: “There is no reason I can give you for this sacrifice except that God demands it. Sacrificing my love for you is what it is for me to have faith in God.” “But father,” Isaac might reply in turn, “all that is about *you*, *your* faith, *your* relation to God. What does it have to do with me?” And of course, in a way, it really does have nothing to do with Isaac since Abraham’s faith is just his absolute relation to the absolute, his infinite self-interest. This relation leaves out Isaac, sacrifices him. How could Isaac come to accept that, agree to it? For Isaac, Abraham would not love directly, but only as something that accorded with his faith, as something his faith allowed or demanded, but either way for reasons that left him out altogether. In the name of Abraham’s singularity, but also his faith and his virtue, Isaac is sacrificed to the absolute: Like every sacrificial victim, he is an item, a token, in an exchange between human and God. So Abraham will not discuss the matter with Isaac, and he will not do so for all the reasons that the biblical Abraham remained silent: In ethical terms his action cannot be justified, and it cannot be justified because those actions cannot be communicated to Isaac in terms that could be acceptable to him; they

leave Isaac out of account, sacrifice him, leaving the living bonds of love bloodied and dead on the sacrificial stone.²³

One can be reborn in faith only if one first dies to the world. In order to die to the world one must slaughter one's living attachments to the world; one must murder one's love of the world and offer it to God. One must sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's silence is the silence of the severing of the bonds of love as what constitutes the very nature of his relation to Isaac. And the condition of this is that the point of view of Isaac is forever excluded.

Remembering Isaac: The Claim of the Other

Caravaggio thematized in his painting the reality of individual experience, *il vero*, and by so doing called into question the very truth of the ideal itself, the truth beyond experience which had been given historical verisimilitude in the traditions of art.²⁴

I have suggested that a not inconsiderable feature of Kierkegaard's presentation of the Abraham narrative involved a work of image creation in which Abraham's faith is sublimed into a picture of ethical-religious beauty, a sublime beauty because always pointing to an inwardness and transcendence exceeding the ordinary capability of discursive communication and narrative representation. It is hence no accident that the opening sections of the text after the "Attunement" are a "Speech in Praise of Abraham" followed by (as a preface to the "Problemata") a "Preamble from the Heart." In the preamble the focus is on the double movement of infinite resignation and, let's call it, infinite affirmation, on the severing of the bonds of love with the sacrifice of all worldly passion, and the simultaneous conviction that nothing will be lost. So the "whole earthly form" that Abraham presents "is *a new creation* on the strength of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but he makes it with such accuracy and poise that he is continually getting finitude out of it, and not for a second would one suspect anything else" (*FT*, 70; emphasis mine). The giveaway here is the phrase "and not for a second would one suspect anything else" since that is what Kierkegaard must convince us of in order to have the violence of infinite resignation, the violence of world-hatred and world-negation become resolved in the invisible perfection of having everything returned—the love of the world is now affirmed as God's gift of the world. And there is only one condition for this to be possible: Sacrifice Isaac. The image of Abrahamic faith lives

off the invisibility of Isaac's ordeal; hence the narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac is both the account of Isaac being sacrificed and, through the narrative itself, enforcing that sacrifice, repeating it. Every telling of the sacrifice of Isaac thus becomes another sacrifice of Isaac, another exclusion of him from the ordeal of his life and death.

Not quite every telling. We do have one depiction of the sacrifice of Isaac that interrupts the movement from infinite resignation to the absurd receiving everything back that places Isaac, terrified, screaming in an infinite of agony of betrayal and loss, at the exact intersection of those two movements: Caravaggio's 1603 *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (Figure 2). It makes sense to discuss this painting in relation to Caravaggio's 1598 painting of the same scene (Figure 1). These two paintings come close to depicting the two sides of the argument: the sublime revelation of faith and the tortured counterimage of a sacrifice that has never stopped occurring.

Both paintings focus on the same moment of the narrative: "the patriarch Abraham with his knife out and ready to slit his own son's throat as an offering to the old testament god, the angel interceding at the last moment, the ram making itself available as a substitute sacrifice."²⁵ Peter Robb, in his uneven *M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio*, nicely summarizes the 1598 *Isaac*: "The earlier version had been a much more rigorously controlled study of figures in darkness, a close sculptural group in the glow of a fire and a little heavenly highlighting. It'd been a very gentle study—within the terms of an event set up to diminish merely human love—thoughtful father, weeping son and sweetly reasonable young angel."²⁶ While fine as a start, Robb underplays some obvious features of the painting. First, the dramatically enhanced chiaroscuro that Caravaggio employs leaves the profiled faces of both Abraham and Isaac partially obscured in shadow, only the three-quarters face of the angel and that of the ram allowed to glow, as if light and angelic transcendence were one. Second, both Abraham and Isaac are turned toward the angel, listening intently, as if to *bear* this very story, their story as part of God's story, hence doubling the sense of the painting being about angelic intervention, a folding of the human event into one forever separate from it. Third, the painting's most striking internal mimetic feature: the right hand of the angel on the blackened fleece back of the ram mirroring or mirrored by Abraham's left hand holding Isaac's black hair (which, like the ram's, is all but indistinguishable from the painting's black background). And then, finally, there is Isaac's relaxed pose, leaning casually on his left forearm (hands tied at the wrist, but without noticeable effect), and, even more surprising, is Abraham's right forearm resting easily on Isaac's thigh, his knife hand suspended in its action.

While there is the odd reality effect—most obviously the sharply lit patch of Abraham’s exquisitely painted neck, veins bulging, disheveled hair hanging lank at the back, and the richly textured, dove-grey left wing of the angel—none of this comes close to experiential truth. I take it, in line with his usual practice, that Caravaggio does here want to contrast the unreality or ideality or fiction of the angel with the reality of the humans; it is just that he can do nothing with these human playthings of the divine, the painting insistently turned toward what even it regards as an unreality.

André Félibien wrote that “Poussin could not bear Caravaggio and said that he had come into the world in order to *destroy painting*. . . . Yet his aversion for Caravaggio is not surprising. For whereas Poussin sought to foreground the nobility of his subjects, Caravaggio allowed himself to be carried away by the truth of nature as it appeared to him.”²⁷ In commenting on the Poussin/Caravaggio opposition, Louis Marin states that “the choice is between the nobility of the subject [Poussin] and the vitality of the object [Caravaggio], between bringing the dead to life—as a story is told through figures that are carefully interwoven within a scene—and simply seeing what appears in the here and now before one’s eyes.”²⁸ The

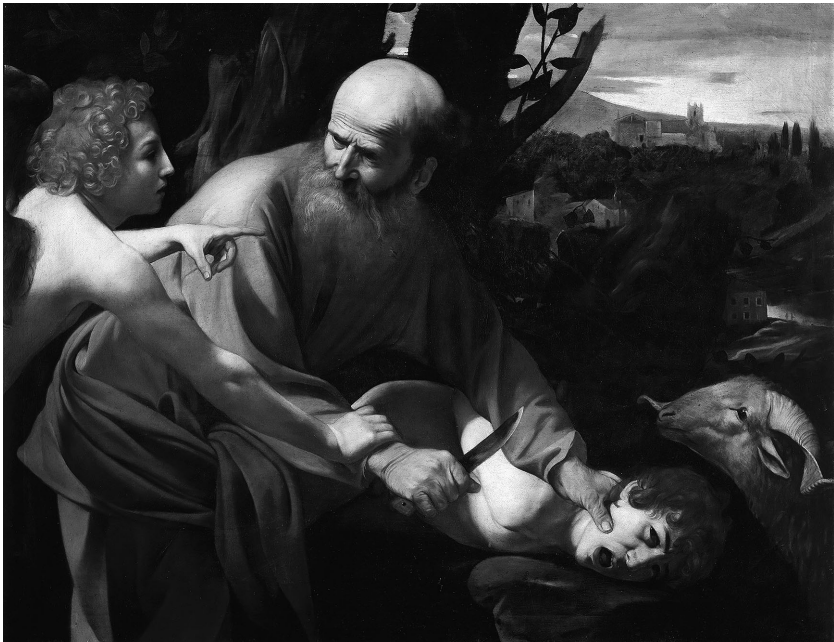


Figure 1. Caravaggio, *Sacrifice of Isaac*. 1598. Oil on canvas, 116 × 173 cm (46 × 68 in.). Piasecka-Johnson Collection, Princeton, New Jersey.



Figure 2. Caravaggio, *Sacrifice of Isaac*. 1603. Oil on canvas, 104 × 135 cm (41 × 53 in.). Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

issues here are immensely complex, a complexity that is densely elaborated in Marin's remarkable study, *To Destroy Painting*. Still, it seems right to say that at the core of Caravaggio's achievement is the de-sublimation or, better, a de-transcendentalizing of painting, a turning away from the narrative idealization of the dead and toward the incorrigible sensuous density of what presents itself in re-presentations. What Caravaggio set out to destroy was what Gombrich called "the classic solution" in which the claims of order—of ideality, conceptuality, and narrative—are "balanced" by fidelity to nature. Order provides the vertical axis of classic Italian painting whereby a single image takes on the authority of an ideal meaning, a world-transcendent meaning that is but temporally and imperfectly incarnated in a physical image.²⁹ Let's say that in classical Italian painting, world images are sacrificed to transcendent meanings in a manner consistent with the Christian disposition of that art. The resolution of figures within a finally transcendent narrative order is, one might argue, the source of the immense pleasure, the *jouissance* proper to Renaissance art.³⁰ In opposing this, Caravaggio sought a means of painting whereby the scene would not be sacrificed to its ideal meaning, in which rather than retrospectively gathering the image before our eyes we are wrenched from our position of being invisible spectators, of being somehow outside and above, the

masters of what we see, to becoming bodily present to the scene being represented. Caravaggio wanted a painting that would not be the bearer of ideas and meanings existing independently of it; rather, meaning would be fulfilled and exhausted by paint matter, by the work of color, light, and shadow in their articulation of figures. And all this was to be accomplished directly in relation to the great tradition of narrative art.

In order to accomplish this task, Caravaggio sought mechanisms for folding a painting back into the scene represented, for de-narrativizing the events depicted in order that they might take on a wholly immanent, sensuous intelligibility. If pressed, I would want to argue that Caravaggio was the first of the southern painters to fully take on the burden of secular modernity, of finding meaning and the loss of meaning in the direct experience of persons and objects. Because his concern was with fidelity to the object, a secular notion of truth in painting, Caravaggio did not seek to make his pictures agreeable, a source of uplifted pleasure. That notion of pleasure presumes that paintings are for the sake of the viewer, lacking inwardness, autonomy, being-for-themselves, and in that betraying the objects represented. My sense of the failure, the unsatisfactoriness of the 1598 *Sacrifice* is precisely that the human subjects of the momentous event it records become mere shadows of angelic light. Fidelity to nature for Caravaggio meant letting the power of what was re-presented make a claim *against* the viewer, a sensuous claiming one would turn away from if one could. Certainly, among the stakes in Caravaggio's nearly one dozen decapitation paintings is that of a specular address to the viewer. In our inability to avert our eyes there emerges a sensuous authority relying on nothing other than the material means of its depiction and the expressive features of the objects represented. One might complain that the sublime address of some of the decapitation paintings—*Medusa* (1598), *Judith and Holofernes* (1599), *David with the Head of Goliath* (1606), *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608)—depend on blood, gore, and sheer grotesquerie for their effects, painterly violence an all to easy accompaniment of the violence represented.³¹ Although one might argue that Caravaggio felt he needed the represented violence to secure the violence of his painterly act, no such argument is relevant to the 1603 *Isaac*. I think of the 1603 *Sacrifice of Isaac* as not only correcting the earlier *Isaac*, Caravaggio bringing to bear on the Abraham narrative the demands of realism his painting was by then fully realizing, but also of achieving what the other decapitation paintings promise but overshoot precisely because here the beheading does not occur. The severance both does and does not happen, and does happen all the

more for not factually happening. Nonetheless, the head of Isaac should be seen as a member of the procession of Caravaggio's severed heads.³²

A premise of my argument has been that the Abraham narrative stands near the center of Western religious spirituality because it elaborates faith as the relation proper to the God-relation. If I am right in posing Caravaggio as attempting to forge a wholly secular method of representation, then his engagement with the paradigmatic account of faith can succeed only by posing itself against that form of world-relation by destroying a central mechanism for its reproduction: the sublime aesthetic of the classic solution that had been the main bearer of the ideal binding of virtue and beauty. The transcending pull of that aesthetic is still evident in the 1598 *Isaac*.

The overriding condition for destroying the Abraham image is to let Isaac in; letting Isaac into the narrative is a matter of content and a matter of form. The content question and the form question are interrelated: In order to destroy the Abraham image one must not only let Isaac in, but transfigure the account so that it is not *also* about Isaac, but fundamentally *about Isaac*. And this is a formal question because it involves more than re-centering the image, so to speak, in order that we have Isaac constantly in view; in order to have Isaac constantly in view in the appropriate sense the narrative movement in which he is a constantly disappearing moment in the resignation and affirmation of Abraham's faith must be not just interrupted, but forever blocked. And this means that we require a narrative representation in which the narrative arrives as always broken, always interrupted, always failing the moment that would be its fulfillment.

It is just this that Caravaggio manages.

Since my own reading of the 1603 *Isaac* began with Louis Marin's, let me begin with the central moment of his interpretation.

Entering from the left, the angel, God's messenger, stays the murderous arm of Abraham with his right hand. Abraham turns his head to follow the angel's left index finger, which *points out* to him what the Lord's angel sees: the ram on the right that will be *sacrificed* in place of the son. In this arrangement, where the retrospection moves from the center to the left, simultaneity functions as an inchoate and prospective immobilization. The gesture and gaze move from left to right where the future is being prepared. A story finds its starting point in the interval between the halting of the knife and the offering of the neck, the instant that serves as the matrix of a successive temporality. But something very strange happens in the space "between" two moments,

this inter-diction of a sacrificial murder that *will not* take place. The viewer's eye is tricked into producing this moment. It is trapped by the *single eye* of Isaac lying on the stone, who, his mouth open as he cries out in terror, looks at me with a gaze that is something like the look of Medusa. This gaze has no equal.³³

Although we know the Abraham story fully, this painting consistently seeks to undermine the possibility that it be finally told. One aspect of this is the different flows of movement in the painting: We can follow the descending light falling from the angel's shoulder to his hand, to Abraham's hand, to the shoulder and face of Isaac; this descending light and movement is matched by a horizontal left to right movement from the angel's shoulder and finger to Abraham's face and forehead; Abraham's eyes travel back against the movement of light to the partially shaded face of the angel (note how in this painting the light values of the earlier *Isaac* are reversed: now Abraham and Isaac are lit, and the angel and ram shaded); there is the left to right movement of the angel's finger pointing to the ram who is to replace Isaac on the stone, with his other hand staying Abraham's hand. Note too how the heads of Isaac and the ram are set one atop the other, with the peaceful ram's head, eye lifted, its look ascending, directly above the horizontal, abjected face of Isaac.

These series of formal, prospective, and retrospective movements do not add up to one story—one coherent temporality—but rather cancel one another, move toward an immobilization. And this might be thought appropriate since the narrative center of the picture is the immobilized hand of Abraham, forcibly being restrained by the angel, the knife fiercely gripped in his right hand. But that immobilized hand is literally that: a movement halted, held, restrained, leaving no doubt that the hand's trajectory is downward toward Isaac's neck. And this downward trajectory, the movement of the immobile right hand, is complemented by the work of the left hand around the neck of Isaac, Abraham's thumb pressing harshly against the boy's cheek in order to hold his head firmly to the stone. The fact that the sacrifice will not take place is, so to speak, contradicted by Abraham's hands: They are the hands of a murderer. How else did we imagine those hands? Caravaggio mimetically emphasizes the downward thrust of Abraham's hand through one of his cherished devices: the powerfully rendered and utterly excessive red drapery wrapped around Abraham's waist, with the looped hanging part finishing the act. The hanging or falling piece of the red drapery is Isaac's blood, the life taken from him.

The immobilized hands that are the painting's narrative center are not what hold our visual attention; it is rather Isaac's single eye staring out at us, the painting's expressive core, that draws our looking back again and again until we are transfixed. In staring out at us, Isaac's look breaks through the narrative formality of the painting, the formality that would source our perceptual mastery of the scene, in order that we become present to him: a witness to his suffering. Isaac's pleading eye performs a searing iconoclastic shattering of the Abraham image, leaving just his suffering, his brutalized becoming animal, a sacrificial ram, to be witnessed. In our being petrified before that eye, Marin conjectures, we spontaneously see the fulfillment of Abraham's intention: Isaac dead. We perceive the true internal connection between the symbolic sacrifice and the literal one. In becoming witnesses to Isaac's brutalization and terror, his death, we leave behind the mythos of faith and enter the cold reality of a loveless world whose ruin derives solely from the fact that there have been those who have had faith.

Deploying a thinned version of Michael Fried's dialectic of immersive absorption versus specular address, we can more explicitly connect the painting's formal and substantive achievement. Fried contends that it is the underlying structure of "absorption-plus-address" that secures the Caravaggio's realization of the autonomous artwork. "The logic of absorption," he states, "is such that, as long as a particular feat of noticing and understanding lasts, the viewer is still 'within' the implied temporality of the image."³⁴ The internal temporality of *Isaac* is just that of the Abraham narrative itself; it concerns the staying of Abraham's hand, and it is accomplished through the crossing of looks among the angel, Abraham, and the ram: Abraham intently looking and listening to the angel, eyes hooded, forehead intensely furrowed, the furrows summoning his world of puzzlement and pain; the angel looking at both Abraham and ram, his finger pointing horizontally to a place where, in fact, the ram is not. The horizontal plane conjured by facing looks and pointing finger (with ram's gaze upward) generates the painting's absorptive moment. I understand the horizontal looks of Abraham and angel to convoke a world of shared concern between them, indeed the very same concern that is the whole content of the 1598 *Isaac*. What then is most obvious about this angel-Abraham-ram trio is that the circuit among them closes in on itself. None of them seems to notice or explicitly to pay heed to Isaac. The absorptive moment of this painting perfectly captures the forgetting of Isaac; his being overlooked here is his disappearance from the Abraham narrative. Only we notice Isaac; his desperate address is to us alone, far beyond the

temporal proprieties of the traditional narrative. Only we are witnesses to his sacrifice.

The authority of this canvas is finally not painterly, not aesthetic at all, even though without its complex movement of conflicting perspectives that in their integration makes the painting both self-conscious about its image character, and in being self-aware in that way, relatively autonomous, it could not achieve its ethical claim. The painting wrenches itself out of being a representation, an object to be beheld, and by addressing the viewer makes him or her into a moral witness. One cannot view the painting without witnessing Isaac's ordeal. In forcing the viewer to witness Isaac's ordeal—or turn his or her back on the painting altogether—Caravaggio has the painting perform, in its being viewed, the moral cogito, that is, it performs the actuality of the other as having a claim against me that is not mine to dispose of but rather places me, situates me in a moral space in which I must either acknowledge the full destiny of that demand—say, to perceive Abraham's irredeemable guilt—or forfeit the possibility of seeing as such. What is meant to be sublime about the Abraham narrative is that it is emptied of all meaning, all content apart from what belongs to faith itself; it gives us faith as absolute (an absolute relation to the absolute). This Caravaggio understands and contests. What faith means is the death of Isaac; what faith means is murder.

Caravaggio's image of Isaac is posed precisely between the two moments of Kierkegaard's dialectic of faith, between the moment of infinite resignation and infinite affirmation in which everything is returned. In Kierkegaard the "movement of infinity" is done with such "accuracy and poise" by Abraham that he keeps getting finitude out of it. Caravaggio in destroying Abraham's accuracy and poise, in forcing us to see the work of his hands and the fullness of his intent, makes the movement of infinite affirmation impossible. There is only finitude here. Between the glittering knife and Isaac's neck, between the angel's pointing finger and the ram who will replace Isaac, between the loss of everything and the getting it back, there is Isaac's pleading, anguished eye blocking the movement from left to right, blocking the narrative, destroying the dialectic and its message, dissolving the scene and its meaning. No more image, no more faith.

Coda on Derrida on Kierkegaard

Chapter 3 of Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, "Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)," which rightly makes the question of keeping secret the key to *Fear and Trembling*, is less a defense of Kierkegaard than a surprisingly

slavish repetition of Kierkegaard's argument, with the minor nuance that he assumes that traditional morality is already a hyperbolic logic of sacrifice: "How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant?" (71; see also 69).³⁵ Casually, that is, without argument, flouting the "ought implies can" principle, this assumes, since feeding my cat *entails* that I have sacrificed all the others, that I must have an a priori, absolute duty to feed all the cats—dogs, hippopotamuses, snakes, parakeets, humans, donkeys, et al.—in the world, a thesis that is not only stronger than even the most extreme versions of utilitarianism, but strictly unintelligible. Compare this to Benjamin's and Adorno's notion of the "guilt context of the living"; it assumes that it is not an abstract deontological demand but my actual *participation* in a range of practices that is the source of my obligation to unknown others. There is no reason to suppose that responding to the call or claim of one other I have sacrificed all others, and so sacrificed ethics itself. The thought that ethical obligation is a priori is here, at least, unjustified.

Put Derrida's extremism aside; his failure of argument in elaborating Kierkegaard is even more severe than this. Derrida wants to argue that the demand of the ethical, the traditional one he is opposing, is the opposite of the secret: It is the demand for justification in rational terms: I must justify myself to the other and hence make my action acceptable to him or her. In so doing, Derrida argues, I relieve myself of my singularity and my individual responsibility: The reasons for my action must be of a kind the other could, at least in principle, share. Exactly why he thinks the demand for rational justification relieves me of singularity and responsibility is unclear: that my reasons are shareable or intelligible to the other, say Isaac, does not entail that any one other than *me* is liable or responsible to *him* (say, because I am his father).³⁶ Nonetheless, what drives Derrida's misprision is an implausible metaphysical premise: "And since each of us, everyone else, each is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my *ego*" (78). This seems a formal and empty account of ethical singularity. Historically, as Nietzsche demonstrated over and over, responsibility—the right to keep promises—is a hard-earned, historically extended, and emphatically *social* accomplishment: The *I* becomes ethically singular only when it becomes indefinitely answerable for its precise doings and sayings to whoever is affected by them (in the absence of all gods, fates, and malevolent natures). Answerability is not the excision of singularity, but its historic introduction: Caravaggio is the first to make Abraham answerable to Isaac

by making the viewer answerable to Isaac's suffering here and now. That is the point of Caravaggio's painting: to generate the space of mutual answerability out of and against the anonymous space of absolute obligation. Derrida, like all idealists, wants to ground the ethical relation between self and other outside of all the historical and social ways selves and others have found themselves bound to one another. If, however, history has no role in the constitution of ethical singularity, then there cannot be any ethical singularity, since nothing can affect historical living except another aspect of historical living.

Historically constituted answerability is not an "absolute decision . . . neither guided nor controlled by knowledge" (77), but a criticizable judgment that is indefinitely answerable to the claims of others; it is only by our actions being in the domain of judgment and criticism that anything like a secular ethics becomes possible.³⁷ But it is just this that makes evident the most egregious of Derrida's presumptions. He states that it is God's silence, his not needing to justify himself—Kant, by the way, thought differently about the appearance of Jesus—that makes him God: "Otherwise he wouldn't be God, we wouldn't be dealing with the Other as God or with God as *wholly other*" (57). As is patent throughout Derrida's text, the function of the "wholly other" is to resolve *the problem of authority* of the moral demand, to seek the authority of the other as having an unconditional claim on me by making him absolutely other: "the unpronounceable name of God as other to which I am bound by an absolute, unconditional obligation, by an incomparable, nonnegotiable duty" (67). It is evident that all the language of "unconditional obligation" and "nonnegotiable duty" are rhetorical efforts to give to the ethical demand an authority that cannot be questioned, challenged, overridden, or denied. But it is hard to see this as anything other than wishful moral rhetoric, dangerous rhetoric since the unity of silence and absolute obligation here is for the sake of an act of gratuitous murder, murder as nothing but a test for fidelity to law and command. An other can possess authority only through the authorization of his or her other (the other of the absolute other), that is, he or she can place a claim on me only if he or she authorizes the possibility of my dissent and my refusal, which he or she in turn can question and criticize. Only if Abraham can disobey can he obey, and whichever he judges as necessary, he then becomes responsible and answerable for; not faith but argument is the only intelligible medium of exchange between human and God: If I cannot answer back, then I cannot answer at all; all else is mere obedience, in fear and trembling, no doubt. Of course, it is not implausible to suppose

that fundamental to the narrative of the binding was the historic effort to distinguish faith *from* mere fearful obedience, and to distinguish a moral god from a mere sovereign pagan god, which is equally the historic reason for the substitution of beast for boy. But faith cannot be distinguished from mere obedience so easily, as the remainder of the Old Testament demonstrates, and even the new one could not twist free from. Only answerability and responsibility without limit, only when my word becomes my bond, only when the other becomes my other to whom I am answerable does the logic of sacrifice stop. But this means, exactly and precisely, there is no permanent solution to the problem of authority without its becoming something inhuman—a theology, say. It is only through the refusal of absolute authority, the absolute other, that there first arises the possibility of an ethics without sacrifice. Derrida follows Kierkegaard in doubling down on the logic of sacrifice—universalizing it, generalizing it—in the empty hope that it will of a sudden turn around and become the opposite of itself. This strikes me as magical thinking.

NOTES

1. These others, of course, are the ones that in some hyperbolic form, either singly or in union with other members of the list, become faith. Faith is an absolutizing or making certain of these more routine attitudes and feelings.

2. For an argument to the effect that trust is the ethical substance of everyday living see my “Trust: On the Real but Almost Always Unnoticed, Ever-Changing Founding of Ethical Life,” *Metaphilosophy* 24, no. 4 (2011): 395–416.

3. On being directed toward “the whole sphere of certainty” see M. Gueroult, *Descartes’ Philosophy Interpreted according to the Order of Reasons*, trans. R. Ariew (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 1:15.

4. R. Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 1:144.

5. *Ibid.*, 145. *Pace* Michael Williams, “Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt,” in *Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36.

6. This is the significance of *The Discourse on Method*, where Descartes narratively frames his philosophical practice in the context of a culture-wide crisis of reason.

7. The “as” does not transform certainty into uncertainty; the fact that I must add to “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” an “I judge . . .” clause does not entail that I could find it even intelligible that $2 + 2$ was not equal to 4. For a defense of the incorporation thesis see Henry Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (New York:

Cambridge University Press, 1990), 51–52. Not only does the Cartesian cogito presage Kant’s “I think must accompany all my representations,” but the normative lesson of Kant’s “I think” is already present in the method of doubt.

8. Hiram Caton, *Origin of Subjectivity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 109. My reading of Descartes has been much influenced by Caton’s too-little-known book.

9. Descartes, *Philosophical Works*, 1:147.

10. Caton, *Origin of Subjectivity*, 117.

11. Although it would be a complicated argument to make, I take it that the discovery that the “I think” is itself mediated (or, as Descartes acknowledges, not wholly self-sufficient) does not trouble the claims being made for the cogito at this juncture.

12. This is the point made over and over again in the great “Unhappy Consciousness” section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), §§207–30. Consciousness takes the Unchangeable to be its essence, its truth. Yet each effort to affirm God as essence turns into an act of self-affirmation—and must, since every effort to show that God is my essence entails me accomplishing an emphatic act of either self-avowal or self-disavowal: Either way the self cannot be bypassed or thinned out or finally stripped of its authority. Which is why Hegel’s phenomenology here becomes darkly comic.

13. The question of the role of faith prior to the Christian age—in which religious belief is from the outset in relation to nonbelief—is complex. I certainly do not want to rule out the possibility that what we think of as faith, faith as Kierkegaard or Pascal or even the medievals see it, could arise only when religion as an orienting form of life has died; faith might well turn out to be one of the ways that religious ideas appear when the forms of life they originally informed have disappeared. This would make modern faith-based religiosity not the return of the repressed, but the return of the dead.

In urging that faith is central to Western spirituality, I am not arguing that the Moses narrative is not the more significant for Western *thought*; as Nietzsche powerfully demonstrates, our ideas of reason and truth receive their critical impetus and self-correcting drive from the idea of the one, unique God; and it is those ideas of truth and reason that, finally, lead to the dethroning of religion. To grant that rationalized reason itself must undergo critical interrogation should not be construed as demanding a regress to a locale prior to reason. My comments about the various affective, attitudinal, and orientational complements to reason in the second paragraph of this es-

say were meant as fast, but I hope sufficient, acknowledgments of the limits to any characterization of reason as self-sufficient.

14. For a powerful contrary reading of the episode, see Omri Boehm, *The Binding of Isaac: A Religious Model of Disobedience* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007).

15. It is for this reason that one might think that Kierkegaard's notion of faith is irredeemably modern, a modernizing of faith in relation to a modern, postreligious notion of reason.

16. All references in the body of the text to *FT* refer to Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1985).

17. For a nuanced discussion of the range of interpretive options, see John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (London: Routledge, 2003), 66–76. This is an immensely useful volume, providing both a fine reading of the text and a clear guide through the leading interpretive options on the text. My reading of Kierkegaard owes the most to two former Essex colleagues, Michael Weston and Stephen Mulhall.

18. In what is the most penetrating reading of *Fear and Trembling* available, Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), wriggles free from this issue by emphasizing the allegorical or analogical reading of Abraham's ordeal as prefiguring Christ's atonement, and then urging, given that Christ is the kind of God willing to shed his own blood for the sake of others, that it follows that "faith could never require the violation of ethical duty" (383). Certainly the implication is hollow; that apart, Mulhall both stops too quickly in thinking through what the stakes of sacrifice are for Kierkegaard and, worse, as I shall show, contradicts the letter and spirit of Kierkegaard's argument.

19. Since at times each of us might be called on to do something that we cannot, then and there, justify to those who most deserve an explanation, Abraham's act is empirically identifiable. Kierkegaard's effort is to take that original empathic identification into a superlative mode.

20. Kierkegaard tacitly admits this strategy, but lays the blame for it on de Silentio. So he comments, "As I have said, I cannot understand Abraham, I can only admire him" (*FT*, 136). De Silentio's admiration is, I am claiming, this aesthetic strategy of creating a noble image of Abraham. It hence does matter that the subtitle of this book is *Dialectical Lyric*; its lyricism is its work of image creation. But if faith is logically silent, then this strategy cannot be dismissed wholly through de Silentio's inadequacies as thinker. Again, the content of Christian faith does not alter the character of faith.

21. The “could” is moral, not psychological; psychologically, we can imagine anyone coming to believe nearly anything.

22. I understand the “in his heart” rather than “in life” substitution as capturing what is sometimes regarded as the crucial shift from a literal to a symbolic sacrifice in the Abraham narrative. As will become evident, in this story where, again, what makes the act sacrifice and not murder is that the object is unconditionally loved; the “literal” to “symbolic” transition changes little.

23. In stating the issue in this way I am following the lead of Bernard Williams’s critique of Kant’s moral theory in which the primary motive for any action must be that it is obligated by or permitted by the moral law. In his essay “Persons, Character, and Morality,” in his book *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Williams imagines a situation in which two persons are drowning, one of whom is his wife, and only one of the two persons can be saved. Morality requires that all persons be treated equally. Complications aside, the moralist might reasonably contend that in such a situation, where no further facts might weigh, and hence in which equal treatment does not disallow the use of preference—the only alternative to the use of preference being pure randomness, say flipping a coin—it must be permissible to save one’s wife. Williams famously comments (18): “But this construction provides the agent with one thought too many: it might have been hoped by some (for instance, by his wife) that his motivating thought, fully spelled out, would be the thought that it was his wife, not that it was his wife and that in situations of this kind it is permissible to save one’s wife.” This is sometimes referred to as the “one thought too many” objection to pure morality. And I am suggesting that this objection applies more forcefully and radically to the question of faith. Both faith and pure morality require that there be one, unitary source of motivation for human action. So a standard complaint against Kantian morality that sharpens the “one thought too many” objection runs like this: I am morally required, as a wide duty, to act beneficently. My friend is in the hospital, and she would certainly be cheered by a visit. Spelling out the deliberation fully: Because I am bound to act beneficently, and visiting my friend in the hospital would be a case of beneficent action, I will visit her. Here the complaint can be uttered by my friend: “I hoped that you would visit because I am ill and your friend, and not because doing so allows you to fulfill your wide duty of beneficence.” The dragging in of morality motivationally brackets, sacrifices, the fact that she is my ill friend. The effort of making myself a fully moral person, perfecting my virtue, as the primary motive governing all my actions has the consequence of making the doing of beneficial actions toward others somehow more about

me than them; it is always my virtue rather than their need that comes first. Substitute the word “faith” for “virtue” in that last clause and the parallel is evident. The sacrifice is simply more complete and radical in the case of faith. Given these parallels between the demands of faith and the requirements of the moral law, it is plausible to interpret the latter as a noble effort to cash out the ideals of religious morality in wholly secular terms, where the moral law replaces the living God. And it is thus equally plausible to criticize Kantian morality as too much under the sway of its theological origin to manage fully the transformation into secular modernity.

24. Charles Dempsey, “Idealism and Naturalism in Rome around 1600,” in *Il classicismo: Medioevo, rinascimento, barocco: Atti di colloquio Cesare Gnudi*, ed. A. Emiliani (Bologna, 1993), 238, quoted in Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 245.

25. Peter Robb, *M: The Man Who Became Caravaggio* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 242.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Quoted from the 1725 *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellens peintres anciens and modernes* by Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. Mette Hjort (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3.

28. *Ibid.*, 4.

29. For an attempt to free the claims of Dutch realism from the grip of the ideal of the classic solution, see my *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), chap. 1.

30. On jouissance, see Marin, *To Destroy Painting* 5.

31. On the relation between representational and formal violence in painting, see my “In Praise of Pure Violence (Matisse’s War),” in *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 37–55.

32. For a thoughtful treatment of the decapitation paintings as exemplifying a structural element in Caravaggio’s development of autonomous art, see Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, lecture 5. Fried’s lectures brilliantly if sometimes erratically stretch his account of the dialectical relation between absorption (immersion) and theatricality (specularity and address) as structural for modern and modernist art to a founding moment of the realist tradition in the art of Caravaggio (now the precursor of Courbet for Fried). Once one recognizes that Fried’s terms of contrast easily track more familiar ones—beauty/inwardness/harmony versus sublime/outward/dissonance/excess—then his project will seem less willful than it sometimes does. For a fuller and more multisided account of the emergence of the autonomous art

of the easel painting, see Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

33. Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, 141.

34. Fried, *Moment of Caravaggio*, 102.

35. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); all page references in the text of the coda are to this text.

36. As my argument in footnote 23 should have made evident, I do not think the notions of justification, shareability, or answerability are strictly Kantian. On the contrary, I think of Kantian morals as an effort to suppress the demand for justification and answerability by formalizing it—which is at least in part, I argue, just what Derrida, following Levinas, is doing here. What Derrida's defense of silence may be a hapless way of trying to understand is that moral norms unlike theoretical truths count as moral only *after* they have been approved, accepted, passionately grasped; hence, moral norms, singular or general, are logically silent in that they have a moment of affirmation that precedes their discursive comprehension because they are only practical as providing reasons for action, but reasons for action necessarily possess an affective component. But this fact about practical as opposed to theoretical reason has been well known since Plato. For an elaboration see Dieter Henrich, "The Concept of Moral Insight and Kant's Doctrine of the Fact of Reason," in his *The Unity of Reason*, trans. Richard Velkley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

37. Responsibility and answerability are "indefinite" for three primary reasons: The meaning of an action is indefinitely open to future transformation; no individual has unique authority over the meaning of an action; and no ground of action is rationally self-sufficient because rationality is always conditioned. They are not indefinite because the other has an absolute claim on me—a thesis that is truly groundless.