

# Introduction to Philosophy

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## Reason and Religious Faith: The Paradox of Faith

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

### Readings

- Genesis 22:1–14.
- Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*.

### Background

Søren Kierkegaard, a passionate Christian, articulates a standpoint that rejects all attempts to provide rational arguments and proofs for religious claims. He endorses a conception of faith that consists of intensely personal commitment maintained in the face of intellectual uncertainty or paradox. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard examines the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to illustrate the paradoxical nature of faith. In this story, God asks Abraham to set aside ethical concerns in deference to a higher calling transcending all ethics and morality. Kierkegaard insists that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son must inevitably strike ordinary thought as being both outrageous and incomprehensible. This story dramatizes the disturbing nature of the demands which religious faith can impose on the life and conduct of an individual. Kierkegaard puts it as follows: "While Abraham therefore arouses my admiration, he appalls me as well". In the end, Kierkegaard maintains that it is the individual's own relation to God that is paramount; it assumes precedence over all other considerations. Religion cannot be rationally comprehended and everyday Christianity pays lip service to a phenomenon whose awesome significance it fails to appreciate or even notice.

### Questions

1. In "Tuning Up", Søren Kierkegaard presents four versions of the story of Abraham. Are we supposed to believe that one of these actually happened? What is Kierkegaard up to here?
2. What does Kierkegaard mean by a "teleological suspension of the ethical" and the "temptation of the ethical"? How does the story of Abraham illustrate these? Why is this temptation impossible for both reason and morally to comprehend?
3. Many heroes in Greek and other cultures have been called to sacrifice their children to their gods. What examples does Kierkegaard give? Why are these examples both rationally and morally comprehensible? Are these also instances of a teleological suspension of the ethical? Why or why not?
4. Is Abraham a murderer?