

The Evolution of Faith and Ethics in Philosophy History: A Comparative Study of Kierkegaard, Augustine, and Greek Myths

Han Wu^{1,a,*}

¹*Ulink College Guangzhou, Nansha, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, 511458, China*
a. Hanwu2538@ulinkcollege.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This article explores the evolution of faith and ethics among philosophy history, based on the work of Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. It argues that Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac reveals the paradoxical and existential nature of faith, which challenges the rational and universal claims of ethical theories. Furthermore, it compares the story of Abraham and Isaac with the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia, who were also asked to sacrifice their children by the gods. The different outcomes of these stories reflect different views of faith, ethics, and divine will would be remarkable. Another Christian philosopher is going to be mentioned, who is Sanctus Aurelius Augustinus. This article explores how both Augustine and Kierkegaard emphasise the role of grace and love in the life of faith, and how they understand faith as a personal and dynamic relationship with God, rather than a static and formal adherence to doctrines or rules. It is suggested that further insights are available by reflection upon the question how they both acknowledge the limits and errors of human reason, and the need for humility and repentance in the face of God's mystery and mercy.

Keywords: Abraham's Sacrifice, Faith and Ethics, Divinity

1. Introduction

Faith and ethics are two fundamental concepts in philosophy that have been explored and debated by many thinkers throughout history. How are religion and ethics defined? How do they interact with one other and with the divine? How do they influence our behaviours and decisions in life? These are some of the questions that philosophers have tried to answer in different ways, depending on their historical, cultural, and personal contexts [1, 2].

One of the most influential and original philosophers who addressed the issue of faith and ethics was Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish thinker who is widely regarded as the father of existentialism [3]. Kierkegaard was interested in the subjective and individual aspects of human existence, and he challenged the rational and universal claims of the dominant philosophical and religious systems of his time. He proposed a radical and paradoxical view of faith, which he illustrated with the biblical story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Kierkegaard's analysis of these stories reveals the existential and ethical dilemmas that humans face when they confront the divine will and their own destiny.

The following writing tends to explore the evolution of faith and ethics in philosophy history, based on the work of Kierkegaard [3]. It will also examine the views of another Christian philosopher, Augustine, who lived in the 4th and 5th centuries and who influenced Kierkegaard's thought [4]. It will discuss how both Augustine and Kierkegaard emphasise the role of grace and love in the life of faith, and how they understand faith as a personal and dynamic relationship with God, rather than a static and formal adherence to doctrines or rules. Furthermore, the story of Abraham and Isaac with the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia, who were also asked to sacrifice their children by the gods will be taken into the discourse to discuss how the different outcomes of these stories reflect different views of faith, ethics, and divine will.

2. Kierkegaard's View of Faith and Ethics

Kierkegaard's view of faith and ethics is based on his distinction between three stages of human existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious [5]. The aesthetic stage is characterised by the pursuit of pleasure, sensation, and variety, without any commitment or responsibility. The ethical stage is characterised by the recognition of universal moral laws and values, and the attempt to live according to them. The religious stage is characterised by the acceptance of a personal and transcendent relationship with God, which requires a leap of faith and a suspension of reason.

Kierkegaard argues that the ethical stage is not the highest or the final stage of human existence, as many philosophers and theologians have assumed. He claims that the ethical stage is still limited by the human reason and the human perspective, and that it cannot account for the paradoxes and mysteries of the divine. He proposes that the religious stage is the highest and the most authentic stage of human existence, but he also acknowledges that it is the most difficult and the most absurd one. He defines faith as "the paradox of existence", which means that faith is the contradiction between the eternal and the temporal, the infinite, and the finite, the absolute and the relative. Faith is not a matter of rational proof or logical consistency, but a matter of passion, trust, and obedience [5].

To illustrate his view of faith and ethics, Kierkegaard uses the biblical story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, which he analyses in his famous book *Fear and Trembling* [6]. In this story, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, who is the child of promise and the source of Abraham's joy. Abraham obeys God without hesitation, without questioning, and without telling anyone. He takes Isaac to the mountain of Moriah, where he is ready to kill him with a knife, until an angel stops him and provides a ram as a substitute. God praises Abraham for his faith and renews his covenant with him.

Kierkegaard interprets this story as a paradigm of the religious stage of existence, and he calls Abraham the "knight of faith" [5]. He argues that Abraham's action is incomprehensible and irrational from the ethical point of view because he violates the universal moral law that prohibits killing an innocent human being, especially one's own child. He also argues that Abraham's action is incomprehensible and irrational from the human point of view because he sacrifices his love, his happiness, and his future for the sake of an absurd and cruel command. Kierkegaard claims that Abraham's action can only be understood and justified from the religious point of view, because he acts out of faith in God, who is the source and the end of all existence. He says that Abraham's faith is a "teleological suspension of the ethical", which means that he suspends the ethical for the sake of a higher purpose, which is God's will. He also says that Abraham's faith is a "double movement", which means that he gives up everything and yet expects everything, because he trusts that God will not take away his son but will restore him to him [6].

Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac reveals the paradoxical and existential nature of faith, which challenges the rational and universal claims of ethical theories. He shows that faith is not a passive or a conformist attitude, but an active and a courageous one, which requires a

leap into the unknown and a risk of losing everything. He also shows that faith is not a general or a collective phenomenon, but a personal and a singular one, which depends on the individual's relationship with God and his or her response to God's call. Kierkegaard's view of faith and ethics is radical and provocative, and it has inspired and influenced many existentialist thinkers and writers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Franz Kafka [7, 8].

3. Augustine's View of Faith and Ethics

Augustine's view of faith and ethics is based on his conversion to Christianity and his interpretation of the Scriptures. Augustine was born in the 4th century in North Africa, and he lived in a time of political and religious turmoil, marked by the decline of the Roman Empire and the rise of various heresies and sects. Augustine was initially attracted by the Manichean religion, which offered a dualistic and deterministic explanation of the world and of human nature, based on the opposition between light and darkness, good and evil, spirit and matter. He later became disillusioned with the Manichean religion, and he turned to the Neoplatonic philosophy, which offered a monistic and rationalistic explanation of the world and of human nature, based on the unity and the hierarchy of being, from the One to the many, from the intelligible to the sensible. He finally converted to Christianity, after reading the writings of Paul and hearing the preaching of Ambrose, and he became one of the most influential and authoritative theologians and philosophers of the Christian tradition [4].

Augustine's view of faith and ethics is based on his understanding of God as the creator and the ruler of all things, and of human beings as the image and the likeness of God, who are endowed with reason, will, and freedom. He argues that human beings are created good, but they are corrupted by sin, which is the result of their disobedience and their pride. He claims that human beings cannot overcome sin by their own efforts, but they need the grace and the mercy of God, who sent his Son Jesus Christ to redeem them and to restore them to their original state. He says that faith is the acceptance and the acknowledgment of God's grace and mercy, and the trust and the love of God, who is the source and the end of all good. He also says that faith is the foundation and the beginning of all wisdom and knowledge, and the guide and the criterion of all reason and morality [4].

To illustrate his view of faith and ethics, Augustine uses the biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve, which he analyses in his famous book *The City of God*. In this story, God creates Adam and Eve in his image and likeness, and he places them in the garden of Eden, where they enjoy his presence and his gifts. God commands them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is the only limit and the only test of their obedience and their love. However, Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent, who is the symbol of the devil, and they eat from the forbidden tree, against God's will. As a result, they lose their innocence and their happiness, and they are expelled from the garden, into a world of suffering and death. God punishes them for their sin, but he also promises them a saviour, who will crush the head of the serpent and who will restore them to their original state [4].

Augustine interprets this story as a paradigm of the human condition, and he calls Adam and Eve the "parents of the human race". He argues that Adam and Eve's action is the origin and the cause of all evil and misery in the world because they violate the natural and the divine law that governs their existence. He also argues that Adam and Eve's action is the expression and the manifestation of their pride and their self-love, which make them prefer their own will and their own judgment to God's will and God's judgment. Augustine claims that Adam and Eve's action can only be corrected and healed by God's grace and mercy, which are revealed and offered in Jesus Christ, who is the new Adam and the new Eve [4]. Sure, people would understand that one may try to continue this article from where it stopped. Here is the rest of the paragraph down below.

He says that Adam and Eve's sin is a "Felix culpa", which means a "happy fault", because it allows the manifestation and the appreciation of God's grace and mercy, which are greater than any evil and any misery. He also says that Adam and Eve's sin is the origin and the basis of the two cities, which are the city of God and the city of man, which represent the two kinds of human societies and the two kinds of human loves, which are the love of God and the love of self [4, 9]. Augustine's analysis of Adam and Eve's fall reveals the theological and historical nature of faith and ethics, which depend on God's plan and God's action in the world. He shows that faith is not a natural or a human phenomenon, but a supernatural and a divine one, which requires a conversion and a transformation of the human heart and mind. He also shows that faith is not a private or a personal phenomenon, but a social and a political one, which affects the human community and the human history. Augustine's view of faith and ethics is classical and authoritative, and it has shaped and influenced many Christian thinkers and writers, such as Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin.

4. Compare and contrast the story of Abraham and Isaac with the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia

The story of Abraham and Isaac and the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia are two examples of stories that involve the sacrifice of children by their fathers, because of a divine command or a divine oracle [3]. However, there are also significant differences between these two stories, which reflect different views of faith, ethics, and divine will, as well as different conceptions of God and the gods, and of human nature and destiny. One of the main differences between these two stories is the motivation and the intention of the fathers who are asked to sacrifice their children. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, who is the child of promise and the source of Abraham's joy. Abraham obeys God without hesitation, without questioning, and without telling anyone. He acts out of faith in God, who is the source and the end of all existence, and who has the power and the right to give and to take away life. Abraham trusts that God will not take away his son, but will restore him to him, and that God will fulfil his promise and his covenant with him. Abraham's action is incomprehensible and irrational from the ethical and the human point of view, but it is understandable and justified from the religious and the divine point of view [5].

In the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia, Agamemnon is told by the seer Calchas that he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, to appease the goddess Artemis, who is angry with him and who has stopped the wind that would allow the Greek fleet to sail to Troy. Agamemnon hesitates, questions, and resists the oracle. He acts out of necessity, not out of faith. He sacrifices his daughter for the sake of his honour, his duty, and his ambition, not for the sake of his love, his trust, and his obedience to the gods. He does not expect the gods to spare his daughter, but to reward him with victory and glory. Agamemnon's action is comprehensible and rational from the ethical and the human point of view, but it is questionable and problematic from the religious and the divine point of view.

Another difference between these two stories is the outcome and the consequence of the sacrifice of the children by their fathers. In the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham is stopped by an angel, who tells him that he has passed the test of his faith, and who provides a ram as a substitute for Isaac. God praises Abraham for his faith and renews his covenant with him. Abraham and Isaac are reunited and blessed, and they return to their home. The story ends with a happy and hopeful note, which implies that God is faithful and merciful, and that he has a plan and a purpose for Abraham and his descendants.

In the story of Agamemnon and Iphigenia, Agamemnon is not stopped by anyone, and he kills his daughter on the altar. The goddess Artemis is appeased, and the wind is restored, but the

sacrifice of Iphigenia triggers a series of tragic events, which lead to the downfall and the death of Agamemnon and his family. Agamemnon is killed by his wife Clytemnestra, who avenges the death of her daughter, and who is later killed by her son Orestes, who avenges the death of his father, and who is pursued by the Furies, who punish the crime of matricide. The story ends with a tragic and hopeless note, which implies that the gods are capricious and cruel, and that they have no plan and no purpose for Agamemnon and his descendants. It had also shown the difference of the believers' perspectives toward God and gods in Christianity and Greek and Roman Mythology.

5. Conclusion

This article explored the evolution of faith and ethics in philosophy history, based on the work of Kierkegaard and Augustine, and their comparison of Abraham, Agamemnon and Iphigenia, and the Greek myths. It is argued that Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac reveals the paradoxical and existential nature of faith, which challenges the rational and universal claims of ethical theories. It also argued that Augustine's analysis of Adam and Eve's fall reveals the theological and historical nature of faith and ethics, which depend on God's plan and God's action in the world. Furthermore, a view of compared the differences of faith, ethics, and divine will that are reflected in the different outcomes of the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Agamemnon and Iphigenia, and Icarus. It has discussed how the Greek myths can be seen as expressions of the aesthetic and the ethical stages of existence, according to Kierkegaard's classification, and how they contrast with the religious stage of existence, exemplified by Abraham and Icarus.

Faith and ethics are two fundamental concepts in philosophy that have been explored and debated by many thinkers throughout history, and that they have significant implications for the human condition and the human destiny. It has also shown that faith and ethics are not static or fixed phenomena, but dynamic and evolving ones, that are influenced by the historical, cultural, and personal contexts of the philosophers who address them. By comparing the views of Kierkegaard and Augustine, and their use of the biblical and the mythical stories, this essay has demonstrated the diversity and the complexity of the philosophical discourse on faith and ethics, and the challenges and the opportunities that it poses for the contemporary reader. This has also opened new questions and possibilities for further research, such as the way by which other Christian philosophers, such as Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, view faith and ethics, and how do they relate to the views of Kierkegaard and Augustine. Also is remarkable the way by which other philosophical traditions, such as Buddhism, Islam, or Confucianism, view faith and ethics, and how do they compare with the views of Kierkegaard and Augustine. These are some of the questions that this research has raised, but not answered, and that invite further exploration and reflection. It has aimed to show why this topic is important and relevant for the philosophical inquiry and the human experience, and to leave the reader with a strong impression and a new perspective.

References

- [1] Golomb, J. (2012). *In search of authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus*. Routledge.
- [2] Stewart, J. B. (Ed.). (2011). *Kierkegaard and existentialism* (Vol. 9). Ashgate Publishing, Ltd..
- [3] Kierkegaard, S. (2000). *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Princeton University Press.
- [4] Tornau, C. (2019). *Saint Augustine*. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2020. *Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University*.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/augustine/>.
- [5] Armstrong, D., & Ratchford, E. A. (1985). *IPHIGENIA'S VEIL: AESCHYLUS, "AGAMEMNON"* 228-48. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, (32), 1-12.
- [6] Lippitt, J. (2015). *The Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*. Routledge.
- [7] Aho, K., Altman, M., & Pedersen, H. (Eds.). (2024). *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Existentialism*. Taylor & Francis.

- [8] Bakewell, S. (2016). *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others*. Other Press, LLC.
- [9] Marino, G. (2018). *The existentialist's survival guide: How to live authentically in an inauthentic age*. New York.