

A Third Interpretation of Kierkegaard's Attunement in "Fear and Trembling"

Jean Ryan
Elmira College (Elmira, NY)

Abstract: Kierkegaard sees the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only child at God's command as the ultimate expression of true faith. In the Attunement, four short retellings of this story are presented, each with a unique variation that results in Abraham failing God's test of faith. These four interpretations are each followed by an analogous passage comparing Abraham's failure to the process of a mother weaning her child. Scholars have put forward two interpretations of the weaning passages' relation to the Abraham's stories: Edward Mooney proposed Abraham as analogous to the mother and Isaac to the child, while Linda Williams later argued for God as comparable to the mother and Abraham as the child. I propose that the weaning analogies of the Abraham illustrations have a more inclusive, comprehensive interpretation than the above: God is the mother, Isaac is the child, and Abraham is the mother's breast or physical self.

One might pass over the Attunement, Kierkegaard's introduction to "Fear and Trembling," as confusing, ambiguous, and generally irrelevant. However, this segment is meant to 'tune' the reader's focus to the eventual discussion of the true meaning of faith. Kierkegaard sees the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only child at God's command as the ultimate expression of true faith. In the Attunement, four short retellings of the story of Abraham and Isaac are presented, each with a unique variation that ultimately results in Abraham failing God's test of faith, and the consequences thereof. These four interpretations are each followed by an analogous passage comparing Abraham's failure to the process of a mother weaning her child. By attempting to make the struggle of Abraham comprehensible, Kierkegaard is in fact introducing one of his main premises about the nature of faith: by understanding and communicating faith, it necessarily becomes something less than true faith.

Most confusion about the Attunement comes from the inclusion of the weaning passages, how they relate to the separate stories of Abraham, and what the Abraham stories are actually trying to convey. An ideal explanation of the Abraham interpretations and their respective

analogies would offer the following requirements and conclusions: first, the mother and child of the weaning passage would be entirely compatible with their relevant characters in the situation; secondly, the weaning passages would not only explain but expose deeper meaning behind the interpretations of Abraham's journey. Scholars have put forward two main interpretations of how the weaning passages relate analogously to the retellings of Abraham's story: Edward Mooney (1991) proposed Abraham as analogous to the mother and Isaac to the child, while Linda Williams (2008) later argued for God as comparable to the mother and Abraham as the child. However, examination shows that these explanations are either incomplete, or in some cases offer conclusions inconsistent with the preceding story. Based on the following considerations, I propose that the weaning analogies of the Abraham illustrations have a more inclusive, comprehensive interpretation than the two proposed by Mooney and Williams: God is the mother, Isaac is the child, and Abraham is the mother's breast or physical self.

The first section of the Attunement introduces a man who has become obsessed with understanding the paradox of Abraham's faith. This is proposed to the audience using the tone of a fairy tale: "There once was a man" (Kierkegaard 8). Likewise, each of the following four stories begins, "It was early morning." Williams comments that this emphasizes that the following accounts are indeed more akin to fairy tales than to the actual biblical account. We know this to be true, since Kierkegaard emphasizes one of the main components of faith as its failure to be communicable, or communicable directly; therefore, these stories which attempt to make sense of Abraham's actions cannot possibly be as meaningful as the original, as they make the events understandable. Their tone and similarity enforce that each story is not a separate factual account, but merely a different interpretation of the actions of the original Abraham –

hence the term “sub-Abraham”, as each description is an incomplete sketch of the whole event, a lesser version of the actual account.

What makes the four Abraham illustrations worthy of examination are the inclusion of the ‘weaning’ passages: each Abraham interpretation is followed by one or two sentences analogously comparing the ordeal of Abraham and Isaac to the ordeal of a mother weaning her infant child. These segments too contain parallel constructions, emphasizing the cohesiveness of the four as interpretations of one global story, while pointing out the different results that transpire from each circumstance. Each passage ends with a line similar to, “Lucky the one who...” While each of these stories explains Abraham’s actions, this final line in each situation reminds the audience that the peril of this sub-Abraham and of the mother are nothing compared to the agony of the true Abraham. In addition to providing meaning to the Abraham stories, the weaning passages emphasize the complete difference of scale between Abraham’s actions and any of earthly, ethical basis.

These weaning passages are obvious analogies to the struggles of each sub-Abraham in his respective interpretation; however, scholars have proposed separate applications of the analogy to the stories. One states that Abraham is to the mother as Isaac is to the child. This would appear to be the most literal translation, as Isaac is in fact Abraham’s child; Mooney writes of this scenario, “If the child weaned is Isaac, then the issue is *how to make Isaac free*” (30). The other proposed roles of the mother and child in the Abraham story are God as the mother, and Abraham as the child. Mooney continues, “In this case the test becomes his capacity to be weaned from a potentially harmful misrelationship to God, a relationship that would keep *him* unfree” (30). Both of these interpretations, when applied to each separate

Abraham story, do fit into each account and provide meaning. However, I would argue that there is in fact a better, more inclusive interpretation of the analogy involving a third component: my analysis would place God as the mother, Isaac as the child, and Abraham as the mother's breast or physical self. In the following examination, I will show how this third piece fits the analogous pieces together in a more comprehensive manner than either of the other proposed relationships.

Each account seeks to make Abraham's actions understandable – putting aside that this is, according to Kierkegaard, essentially counter-productive to understanding faith. However, changing some circumstance of the story leads to a difference of outcome. The first scenario shows Abraham trying to convey to Isaac the command he has received from God. However, when he sees that Isaac's terror is not lessened, he changes his explanation of his actions, instead putting on the face of a madman. Most scholars agree that Abraham does this so as to preserve Isaac's faith in God, as he sees this universal love as more important than that of a father. This is likely, since, as a man of such a high degree of faith, Abraham would not have willingly tarnished God's name for such a selfish purpose as to preserve his own. The passage following this scenario describes a mother weaning her child by 'blackening her breast', so that it will seem unappealing to the child; therefore, the child will not be subject to painful separation, as the object of its desire will no longer be desirable.

First, we must examine the relationship between this story and weaning passage using the first interpretation, that of Abraham as the mother and Isaac as the child. Williams finds comparison between the two in that both the mother and Abraham use deception as the means to an end (4). As previously stated, using this interpretation examines Abraham setting Isaac free;

by weaning Isaac from his protection, Abraham gets back a child who understands the true power of faith in God. Lippitt, however, points out, “The God in whom the dying Isaac has faith in is presumably a God who would *not* demand such a sacrifice[;] the God who would demand such a sacrifice is precisely the kind of God against whom Abraham feels the need to protect Isaac’s faith” (24). This realization is exactly why this interpretation of the analogy is faulty: the faith Isaac comes to is essentially in a false image of God.

If this has faults, let us examine the relationship using the second interpretation, that of God as the mother and Abraham as the child to be freed. If this is the case, what is the deception between God and Abraham? One possibility that Williams hypothesizes is that God is not actually seeking the physical sacrifice of Isaac (7). In this situation, God is taking the abhorrent role of the mother – viewed as unloving by the child – in making such a demand of Abraham. The result of both scenarios is a better relationship between the two involved. While this idea also fits, one finds problem with the actual comparison: if simplified to merely an act of deception, this analogy makes sense, but if the specific action of blackening the breast is taken into consideration, what is this parallel to in Abraham’s situation?

Now, then, let us examine the parallels between Abraham’s situation and the weaning passage with my proposed interpretation of God as the mother, Isaac as the child, and Abraham as the mother’s physical body. If one takes this standpoint, the motives and outcomes for each are changed, but the analogy better connects the weaning passage with the sub-Abraham scenario. Abraham is the mother’s body passing sustenance in the form of faith in God onto Isaac; God then eliminates the connection between body and child – weans Isaac from Abraham – in order to create a truer connection between himself and Isaac. Kierkegaard writes, “So the

child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother is the same, her glance is as loving and tender as ever” (28). As in the situation of a mother weaning her child, this does not necessarily mean that Isaac falls away from Abraham, but simply signifies that Abraham must no longer act as a tool of God’s faith for Isaac.

For this first scenario, then, Abraham’s image is tarnished; by framing his motives as those of a madman, Isaac loses the faith he has in Abraham, and calls out to God: “God in heaven have mercy on me, God of Abraham have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then be Thou my father!” (Kierkegaard 10). With these words, Isaac clearly displays his surrendering of faith to God. As the ideal outcome of Isaac being weaned from Abraham to become closer to God would maintain a positive relationship between the three, this comparison also provides further reasoning why the story of the sub-Abraham is not comparable to the true one, since Isaac now fears his father.

In the second interpretation of Abraham and Isaac’s story, Abraham brings Isaac to the mountain in Moriah, and is prepared to sacrifice him as before, but instead of feeling joy upon his discovery of the lamb, Abraham sinks into darkness, as he struggles to comprehend why his God would demand such a sacrifice of him. Williams summarizes, “It haunts him that the God he believed was unconditionally good could ask such a monstrous deed from him” (5). Since this interpretation examines Abraham acting simply out of blind obedience rather than true faith, this version is incomplete. The weaning analogy that follows this second passage describes the mother physically covering her body from her child, therefore denying access.

Again, the first analogy examines Abraham as the mother and Isaac as the child. Through this, Isaac loses his father just as the child loses the physical sense of the mother.

Lippitt comments, “Among the things that this Abraham has lost, therefore, is the capacity genuinely to understand and empathise with the cares, concerns and losses of his son” (25). This provides a slightly deeper reading of the analogy, saying that Isaac has not only lost his father in the sense that Abraham becomes withdrawn from the world, but more specifically is withdrawn from Isaac’s life. However, this analogy is erroneous in that the mother purposely covers her breast in order to wean the child, while Abraham’s loss of connection with Isaac is not voluntary – indeed, Abraham sees his loss as his new lack of understanding in God, whereas losing Isaac is a consequence of this first loss. Additionally, while Isaac is then freed from living vicariously through Abraham’s faith, it is unclear how this would influence him to gain his own personal faith in God when his father’s is so clearly shaken. The line, “Isaac thrive as before,” can be interpreted as Isaac’s faith was not altered – either negatively or positively, so any relationship with God was thus not strengthened.

A second examination, again, places God as the mother and Abraham as the child. Williams writes, “By asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God forever alters the grounds of their relationship. A relationship with God does not guarantee all sunlight and flowers. The immense magnitude of God’s power encompasses death and darkness as well” (7). This does fit, as the relationship between both mother and child becomes less physical, and Abraham does seem to pull away from God. Additionally, the line of the weaning passage stating, “the child no more has a mother,” is true here as well, as Abraham no longer feels he has a relationship with God. I will assent that this interpretation does provide a solid reading of this sub-Abraham’s actions.

However, let us continue by examining the third proposed interpretation for this second passage, which too provides a strong analysis. If God is the mother, then the weaning is

purposeful, as He seeks to gain a closer relationship with Isaac – solving a problem inherent in the first interpretation of this second passage. As Abraham is the mother’s physical body, then Isaac indeed undergoes a separation from him, as does the child of the analogy. God “covers” the countenance of Abraham in order to wean Isaac from his dependence on his father for the idea of faith. Again, similar to the first passage, the fact that this does not result in entirely positive relationships between the three is not a sign of the interpretation’s weakness, but rather a reminder that this sub-Abraham is nothing compared to his true self.

In the third of the Abraham retellings, Abraham again struggles to comprehend God’s command. He begs God to understand why he cannot willingly sacrifice that which he holds dearest. Which is a sin – his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, or his disobedience to God? He is uncomfortable taking the risk of losing his son for the potential gain that is possible. The weaning passage which follows this third retelling describes the pain felt not only by the child but also by the mother. Her child will never be as close to her after she weans it, and although the relationship will continue to grow and develop, she mourns the loss of this unique relationship between mother and child.

The relationship between these passages through the first interpretation is apparent and literal. The process of giving up his son is too much for Abraham to bear, especially when he cannot know that the actual consequence will supposedly be an even greater relationship not only between himself and Isaac but also including God. Lippitt suggests that “the significance of this passage lies in the contrast it effectively draws between the feelings of love and care that a mother has for her child (crucially, *this particular* child), and the level of generalized abstraction required by an approach to ethics which aims to trade exclusively in terms of ‘duties’ stemming

from ‘universal’ ethical laws” (27). The mother – and in this situation, Abraham – finds sorrow only from the contemplation of the ethical sense, and cannot push past this to the final stage the relationship should eventually culminate in. However, the mother knows that she must give up this relationship with the child, and is assured by societal norms that this sacrifice is meaningful. On the other hand, Abraham’s actions are entirely unprecedented, and he has no example from which to influence his decision.

If God is the mother, and Abraham the child, then God is the one who feels sorrow at the potential loss of Abraham. According to this interpretation, God understands the huge demand he is asking of Abraham, and empathizes with Abraham’s difficult decision – for if this request was not so monumental, the outcome of Abraham as the model of faith would not be as remarkable (Williams 7). If this is merely a test on God’s part, however, Williams comments, “Tests are informative, but it is hard to imagine a test that would inform an omniscient God” (7). Here is where the analogy falls apart: God should not feel sorrow at losing Abraham, because God knows the ultimate outcome of his demands – a better relationship for all.

Using the third interpretation, God is the mother’s consciousness or subconscious, Abraham is the physical body, and Isaac is the child. The mother feels physically conflicted at having to give up her child, even though she wants to trust herself – God – that it is the right thing to do. She – Abraham, in the analogy – does not wish to give up the physical bond with her child in order to gain the relationship which she knows she must pursue – what God tells Abraham. Through this interpretation it is also implied then that God, even, feels some sorrow at separating Isaac from Abraham. “When the child is to be weaned the mother too is not without sorrow, that she and the child grow more and more apart; that the child which first lay beneath

her heart, yet later rested at her breast, should no longer be so close” (Kierkegaard 12). By requesting this of Abraham, Isaac will no longer be as close with his father, in order to obtain a more perfect relationship with God.

This brings us to the fourth and final passage which attempts to shed light on Abraham’s actions. Abraham brings Isaac to Mount Moriah, just as in the actual account. However, as Abraham is preparing for the sacrifice, Isaac sees his father’s hand shake – and thus loses his faith. Scholars disagree whether the faith lost is that in Abraham or in Isaac, as the text is unclear: “Isaac had lost his faith. Never a word in the whole world is spoken of this, and Isaac told no one what he had seen, and Abraham never suspected that anyone had seen it” (Kierkegaard 13). The weaning passage is just as ambiguous, referencing the fact that, after the mother weans the child, she has solid food on hand, so the child will continue to receive sustenance. The ambiguity and vagueness of this fourth section makes it the hardest of the four to solidly interpret; each of the three applicable analogies present multiple interpretations.

This weaning passage adds the significance of the “solid food at hand” as an additional aspect of the analogy to consider. If Abraham is the mother and Isaac is the child, what is the solid food present to sustain Isaac? Since this fourth passage is so ambiguous, even this one interpretation of the analogy presents multiple solutions. In terms of the sacrifice itself, Williams writes, “Perhaps God’s blessing and favor will be “more solid food” than can be found in any earthly love, even in that of a loving child. But then Abraham would be getting the more solid food rather than “the child” – Isaac” (5). As she points out, this is illogical, because in the weaning passage, the solid food is given by the mother to the child. One scenario of the fourth passage is that the faith Isaac loses is his faith in Abraham – he is weaned from Abraham’s

influence; what solid food, then, does Abraham as the mother have to give his son after this? Lippitt concludes, “Though he is prepared to go through with the sacrifice, this sub-Abraham does so in despair: he has no sense of joy or confidence in what he is prepared to do. Moreover, Isaac suddenly realizes this” (28). This, however, emphasizes the downfall of this interpretation: since Abraham does not know that Isaac saw his hand shake, he has no reason to offer any such sustenance. Alternatively, if Isaac loses his faith in God, what does Abraham offer? The outcomes of these two scenarios are equally unclear and offer any further insight into this fourth account.

God as the mother and Abraham as the child provides a slightly better interpretation of this passage. Williams comments, “Here I am tempted to say that the ram that is substituted for Isaac is “the more solid food,” but I am afraid that would be a bit too literal a reading of the passage!” (7). Indeed, such an examination takes into consideration only the literal sacrifice, and not the faith and relationships in question. In order to free Abraham from a potentially harmful or misunderstood relationship with God, God as the mother weans Abraham; perhaps the solid food is the final, solid relationship that Abraham will have with God after this ordeal, and Abraham simply cannot overcome the weaning to appreciate the solid food – as evident in his shaking hand. Using this interpretation of the analogy, however, completely cuts Isaac out of the picture – and Isaac’s experience is arguably the more important focus of this fourth passage.

My third interpretation again provides a more complete picture of what occurs between God, Abraham, and Isaac, and clears up much of the ambiguity of this passage by necessity. If God is the mother weaning Isaac from Abraham, this would imply that Isaac loses his faith in Abraham rather than God. Even though neither outcome is specified in the text, this complies

with the supposed goal of an improved relationship with God, as loss of faith in God would make this connection impossible. God eliminates Isaac's reliance upon his father – the physical weaning of the child – and instead offers him the solid food of a relationship with God in its place.

The simple existence of the Attunement confuses many readers, either in its purpose or in its relevance to the continued text. However, these short interpretations of the story of Abraham and Isaac are key to Kierkegaard's discussion of the nature of faith itself. The real discussion of these passages comes in identifying the relationship between the sub-Abraham passages and the weaning analogies, as their correlation is never clarified. There are many other possible conditions to take into account: the order the passages appear in, the point of view involved in the telling of the story – even Kierkegaard's broken relationship with Regina has been examined as possibly affecting these analogies. Mooney mentions Kierkegaard's descriptions of additional interpretations of the Abraham stories, as he wrote them in his journals – each meant to show what faith is *not*. This is just the purpose of the weaning passages, to show how this sub-Abraham fails in expressing the ultimate faith that Abraham exercised. Previous analyses of the passages describe a literal interpretation of Abraham as the mother and Isaac as the child, or a deeper explanation of God as the mother and Abraham as the child. However, the additional or clarified meanings found after applying such ideas are often unclear or irrelevant. My third interpretation of God as the mother, Isaac as the child, and Abraham as the mother's physical body explains completely the relationships of faith between all involved, as well as provides additional substance and explanation of each sub-Abraham's failure to convey true faith.

Works Cited

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