

Love and Hate: Derrida and Kierkegaard Hiding in the Bushes with a Ram

The *akedah*, the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah (found in the twenty second chapter of the book of Genesis) is most commonly read into commentaries on ethics and obligation; this passage is a frequent point of departure for reflections on how the obvious tension between responsibilities towards one's family and obligations to one's G+d¹ might be resolved. However, I am not entirely certain that such an approach will bear any fruit that has not yet already ripened and been plucked. As such, in this participatory effort which is but the first germination of the mustard seed of a momentary thought, I will instead focus on the alternative tension between love and hate, which is most properly identified in the writing of Jacques Derrida in his 1999 book *Donner la Mort* (the Gift of Death). In the third chapter, titled "Whom to Give to (Knowing not to Know)" Derrida deals substantially with various texts from Danish philosophical theologian Søren Kierkegaard in his reckoning with the relationality of the sacrifice atop Mount Moriah, forming a more than sufficient theoretical basis for the questions I would like to investigate: did Abraham kill his son out of love or hate? Did G+d? Was this nothing but 'methodological' "play"?

Before any further elaboration, it is appropriate to enumerate the value of this project. If one happens to have some obligation to a tradition which values the exegesis of the story in question, the value can remain implied. However, if no such obligation exists, it is my view, which is shared by authors far wiser than I, that biblical exegesis in the tradition of deconstruction² is worth at least a cursory investigation for the purposes of cultural relevance, if nothing else, though in my opinion, mere cultural exploration is a low bar to clear—observations of some theoretical import can be drawn from the scriptures with the same

¹ Personally inspired by the Jewish tradition's reverence for the written name of G+d, I have adapted the textual translation of the divine to fit my best practices. Consider it my *chumra*.

² Apologies, Derrida. I'm sure he would retch at the phrase "tradition of deconstruction," but such is the nature of my writing.

intensity as any other text. The potential in projects such as this is vast, and attested to by the existent volumes of literature in this vein, of which Derrida and Kierkegaard will be the focus of this exploration.

Any exploration of the potential meaning to be derived from the story of Abraham and Isaac on the mountain must itself begin in that moment. As Abraham brought down his knife upon Isaac his son, at the behest of his G+d, he committed a veritable breach of the ethical. It is demonstrably wrong to put one's son to death—such an act is committed outside of ethics, this much is of little³ question. For Derrida, because there exists no separation in the eyes of Abraham between the moment in which he stretches out his hand and the act of murder, the moment and the act cannot be separated.⁴ This is important to our discussion of love and hate inasmuch as it dismisses the contention of the act as essentially incomplete—we may consider the act done, and in our reflection, each action is aorist in its completed aspect—but enough introduction.

What happened when Abraham killed Isaac is a matter of great contention. Even making a claim such as “Abraham killed Isaac” elicits much reaction, considering Isaac was not, technically, killed, though such an objection cannot help but seem pedantic at best. For Abraham, upon hearing the call of G+d, is not said to have waived or tarried in his execution, even to the point of execution. To Abraham, the representative of all peoples, the murder *was* committed—having no foreknowledge of G+d's intention to stay his hand, Abraham raised the knife to kill his son having already put him to death in his heart. While he would not be charged with murder, for the purposes of textual analysis, Abraham can be counted as having killed Isaac—a killing which was not for his benefit, or out of malice, but a killing in the coldest of blood. This killing, perhaps the purest manifestation of an act of hate, is terribly captivating.

³ Little, not none. I have no wish to litigate the ethics of sacrifice and filicide here—that line of questioning is, in my opinion, far more suitable in the discussion of Christ's Passion.

⁴ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 63

Abraham not only sets aside his love for his son, but casts it down, rejects it fully, in favor of hate and death, recognizing his son as not his. His abandonment is complete, and is only prevented by the grace of the G+d who ordained this entire exercise in the first place, and even then only by means of an angel, a messenger. Were there yet more tests to run?

Indeed if I am allowed a brief digression, I would give some special consideration to the role of the angel in this story. In the text, this angel, though represented in various paintings and in the popular imagination as one who must have been one of heaven's best arm wrestlers, does not lay a hand on Abraham. Instead, he calls twice, possibly out of necessity (for who would not be somewhat focused on the task at hand when the task in question is the killing of one's own son?) for Abraham to stop the downward motion of his arm upon Isaac. Since this story is not a tragedy, per se, and since source E⁵ is not interested in further twisting the knife, the angel's call is heeded, and Abraham stops before any physical (though perhaps not psychological) harm is wrought upon his son. There is much that could be made of the means by which G+d chooses to engage Abraham here: He stops him with the voice of a messenger, and then offers him the ram. By means of apology? Maybe. By means of assurance? Also possible. However, the question of G+d's engagement with Abraham only obfuscates what I believe to be the larger question brought about by the sacrifice of Isaac atop Mount Moriah.

The question immediately raised by the *akedah* is not a simple "why?" That much is relatively clear; Abraham obeyed God to the extreme. The more interesting question, and the one which both Derrida and, to a lesser extent, Kierkegaard, find themselves drawn to is the question of "how did Abraham do this?" Abraham's ability to murder the son whom he loved becomes such an issue when attempting to hold together both Abraham's love and his killing. Without devaluing or discounting either his love for Isaac or his commitment to the hateful killing, we are left with a tension which, in the moment that Abraham brings down his arm,

⁵ The source of scholarly consensus for the book of Genesis, with gloss provided by R and edited by J.

snaps. This is the moment which Derrida claims⁶ that Kierkegaard calls “a moment of madness.” But dutiful Abraham is not mad, is he? His love and his hate, negotiated against his duty, do not make him a madman—otherwise, how could G+d have always already done the exact same thing? So then, what to make of the love and the hate which are held in total equal?

Love and hate are not a dichotomy but a dialectic. As manifestly obvious as this statement may be, it is also somewhat boring. The revelation of tension between the two which does not reflect an uncoupling ought not be a revelation at all, but rather a clarification of the confusing utterances of Jesus, which were of course also already present in the bushes of Mount Moriah. Excerpted from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 14 verse 26, Jesus says “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.” There is no special dispensation given against the amount of hate that one must have, nor is there any loophole to mitigate that hate through some sort of enduring love. Instead, to be obedient to G+d, one must fully hate that which one has been led to love.

The reason for this hate is not immediately evident. Neither from the vantage point among the bushes atop the mountain, nor from the foot of the cross, nor even from the Derridian text can one swiftly glean the function of this hate. I am quite interested in several readings which have evolved out of Derrida’s writing on alterity and hate, which speculate that the recognition offered by Abraham to G+d through the sacrifice (of death by means of hate) is the only recognition within the human power to grant, but I am not capable of fully investigating such ideas here. Instead, it is most prudent to focus on the specific; why must Abraham hate? Or, more accurately, why has G+d called Abraham into this hate? What divinity would ask this out of love?

⁶ Derrida, throughout his life, maintains that Kierkegaard said “The moment of decision is madness.” However, nobody has ever been able to locate this quote, leading most to believe that it was merely Derrida’s confidence which imbued the aphorism with the spirit of Kierkegaard.

Clearly, G+d has no compunctions about filicide. Or, more accurately, there exists a set of circumstances in which it becomes necessary G+d does away with His reservations. In that way, Mount Moriah operates in two distinct manners depending upon whether one takes the human perspective or the perspective of the Other. In the eyes of the human, the obligation to duty beyond duty is extended to every duty that arises in human experience, which is not at all insignificant. However, the other perspective carries yet more weight in the form of a test run. What man can do, what man indeed did, must, as below so above, in the image of G+d, carry the same ability on eagles' wings to heaven. In that moment the all-knowing G+d learned that He could execute upon the same—his chosen patriarch passed the test, proof positive; if the man he created in his own image could do the impossible, could acknowledge in secret his ultimate obligation to the Other to the point of hatred (because, as established, there is no way to give the gift of death to the one whom you love without hating them fully and totally in that moment which is every moment), then surely G+d could do the very same? How could the G+d who exists in every moment not hate His Son (Jesus) in every moment? And who are we to G+d, the ultimate Other, if not His other the same?

The bushes atop Mount Moriah are surely crowded. The moment, extended *ad infinitum*, with the knife swinging downward and the hand being stayed in every second, plays itself out until the day after the last day. All are watching, loving, hating, and sacrificing in all moments. And what is G+d to do? He sent a ram—*le don de la mort*.