

Kierkegaard and The Religious Sense Kierkegaard proposes three ways of living: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. He says that a “leap of faith” is necessary to traverse the space between the ethical and the religious. He proposes three ways of living: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. Aesthetic living is indulgence in pleasure for oneself. This is the stereotypical view of the secular world, so I would be disappointed if the ethical living category was not also addressed by Kierkegaard. Ethical living is selfless; if taken to its logical conclusion, it drains money and energy from its most staunch adherents. As some philosophers have pointed out, taking ethical living to its extreme is . . . extreme. It sets an ideal that opposes our natural inclinations. Jesus admonished a rich man to give away all his belongings, which in essence was an appeal to the ethical living category. As bioethicist Peter Singer admits, this view of life can lead to nowhere but dissatisfaction if not realized in a realistic way; otherwise, an unbelievably ethical person may despair over their inability to realize their ethical stance perfectly. Lastly, religious living requires that someone follow God’s commands. If the command is unethical, the ethical viewpoint must be supplanted by the religious viewpoint. In other words, God’s command must still be obeyed. Kierkegaard even refers to religious living as absurd because, without God’s admonition to sacrifice Isaac, such a sacrifice is indeed cruel.

Is Kierkegaard correct that religious living is absurd but justified? Yes, but only given two assumptions that could easily be melded into the first: 1) The actor knows that God is all-knowing and all-loving, and 2) The actor knows that the outcome of the unethical deed is ultimately to the benefit of the victim. I believe that most everyone could agree with this justification of an unethical deed; we might even call it ethical because its consequences are known by a good God and vetted to yield a net positive to the victim. Indeed, these assumptions could grant a justification to the Inquisition’s many tortures, presumably all of which worked to hold heretics’ feet to the fire (metaphorically and perhaps literally) to ultimately rescind their heretical utterances and repent for their unholy actions; in this sense, these tortures could be deemed rational because hellfire awaited those individuals who were unfortunate enough not to be compassionately tortured to repentance. However, these assumptions are just that, assumptions; they require faith. To use the version of faith presented in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” “Things not seen” presumably is not limited to the eyes but extends outward to all the senses, including the ethical and moral sense. In his flagship book *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard defends the Binding of Isaac because Abraham abides to religious living in lieu of ethical living. Interestingly, Kierkegaard imagines that Abraham’s defiance would have potentially earned him more praise. The “knight of faith”, as Abraham is called, subordinated the ethical and rational to God. Kierkegaard proposes that Abraham had faith in the ultimate good of the act; that Isaac would despise him but love God still. This tradeoff would destroy the father-son bond, but a net gain would be had. Perhaps this is commendable, but it is only commendable given the two stated assumptions.

In what practical way is Abraham’s story of faith beneficial to us in a literal sense? I would argue that it’s not. Abraham is assumed to fulfill both assumptions in the previous paragraph, though it seems unlikely that the same assumptions can be had by any person in their right mind. There are far too many denominations, sects, and cults within the Abrahamic religions, and the admonitions of each are likely to contradict the admonitions of all the others at least once. Thus, that which is claimed to be God’s command may not be God’s command. This should frighten those religious who justify the pain and suffering they cause for the supposedly greater good. To live ethically rather than religiously is to turn a blind eye to that which cannot be perceived through the senses and through the human perspective.

Although there are many devices that detect what we cannot, science is unlikely to be capable of detecting everything. It would be ludicrous to deny that there are many things which lie outside the human capacity to notice; but greater lunacy lies in those who claim to understand an ultimate moral code outside of the human experience, especially in the face of contradictory claims whose foundations are also faith-based.

*“The naturalistic understanding of morality does not lead to absolute precepts and sure judgments, but instead warns against basing them blindly on religious and ideological dogma. When such precepts are misguided, which is often, it is usually because they are based on ignorance.” – E.O. Wilson (The Social Conquest of Earth)*

Even in conceding the knowledge lost through sole scientific inquiry, that faithful admonition which harms individuals is nothing less than disgraceful and inhuman. Even in the hope that an ultimate good will be brought about through this sacrifice, even inadvertent in causing pain, this practice is pernicious. I advocate for a morality which minimizes faith (refer to the Values section on why faith is not completely expendable); certain moral truths may be lost, but concessions must be made to reduce suffering caused by religious moral claims. There is no reliable method whereby true moral religious assertions can be partitioned from the false. For this reason, the religious soundbite “Hate the sin, love the sinner” is context-dependent and thus only justifiably used when the “sinner’s” actions are discernably reprehensible. In the case of amoral actions, the invocation of this saying is casuistic; that is, clever yet unsound. Though we can always be optimistic that it is not instead “Hate the sin, hate the sinner.”