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Exceptions (to exceptions) and decisions (about decisions) in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*

1 Introduction

Recent decades have seen Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) consulted ever more frequently for insights related to social justice, politics and especially political theology.¹ This trend marks a departure from a reception history that often treated (indeed, criticized) Kierkegaard's thought as acosmic or apolitical,² or which attended to Kierkegaard's politics – including his commitment to the pre-1848 Danish absolute monarchy – primarily in connection to his biography and to his historical situatedness.³ The prominence of political theology among recent critics of neoliberalism is itself linked to a revival of the thought of German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985),⁴ who drew inspiration from Kierkegaard throughout his career.⁵ This has led scholars

1 See, e.g., Saitya Brata Das, *The Political Theology of Kierkegaard* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); Sylvia Walsh Perkins, ed., *Truth is Subjectivity: Kierkegaard and Political Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2019); Mads Peter Karlsen, "Towards a Kierkegaardian Retreating of the Political," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 24 (2019): 375–392, <https://doi.org/10.1515/kierke-2019-0015>; Roberto Sirvent and Silas Morgan, eds., *Kierkegaard and Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018); Michael O'Neill Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); and Barry Stocker, *Kierkegaard on Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

2 See, e.g., T. W. Adorno, "On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung/ Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 8 (1939–1940): 413–429; Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. by Ronald Gregor-Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1947]), 46–97, 253–254; Louis Mackey, "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics," *Review of Metaphysics* 15 (1962): 602–620; and Peter George, "Something Anti-social about *Works of Love*," in *Kierkegaard: The Self in Society*, ed. George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare (London: Macmillan, 1998), 70–81.

3 See, e.g., Bruce Kirmmse, "Kierkegaard and 1848," *History of European Ideas* 20, nos. 1–3 (1995): 167–175, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-6599\(95\)92938-Q](https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-6599(95)92938-Q).

4 See, e.g., Chantal Mouffe, ed., *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London and New York: Verso, 1999).

5 A number of texts by Kierkegaard are alluded to throughout Schmitt's unpublished writings, e.g., Carl Schmitt, *Der Schatten Gottes: Introspektionen, Tagebücher und Briefe 1921 bis 1924*, ed. Gerd Giesler, Ernst Hüsmert, and Wolfgang H. Spindler (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2014); Carl

to interrogate the historical, theological and philosophical intersections between Kierkegaard and Schmitt, including by investigating which elements of Kierkegaard's thought might serve as antecedents to aspects of Schmitt's political theological project.⁶

One stimulus for attempting to recover a politics from figures such as Kierkegaard and Schmitt is an increasing skepticism about the capacity of liberal democracy – whether in essence or in its current manifestations – to respond adequately to the dominant moral and political challenges of the twenty-first century,⁷ including ecological catastrophe, a resurgence of aggressive far-right nationalism in Europe and elsewhere, and so-called migration crises.⁸ (Perhaps some of these issues are themselves byproducts of the organization of liberal democratic institutions.) Identified as critics of forms of liberalism, Kierkegaard and Schmitt may offer intellectual resources to respond to such challenges, challenges which often involve a degree of violence (either explicitly exerted by state power or permitted by way of negligence). But here, ambiguities between the descriptive and normative elements of Schmitt's thought bubble to the surface, not to mention lingering questions about the political applicability of Kierkegaard's Christian accounts of religious duty. Both authors attend to the significance of will or authority unchecked by public rationality, i.e., the *decision*. Both may also

Schmitt, *Tagebücher 1925 bis 1929*, ed. Martin Tielke and Gerd Giesler (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2018); and Carl Schmitt, *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1947 bis 1958*, 2nd ed., ed. Gerd Giesler and Martin Tielke (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2015 [1991]).

6 See, e.g., Birte Löschenkohl, "Occasional Decisiveness: Exception, Decision and Resistance in Kierkegaard and Schmitt," *European Journal of Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (2019): 89–107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/147488511561930>; Rebecca Gould, "Laws, Exceptions, Norms: Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin on the Exception," *Telos* 162 (2013): 77–96, doi:10.3817/0313162077; Burkhard Conrad, "Kierkegaard's Moment: Carl Schmitt and His Rhetorical Concept of Decision," *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 12, no. 1 (2008): 145–171, <https://doi.org/10.7227/R.12.1.8>; and Karl Löwith, "The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt," in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, trans. Gary Steiner, ed. Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 137–169.

7 See, e.g., Chantal Mouffe, "Introduction: Schmitt's Challenge," in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 2.

8 For scholarship drawing from Kierkegaard as a resource to respond to these challenges, see, e.g., Thomas J. Millay, *Kierkegaard and the New Nationalism: A Contemporary Reinterpretation of the Attack upon Christendom* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2021); Isak Winkel Holm, *Kierkegaard and Climate Catastrophe: Learning to Live on a Damaged Planet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192862518.001.0001>; and Andrzej Ślōwikowski, "Can a Refugee be One's Neighbor in an Ethical Sense?: An Attempt to Transpose the Transcendent Category of Love for One's Neighbor from Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* into Immanent Ethical Practice with Reference to the Contemporary Migration Crisis," in *Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics*, ed. Mélissa Fox-Muraton (Berlin and Boston, MA: Walter De Gruyter, 2020), 147–167, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110707137-009>.

argue for positions that can offer no reliable check on the (potentially violent) decisions made by these wills or authorities that affect the welfare of others.

Consider, for instance, what has been labeled an ongoing migration crisis in Europe since 2015. Member states' policies are implicated in thousands of documented and presumed deaths related to continuing migrations to and within the EU.⁹ The death and violence (whether understood as negligent, purposeful or some admixture of the two) is justified by a rhetoric that appeals to state security, a move that has been well-documented in connection to actions taken by Hungary and Poland.¹⁰ This is an example of what Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver have called *securitization*, which they define as “the discursive process through which an inter-subjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat.”¹¹ Though the dynamics of securitization are debated, Holger Stritzel has described the concept, as articulated by Buzan and Wæver, as a perduring decisionist speech act.¹² In effect, Schmitt's critique of liberal institutionalism shines a spotlight on these hypocritical elements of liberal states that callously or cruelly turn away those seeking refuge; at the same time, Schmitt's elevation of the maintenance of political order as the ultimate task of the sovereign seems to justify the use of securitizing technologies, which do violence to people under the banner of exceptional circumstances.

For Kierkegaard specialists, intersections with Schmitt are fraught. Such scholars often hope to defend the relevance of Kierkegaard's thought in an academic climate that reasonably expects some form of applicability to topics such as political resistance, social justice, economic disparities and environmental ethics. However, classic interpretations of Kierkegaard as an irrationalist or decisionist about whether (and how) to be ethically or politically committed – such as Alasdair MacIntyre's in *After Virtue* (1981)¹³ – may caution against mobilization of

9 See, e.g., Marie McAuliffe and Anna Triandafyllidou, eds., *World Migration Report 2022* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2021); and Julia Black, *Annual Regional Overview: Europe (January – December 2021)* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2022), 6, <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022>.

10 Monika Kabata and An Jacobs, “The ‘Migrant Other’ as a Security Threat: The ‘Migration Crisis’ and the Securitising Move of the Polish Ruling Party in Response to the EU Relocation Scheme,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 4 (2023): 1223–1239, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2146072>.

11 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 491.

12 Holger Stritzel, “Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond,” *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 3 (2007): 357–383, 363, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066107080128>.

13 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1981]), 39–43.

his philosophy or theology for such purposes. Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843) – with its praise of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, characterized as a “teleological suspension of the ethical”¹⁴ – is often specifically targeted by critics as a work that permits or even encourages amoral or unethical decision-making, including the decision to perform religiously inspired violence.¹⁵ While Kierkegaard's attention to the particular subject may render his thought attractive as a way to empower resistance against forces that claim to carry the authority of universality, it simultaneously incites an anxiety among scholars that his focus on the individual will risk unhinging his politics from concern for justice altogether.

Anthony Rudd has connected such readings of *Fear and Trembling* – which he deems misreadings – to controversial figures who drew from Kierkegaard in their accounts of ethical and political decision, including György Lukács (1885–1971) and Schmitt.¹⁶ Lukács seems to have understood Kierkegaard as significant in his decision to support terror to achieve Bolshevik political goals, despite himself acknowledging ethical prohibitions against violence¹⁷; Schmitt quotes Kierkegaard to support his account of sovereignty.¹⁸ While, of course, Schmitt's explicit defense of invoking the Weimar constitution's Article 48 and support of the Nazi Party – neither of which was an accident¹⁹ – makes his favorable references to

14 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in *Kierkegaard's Writings VI*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983 [1843]), 54. When I interpolate or otherwise consult the Danish text, I refer to Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al., eds., *Søren Kierkegaards skrifter*, vol. 4 (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997–2013).

15 E.g., Troels Nørager, *Taking Leave of Abraham: An Essay on Religion and Democracy* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), 45–98; Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 76.

16 Anthony Rudd, “Kierkegaard and the Critique of Political Theology,” in *Kierkegaard and Political Theology*, 19–22.

17 See Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 175–201, 203, 213.

18 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005 [1922/1934]), 15. When I interpolate or otherwise consult the German text, I refer to *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, 9th edition (Berlin: Duncker & Humboldt, 2009 [1922]).

19 The relationship between Schmitt's political thinking – which shifts throughout his authorship – and his support of Nazism is complex, but not to be minimized. For more on this topic, see Ville Suuronen, “Mobilizing the Western Tradition for Present Politics: Carl Schmitt's Polemical Uses of Roman Law, 1923–1945,” *History of European Ideas* 47, no. 5 (2021): 748–772, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2020.1818115>; and Ville Suuronen, “Carl Schmitt as a Theorist of the 1933 Nazi Revolution: The Difficult Task of Rethinking and Recultivating Traditional Concepts,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (2020): 341–363, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00417-1>.

Kierkegaard all the more uncomfortable, what is at stake for Rudd in both figures' reliance on Kierkegaard to articulate their decisions (or, in Schmitt's case, decisionism) is a broader bramble: the possibility that Kierkegaard's thinking might justify the unchecked will of an individual or collective whose authority would extend beyond conventional modes of public, rational or ethical critique and deliberation. Rudd's verdict is swift: "Decisionism is, I think, unacceptable, either in politics or outside it."²⁰

But if not a pure decision, what constitutes Kierkegaard's (in)famous leap of faith? According to Rudd's reading, Kierkegaardian faith is always modulated by robust metaphysical or theological commitments: the decision of faith from the aesthetic to the ethical to the religious spheres of life is "not [. . .] a series of blind leaps," but instead "a version of the Platonic Ascent"²¹; an "objective Good (God)" ensures that the right decision is not without content.²² When the Abraham depicted in *Fear and Trembling* follows God's command to sacrifice Isaac, he does so, on Rudd's account, "because he trusts God. Since God has commanded this, it must be good—not because God decides what counts as 'good' but because he believes that God will only command what is in fact good."²³ Other scholars have made parallel moves, highlighting that the claims in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship about the leap of faith tell only half the story. Attributing a position to Kierkegaard requires, so they claim, attention to non-pseudonymous and explicitly Christian works, such as *Works of Love* (1847).²⁴

While Rudd's and other interpretations of Kierkegaard are right to remind readers of his robust Christian commitments, they too confidently presume to know the content and limits of Kierkegaard's account of Christian faith. For Kierkegaard, does God's (presumptive) unwavering goodness really tie up the loose ends of a text like *Fear and Trembling*? Is Kierkegaard's supposed decisionism acceptable only because he was coincidentally committed to a God that commands love for the neighbor? Can we really rest easy believing that (Abraham believed that) God would simply clean up the mess God seemed to create in the episode of

²⁰ Rudd, "Kierkegaard and the Critique," 23.

²¹ Rudd, "Kierkegaard and the Critique," 22.

²² Rudd, "Kierkegaard and the Critique," 22.

²³ Rudd, "Kierkegaard and the Critique," 27.

²⁴ E.g., M. Jamie Ferreira, *Love's Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard's Works of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5, 40; and C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 19–20, 61–84. Though in a more prolonged treatment of *Fear and Trembling*, it would be necessary to defend an account of why Kierkegaard deployed the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, I lack the space to do so in this short piece. In the pages that follow, I refer to the author of *Fear and Trembling* only as "Kierkegaard."

the Binding of Isaac?²⁵ Perhaps more importantly, such readings risk obscuring or disempowering what is politically most potent in Kierkegaard's early pseudonymous productions, or may even fundamentally conflate Schmitt's political juridical decisionism with the function and structure of an individual's decision in Kierkegaard's thought (two distinct concepts which are at best analogous or isomorphic).

In the pages that follow, I first argue that, in Kierkegaard's work, it is indeed *Fear and Trembling*, with its "teleological suspension of the ethical," and not *Repetition* (1843) – despite Schmitt's direct quotation of the latter – that inspires Schmitt's conceptions of sovereignty, decision and exception in *Political Theology* (1922). In other words, to understand Kierkegaard on the core issues that are also of interest to Schmitt (and to the loose-knit project of political theology in general), we must think *through* rather than *around* the account of faith's relationship to ethics proffered in *Fear and Trembling*.

Second, I argue that, even if I am correct that it is Schmitt's inspiration, he nonetheless attempts to argue a position that *Fear and Trembling* subtly positions itself against. Though a hero of faith such as Abraham may be excepted from the ethical (*det Ethiske*), it is *Fear and Trembling's* tragic heroes – heroes of the ethical sphere, whom Kierkegaard criticizes by juxtaposing them with the knight of faith – who most precisely embody Schmitt's conception of the sovereign. *Fear and Trembling* thus issues a preemptive critique of this mode of Schmittian politics from the standpoint of faith; though the book's account of the Binding of Isaac seems to condone violence, Kierkegaardian faith ultimately refuses to accept that state violence is ever necessary to maintain order.

Third, in conjunction with my preceding interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*, I advance a preliminary account of Kierkegaard's decisionism, which I distinguish from Schmitt's. I characterize it as a form of optimistic meta-decision: to have faith is to decide that Schmitt's account of the exception – including its understanding that in exceptional circumstances, state violence may be required to preserve order – does not have the final word. By defending this interpretation, I make the provocative claim that, as long as we are willing to entertain a Kierkegaardian conception of paradox in our political thinking, we might recognize faith as a crucial basis for a form of liberalism that does not fall victim to

²⁵ Such readings of *Fear and Trembling*, which get a great deal correct, might be labeled 'eschatological trust' interpretations of the text, following John J. Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*," in *Ethics, Love, and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 196–233; and John Lippitt, *The Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2016 [2003]), 175–195.

Schmitt's otherwise apt critique. Accordingly, decisionism – in a different form – can be untethered from the pessimism of Schmitt's critique of liberalism; most importantly, some version of liberal democracy might still have the hope of becoming unyoked from Schmitt's conclusions that exclusion, exceptions and violence are tragically necessary to preserve a social contract.

2 Schmitt's Kierkegaardian inspiration

Schmitt's *Political Theology* begins with a succinct definition: "Sovereign is the one who *decides* on the *exception*."²⁶ Already we have all our three central concepts. To paint Schmitt's argument in broad strokes, his claim is that liberal constitutionalist accounts of statehood fail to acknowledge that the supposedly universal application of legal norms requires an extra-legal sovereign authority to interpret and apply them. As Paul Hirst puts it, for Schmitt, "all legal orders have an 'outside'; they rest on a political condition which is prior to and not bound by law. A constitution can survive only if the constituting political act is upheld by some political power."²⁷ According to Schmitt, the state and its legal structures are not primary; no constitution or social contract is a fully closed system. Instead, political power (a sovereign will) preserves the system, maintains it and decides how rules are applied within it.

Critically, sovereign authority is also a precondition of any state of exception, that is, a situation in which the normal application of laws is suspended to respond to abnormal events that threaten the state. Even when the law prescribes conditions, procedures and limitations for states of exception, the very possibility of the exception – and the reality that someone must decide when circumstances are exceptional (versus normal) – exposes that at the foundation of the state (and every moment of its persistence) is an act of decision-making that the law itself cannot exhaustively determine. Hence, Schmitt writes, "The decision on the exception is a decision in the true sense of the word. Because a general norm, as represented by an ordinary legal prescription, can never encompass a total exception, the decision that a real exception exists cannot therefore be entirely derived from this norm."²⁸ A party tasked with deciding how to suspend law in order to preserve order and ultimately maintain the law inhabits a liminal position: "Al-

²⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5. [translation slightly modified] [emphasis added]

²⁷ Paul Hirst, "Carl Schmitt's Decisionism," in *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 7–17, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3817/0687072015>.

²⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 6.

though he stands outside the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs to it, for it is he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety.”²⁹ Even if, as described here, a party acts on behalf of the law or constitution – that is, as would a commissarial dictator, to call on a term Schmitt formally defines elsewhere³⁰ – the power to do so implies a pivot point outside legality that ultimately governs it.

Schmitt imagines this model of sovereignty by way of a theological analogy: The exception, like a “miracle” (*Wunder*), exposes the role of a sovereign who, like God, extends beyond the state (beyond nature) and maintains its order.³¹ The exception thus demonstrates that the rule is relative; the rule of law holds only when the sovereign decides it does. In a central passage, Schmitt writes,

The exception [*Ausnahme*] can be more important to it [a philosophy of concrete life] than the rule, not because of a romantic irony for the paradox [*Paradoxe*], but because the seriousness of an insight goes deeper than the clear generalizations inferred from what ordinarily repeats itself. The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition [*Wiederholung*].³²

The exception is not only “more interesting” and “more important” because it reveals the limits of legal norms in abnormal circumstances; it also reveals the contingency of civil law *as such*. The very “existence” of the rule derives from a sovereign decision-maker; the exception is baked into the system at and as its foundation.

In the above quotation, the terms “paradox” (*Paradoxe*) and “repetition” (*Wiederholung*) are clear allusions to Kierkegaard’s thought. Indeed, in the very next paragraph, Schmitt excerpts passages from a German translation of Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* (which he assembles into a single quotation without noting his elisions):

A Protestant theologian who demonstrated the vital intensity possible in theological reflection in the nineteenth century stated: “The exception [*Die Ausnahme; Undtagelsen*] explains the general [*Allgemeine; Almene*] and itself. And if one wants to study the general correctly, one only needs to look around for a true exception. It reveals everything more clearly than

²⁹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 7.

³⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship: From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian Class Struggle*, trans. Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 126–127.

³¹ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

³² Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

does the general. Endless talk about the general becomes boring; there are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then the general also cannot be explained. The difficulty is usually not noticed because the general is not thought about with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, on the other hand, thinks the general with intense passion.”³³

How important is Kierkegaard, and this passage in particular, for understanding Schmitt’s decisionism?

Despite his quotation of *Repetition, Fear and Trembling* is (and I will suggest, correctly) more often associated with Schmitt’s thinking.³⁴ Birte Löschenkohl has pushed against this trend, arguing that Schmitt’s invocation of *Repetition* should occasion a reevaluation of Kierkegaard’s view of exception: “Such a perspective shifts attention from thinking the exception as a *state of exception*, a concept that mostly concerns state politics, to thinking about an *exception from the state* that struggles with and resists hegemonic forces from below.”³⁵ For Löschenkohl, excepting oneself from making decisions on the terms offered by the state constitutes a new form of agency, which can serve as the fulcrum for radical political

33 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15. For the passages of *Repetition*, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, in *Kierkegaard’s Writings VI*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983 [1843]), 227. Bracketed interpolations in the above quotation are from the German of Schmitt’s *Politische Theologie*, and Kierkegaard’s Danish, respectively, from *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vol. 4. For the German translation Schmitt likely quoted here, see Søren Kierkegaard, *Furcht und Zittern/Wiederholung*, 3rd ed., trans. Heinrich Cornelius Ketels, Hermann Gottsched, and Christoph Schrempf, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3 (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1923 [1843]), 203–204. The most updated register of Schmitt’s library includes no copy of *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* in any language. See Carl Schmitt Gesellschaft, *Die Bibliothek Carl Schmitt*, last updated September 2021 (Carl-Schmitt-Gesellschaft e. V., 2022), accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.carl-schmitt.de/en/research-2/privatbibliothek-carl-schmitts/>.

Though Schmitt’s quotation seems to reflect the 1909 and 1923 Gottsched and Schrempf translations (which resemble one another quite closely), it is hard to say which he was examining, given Schmitt’s unmarked elisions in the passage. Perhaps he was partially quoting from memory or inaccurate notes, or perhaps he was partially translating from some Danish version of the text.

34 See, e.g., Rudd, “Kierkegaard and the Critique,” 19–20; Richard A. Cohen, “The Power of Carl Schmitt: Fascism, Dualism and Justice,” *Religions* 10, no. 1 (2019): 7, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010007>; Bartholomew Ryan, *Kierkegaard’s Indirect Politics: Interludes with Lukács, Schmitt, Benjamin and Adorno* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014); and Bartholomew Ryan, “Carl Schmitt: Zones of Exception and Appropriation,” in *Kierkegaard’s Influence on Social-political Thought*, ed. Jon Stewart, vol. 14 of *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 177–207.

35 Löschenkohl, “Occasional Decisiveness,” 90.

change. Though Löschenkohl's move is a clever one, and her reading of *Repetition* productive, I believe she may make too much of Schmitt's quotation of the book.

For several reasons, I defend the more traditional interpretation that *Fear and Trembling* is the better candidate to pursue the intersection between *Political Theology* and Kierkegaard's thinking. First, because the German versions of *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* comprised the same volume, it is entirely possible that Schmitt could have fluidly read both alongside one another, flipping between the pages and quoting from the latter while still considering the content of the former. Second, there is textual evidence from Schmitt's discussion of exception: the term "paradox" (*Paradoxe*) appears in *Fear and Trembling* but not in *Repetition*, flagging the relative importance, for Schmitt, of the former. Third, as is visible in the above quotation, the context of the passage Schmitt cites from *Repetition* about the concept of exception suggests that he does not rely on *Repetition* for the political or theological content of the concept, but rather as a hermeneutical guideline he finds noteworthy and cleverly framed in the work; in other words, in the passage that excerpts *Repetition*, Schmitt is less interested to identify substantive political theological overlap between himself and Kierkegaard than he is to share a historical precedent for examining a "borderline concept [*Grenzbegriff*]"³⁶ – the exception – in order to understand the norm.³⁷ Fourth, and crucially, *Fear and Trembling's* extended discussion of faith as involving a "teleological suspension of the ethical" may, on a plain sense reading, seem to suggest that a connection to the divine (such as through faith) excepts one from general moral norms. This relationship between faith and the ethical is clearly parallel to the relationship between the sovereign and law that Schmitt famously frames with theological language: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts [. . .] The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle [*Wunder*] in theology." Fifth, versions of a Danish cognate (*Vidunder*) of a German term for "miracle" Schmitt uses (*Wunder*) appear 21 times in *Fear and Trembling*, often in close con-

³⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

³⁷ Karl Löwith makes a similar case: "The exception, Schmitt says [. . .] does not simply confirm the rule, but instead it is only on the basis of the exception that the rule can live. And it is for this reason alone that he is interested in Kierkegaard, though Kierkegaard never meant to justify the exception *as such* when he says that it explains the universal as well as itself and that if one wants to study the universal then one need only look for a genuine exception". Löwith, "Occasional Decisionism," 142. Here, Löwith goes further than I do, suggesting that it is "for this reason *alone*" Schmitt is interested in Kierkegaard. I contend that Schmitt's decisionism was, crucially, also inspired by *Fear and Trembling's* articulation of faith as involving a "teleological suspension of the ethical," even though *Fear and Trembling*, on my interpretation, presents a view that ultimately diverges from Schmitt's.

nection with Kierkegaard's central concept of faith (*Tro*),³⁸ but only twice – and comparatively inconspicuously – in *Repetition*. This suggests Schmitt's prolonged engagement with *Fear and Trembling* surrounding *Political Theology*'s central definitions, claims and arguments.

In short, the Kierkegaard of *Repetition* is not one of Schmitt's primary conversation partners in *Political Theology*. It is much more likely that the supposed analogy between *Fear and Trembling*'s teleological suspension of the ethical and Schmitt's conception of sovereignty is the key inspiration for some of Schmitt's claims about the concept of decision in *Political Theology*, even if – as I establish next – *Fear and Trembling*'s conception of faith is ultimately disanalogous with Schmitt's political theology.

3 Exceptions to exceptions

Interpreters of *Fear and Trembling* have, independently of Kierkegaard's connection to Schmitt, struggled with the implications of faith's "teleological suspension of the ethical," which seems to suggest that it is excusable to violate moral norms in rare cases, such as upon receiving a direct command from God. In short, we might worry that Kierkegaard is advocating, in the name of Christianity, making oneself an exception to morality. On this sort of reading, *Fear and Trembling* praises Abraham's faith precisely because he is willing to sacrifice Isaac when privately commanded by God. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, seems to read the book this way. He connects Kierkegaard's thought to Nazism, worrying about a "harshness" and a "violence" that can emerge when the subject, in faith, transcends the ethical.³⁹ Indeed, this "moral exception" method of reading *Fear and Trembling* is attractive, for it is otherwise challenging to make sense of the book's

38 E.g., Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 18. In the German translation of *Fear and Trembling* Schmitt quoted in *Political Theology*, the term is "das Wunderbare." See Kierkegaard, *Furcht und Zittern/Wiederholung*, 14. It should be noted, admittedly, that the term 'exception' (*Undtagelse*) appears frequently in *Repetition* but not in *Fear and Trembling*, except once (as *undtagen*), and then only innocuously. See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 56 / Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter Vol. 4, 150. On this point, Ryan makes a misleading remark in two pieces that implies the significance of the term *Undtagelse* in *Fear and Trembling*. See Ryan, "Carl Schmitt," 178; and Ryan, *Kierkegaard's Indirect Politics*, 90.

39 Levinas, *Proper Names*, 76. Gene Outka advances a similar position, treating the text as lauding a form of religious duty that may cut against otherwise universalistic morality: See Gene Outka, "Religious and Moral Duties: Notes on *Fear and Trembling*," in *Religion and Morality*, ed. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), 204–254.

prolonged investigation of Abraham, who is praised as faithful *because of* the way he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac.

Though there are many passages worth examining, let us look at two in which Kierkegaard explains faith's "teleological suspension of the ethical":

The ethical [*Ethiske*] as such is the universal [or, 'general'; *Almene*], and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *τελος* but is itself the *τελος* for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further. The single individual, sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy, is the individual who has his *τελος* in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal.⁴⁰

Faith [*Troen*] is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal [*Almene*]*—yet, please note, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that after having been in the universal he as the single individual isolates himself as higher than the universal. If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed. For if the ethical—that is, social morality [det Sædelige]—is the highest and if there is in a person no residual incommensurability in some way such that this incommensurability is not evil [. . .], then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had or what can be deduced from them by consistent thought.*⁴¹

If faith is possible – that is, if there is a "teleological suspension of the ethical," if there is an absolute duty to God, if religiosity cannot be reduced to the categories of Greek philosophy – then the ethical has already been cracked open, indeed cracked apart.

But what does it mean – in faith – to except oneself from the ethical, to have a motivation whose *telos* or end renders it "higher than the universal [or general]"? To answer such a question, it is essential to understand what is meant by "the ethical" (*det Ethiske*). It is tempting to treat Kierkegaard's concept of the ethical – characterized with language of universality and immanence – as suggestive of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) ethics, which considers all persons equally as moral agents and potential moral patients based on a self-legislating moral imperative.⁴² On such a reading, faith's elevation of the single individual over the ethical qua universal generates tension with universalizable ethical or moral obligation as such.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 54.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 55.

⁴² See Outka, "Religious and Moral Duties," 234–238.

But even though Kierkegaard's framing of the ethical might resonate rhetorically with Kantianism or similar moral theories, what is meant by "universal" here is subtly different. What the terms "ethical" and "universal" refer to, I contend, is actually the very sort of structural presupposition presumed by Schmitt in his account of sovereignty: an ethic or political arrangement anchored in a social contract.

On this point, Kierkegaard's usage of the term *Almene* is equivocal, for it can imply both (strong) universality and (weaker) generality. In these crucial passages, the term refers at once to the general welfare of a community (perhaps even the community of all human beings) and also to the universality or necessity with which an obligation holds. Accordingly, for Kierkegaard's conception of the ethical as such to be *det Almene* is to imply, first and foremost, that it necessarily or categorically obtains, but it does not specifically imply, for example, the content of the Kantian categorical imperative. This is not particularly surprising, for many conceptions of moral obligation (for example, utilitarian moral theories such as Henry Sidgwick's⁴³) argue for the universality of a moral principle without requiring that all human beings be treated categorically as Kantian ends in themselves. In this way, we can begin to see overlap between *Fear and Trembling's* account of the ethical and Schmitt's account of political order and the rule of law, especially insofar as a sovereign will may intervene in – indeed suspend – the law to preserve order.

This point can be clarified with reference to *Fear and Trembling's* ethical hero figures, that is, the tragic heroes whom Kierkegaard contrasts with Abraham. The four, to whose stories Kierkegaard alludes, are Jephthah, one of Israel's judges from Judges 11; Lucius Junius Brutus, the semi-historical founder of the Roman republic, discussed at length in Livy's *Ab urbe condita*; Socrates, whom Kierkegaard labels an "intellectual tragic hero"⁴⁴ based on his refusal to escape execution, as depicted in the *Crito*; and Agamemnon, the Mycenaean king and leader of the military campaign against Troy, as portrayed in Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis*. "The tragic hero," remarks Kierkegaard, "gives up their desire to fulfill their duty."⁴⁵ In Jephthah's case, he swears that he will sacrifice whatever emerges from his house if God ensures Israel's success in battle against Ammon.

⁴³ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1907 [1874]), 23–38.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 116.

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 78n. [translation modified]

Lamentably, it is his daughter, whom he sacrifices as promised.⁴⁶ Brutus, after vanquishing the Tarquin tyrants, gathers the people of Rome to swear an oath that they will never again permit a king; when his own sons participate in a conspiracy to reconstitute the monarchy, Brutus passes the sentence and watches his sons' execution.⁴⁷ Socrates, alluding to an Athenian loyalty contract, willingly submits to unjust execution rather than bribe his way out.⁴⁸ Agamemnon, as one among many participants in a pact of nonviolence among Helen's many suitors, sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to ensure that favorable winds permit Helen's recovery from Troy, lest – in her absence – the confederation of Greek kingdoms collapse.⁴⁹

Right away, we can see that two of the tragic heroes do not meet the demand of an all-encompassing moral principle like Kant's categorical imperative, for both Agamemnon and Jephthah sacrifice their daughters in the interest of military success; their daughters function as means, not ends in themselves, showing the tragic heroes to violate the categorical imperative's formula of humanity.⁵⁰ More importantly, the narratives alluded to in Kierkegaard's references to these tragic heroes reveal *Fear and Trembling's* conception of the ethical to be at the same time a theory of statehood (or at least social contract), which, like Schmitt's, highlights the state's dependence on a sovereign authority to maintain order when it is threatened, and is grounded upon a politically primordial distinction between friend and enemy.⁵¹ Except for Socrates, each tragic hero is called to manage a concrete crisis in which an incipient state – signified by or sealed with a pact, oath or promise – is threatened by an external force. Moreover, in each such situation, the crisis of the state's existence demands suspension of the normal obligations of filial piety, not to mention the personal desire of the tragic hero, to ensure the persistence of the state and the legitimacy of its founding oath.⁵²

46 Judg 11:34–40, in Michael D. Coogan et al., eds., *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard version*, 5th ed. [NRSV] (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 382.

47 Livy, *The History of Rome*, trans. William Masfen Roberts, vol. 1 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912), 71 (2.1.8–10, 2.2.5).

48 Plato, *Crito*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN and Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), 45–46 (51e–52a).

49 Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, trans. Charles R. Walker, in *Euripides V: The Complete Greek Tragedies*, 3rd ed., ed. David Grene et al. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

50 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 76 (4:425).

51 E.g., Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded edition, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1932]), 26.

52 In Socrates' dialogue with the personified laws of Athens, this crisis of legitimacy is merely hypothetical, which is one reason Kierkegaard qualifies him as an "intellectual" tragic hero.

The setting of Agamemnon's tragic heroism is particularly instructive because of how Helen, kidnapped by Paris, quite literally embodies the legal framework of the Greek confederation, namely the pact her father Tyndareus administered to her suitors.⁵³ Without the body of Helen physically present in Greece, the Greek men of standing become bloodthirsty, threatening to sunder the newborn state. Hence Agamemnon concludes that these are exceptional circumstances. He decides to do violence to his daughter – transcending the normal order of filial and household obligations, not to mention paternal love – in order to begin reconstituting the state by conducting warfare against an enemy to retrieve Helen, Greece's keystone. This is much how Schmitt's commissarial dictator might temporarily suspend a constitution in accord with principles of that constitution, in order to preserve it.

It is perhaps surprising that when Kierkegaard narrates Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, he remarks that it is done by "the whole nation" and "for the welfare of all."⁵⁴ There is an irony in this remark, for "the welfare of all" excludes both the Trojans, who are to be attacked to preserve order in Greece, and Iphigenia herself, the daughter of the Greek king, whose death is required to accomplish this task. This demonstrates that the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* – though it may indeed involve placing an obligation on all individuals – does not ultimately secure each individual's well-being and dignity. The will of the "whole nation" is focused into a single killing, in order to enable the later killing of Trojans, now the enemies of Greece. Although Kierkegaard's conception of the ethical qua universal, as he defines it, "applies to everyone" and "applies at all times," this has the meaning that, at any time, *anyone can be the exception* and thus sacrificed in the interest of the general welfare. (Anyone can be an enemy, if a community of friends needs them to be.) Therefore, even if Schmitt finds inspiration in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* for a certain type of exception to a form of normative ethics or legality, the decisionist logic he associates with religious language ("miracle") is represented by one of *Fear and Trembling's* defective categories (the ethical) that Kierkegaard critiques from the standpoint of faith.⁵⁵

53 This backstory is recounted in both today's English scholarly standard version of *Iphigenia in Aulis* and the Danish translation Kierkegaard consulted when authoring *Fear and Trembling*: Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, in *Euripides*, trans. and ed. Christian Wilster (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1840), 103 (lines 49–79).

54 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57.

55 I have given an extended account of *Fear and Trembling's* tragic heroes and their relationship to founding pacts of the state in Aaron J. Goldman, "On *Fear and Trembling's* Motif of the Promise: Faith, Ethics and the Politics of Tragedy," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* 25, no. 1 (2020): 57–84, <https://doi.org/10.1515/kierke-2020-0004>.

As is clear from *Fear and Trembling*, the ethical is not the whole story. What does faith's teleological suspension of the ethical mean if the ethical refers to a limited, perhaps even flawed, universalism? To address this issue, we shall turn to Abraham, whose call to sacrifice Isaac occurs against a crucial backdrop: the covenant with God. As with the tragic heroes, God's promise to Abraham has a political dimension. In Genesis 17, God proclaims, "I have made you the father of nations [. . .] kings shall come from you."⁵⁶ Isaac is the vessel through which this promise is to be delivered. Yet God surprises Abraham by asking him to kill his son, thus appearing to annul the promise made with Abraham. Abraham remains faithful. On Kierkegaard's narration, this means that Abraham believes that Isaac will survive, which is to say, despite God appearing to violate the covenant, Abraham remains committed to the idea that God will uphold God's end of the promise. To become the father of nations turns out not to require violence. It requires a super-ethical commitment to nonviolence; it only requires faith.

Herein reside the diverging interpretations of faith by Kierkegaard and Schmitt: for Kierkegaard, the crux of faith is not that the faithful single individual is unbound by moral obligations in the same way the Schmittian sovereign transcends the legal norms of the state; faith does not permit one to transcend or hover over worldly concerns. Instead, faith is precisely the refusal to except oneself from the commitments involved in the covenant, oath or contract that determine one's obligations. Much as, for Kierkegaard, God's decision (*Beslutning*) to incarnate cannot be reversed,⁵⁷ there remains no space in faith to transcend, renegotiate or except oneself from a promise one has genuinely entered. History is a history of promises. And insofar as these promises are historical, they are material, concrete, finite. Even if flexibly interpretable, they thus resist the transcendent authority of a decisionist sovereign or even the will of God.

God's demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac turns out to be significant to Kierkegaard's narration, not because it is the fulfillment of the covenant, but because it serves as a possible obstacle to Abraham's trust in God to uphold it – an obstacle that Abraham, in faith, deftly obviates.⁵⁸ Much like how, for Schmitt, a commissarial dictator may act on behalf of the sovereign will by suspending law (for

⁵⁶ Gen 17:5–6 (NRSV), 34. For other formulations of the covenant with Abraham, see Gen 12 and 15.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, in *Kierkegaard's Writings VII*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 24–25.

⁵⁸ For an excellent discussion of the narrative structure of *Fear and Trembling*'s depiction of the *akedah*, see Davenport, "Eschatological Trust," 199–205.

some people, for some time) in order to preserve it, Kierkegaard's tragic heroes choose the welfare of the state over the welfare of all individuals so that security and legal order return. Abraham, instead, suspends the ethical. That is to say, in faith he annuls the tragic presumptions of the ethical when he chooses not to choose between two ethical concerns: the promised state ("the universal was [. . .] cryptically in Isaac, hidden, so to speak, in Isaac's loins"⁵⁹) and the ethical duty of the father to love the son.⁶⁰ Kierkegaard's tragic heroes must compromise their responsibility to particular members of a community bound by a social contract to ensure that the whole order perseveres; in contrast, Abraham has faith that Isaac's life – despite being demanded by a command of God – will not be lost, and indeed that it is precisely through Isaac's particular life and descendants that a state will emerge and persevere. Kierkegaardian faith, then, ought to be understood as a religious critique of the pessimistic assumptions that ground a political theology like Schmitt's. Schmitt's world, like the world of the tragic heroes, is a tragic one in which having friends means also having enemies. Kierkegaardian faith – if it is possible – engenders another option; it constitutes an exception to a political reality that itself depends on and demands exceptions.

What the conversation between Schmitt and Kierkegaard illuminates is that Kierkegaard himself is ambivalent about the role of transcendence in securing a genuinely moral politics. Kierkegaard suggests – although quite subtly in *Fear and Trembling* – that a new vocabulary and logic are needed, which rely more on the metaphysics of incarnation than of transcendence.⁶¹ Faith is, crucially, interested in

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 59.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57. Löschenkohl writes of a "decision not to decide" made by *Repetition's* young man but (presumably) not by *Fear and Trembling's* Abraham (Löschenkohl, "Occasional Decisiveness," 97–98). I find this locution stirring, and I will unpack it – in my own terms – in the fourth section of this chapter. However, while I am agnostic about the young man's (in)decision in *Repetition*, I have made the case that *Fear and Trembling's* Abraham excepts himself from exceptions, indeed decides not to decide on the exception.

⁶¹ One excellent interpretation of Kierkegaard that highlights this distinction is Steven Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard and the Refusal of Transcendence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). By "incarnation," I mean (broadly) the entry of perfection into the finite world from outside it. Though Kierkegaard was a Christian chauvinist and specifically a supercessionist interpreter of Judaism, I am utterly uncommitted to the notion that the New Testament and Christianity have exclusive ownership of an incarnational logic. For example: "[T]his command which I charge you today is not too wondrous for you nor is it distant. It is not in the heavens [. . .] And it is not beyond the sea [. . .] But the word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it". Deut 30:11–14; *Hebrew Bible*, trans. Robert Alter, vol. 1 (New York and London: Norton, 2019), 722.

the finite: “Temporality, finitude—it is this upon which everything turns.”⁶² To be sure, this does not mean that, for Kierkegaard, faith is reducible to the mechanism of nature or to mere power relations between creatures. But for faith to be faith – and not the decision of a tragic hero or a Schmittian sovereign – it must be utterly *in the world*; it does not exclude the possibility of actualized moral attention for others (which is indeed temporal, finite), and may indeed serve as the pivot point on which genuine morality and politics become possible.⁶³

4 Decisions about decisions

I have just argued that *Fear and Trembling*’s conception of faith does not serve as an antecedent to Schmitt’s political theology. It is *Fear and Trembling*’s (defective) category of the ethical which most closely captures Schmitt’s conception of the political, while Kierkegaardian faith is precisely a refusal of the logic of exception on which Schmitt’s politics depends. Does this mean that Kierkegaard is – *pace* MacIntyre, *pace* Schmitt – even a decisionist in the first place?

Yes and no. In *Fear and Trembling*, whether to be faithful – the ultimate decision for the individual – is not to decide upon ethical or political principles as though one were a transcendent, voluntaristic God. It is instead to make a meta-decision about whether the world is tragic, and so requires such lower-order decisions – or whether, in Kierkegaard’s words, “a divine order prevails.”⁶⁴ Kierkegaard structures this meta-decision (the decision to be faithful or not) upon an informal *modus tollens* deduction framed as a thought experiment.⁶⁵ Serving as the

⁶² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 49. [translation slightly modified]

⁶³ In contrast to the ethical, *Fear and Trembling* hints at the ripeness for recovering morality within the context of faithful finitude, writing, “[I]t does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated; rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, such as, for example, that love to God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor—an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty.” Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70. How Kierkegaard understands this process to unfold is most fully unpacked in his non-pseudonymous *Works of Love*.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 27.

⁶⁵ Though the thought-experimental structure of *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) is obvious, it is rare for scholars to identify it in *Fear and Trembling*. For the only example I am aware of, see Ingrid Malm-Lindberg, “The Thought Experimenting Qualities of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*,” *Religions* 10, no. 6 (2019): 391–407, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10060391>. Malm-Lindberg’s piece, however, does not draw from the same passages I do to gesture to *Fear and Trembling*’s subtle use of thought-experimental framing in each Problema; instead, she (astutely) makes a

fulcrum for the decision, this thought-experiment structure is repeated throughout the text, including in each of the “Problemata”:

Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal [. . .] If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed.⁶⁶ (“Problema I: Is There a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?”)

Therefore, either there is an absolute duty to God—and if there is such a thing, it is the paradox just described, that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal and as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute—or else faith has never existed because it has always existed, or else Abraham is lost.⁶⁷ (“Problema II: Is There an Absolute Duty to God?”)

Once again we stand at the same point. If there is no hiddenness rooted in the fact that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal, then Abraham’s conduct cannot be defended [. . .] But if there is such a hiddenness, then we face the paradox [. . .] Faith is not the first immediacy but a later immediacy. The first immediacy is the esthetic [. . .] But faith is not the esthetic, or else faith has never existed because it has always existed.⁶⁸ (“Problema III: Was It Ethically Defensible for Abraham to Conceal His Undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac?”)

If Abraham is the father of faith, this means faith is possible in the world. If faith is possible, it involves a teleological suspension of the ethical (Problema I), entails an absolute duty to God (Problema II), and implies justification of Abraham’s privacy in terms distinct from Kierkegaard’s aesthetic sphere of existence (Problema III). If such conclusions do not obtain of the world, then faith is impossible: “faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed.” This is to say, if the activity of faith is reducible to the acts of *Fear and Trembling*’s tragic heroes or the exceptionalism of Schmitt’s sovereign, then it is nothing special (“it has always existed”), and there is no exception to making exceptions in a Schmittian politics.⁶⁹ (Kierkegaard associates this subjective standpoint with the pessi-

broader point about the text’s deployment of thought experiments as a strategy to push the reader toward subjective engagement with the questions of Christian faith.

⁶⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 55.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 81.

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 82. Another such instance occurs at Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 112.

⁶⁹ Kierkegaard takes this move to be important enough to instruct his reader to commit it to memory: “I bid the reader to bear these consequences *in mente* at every point, even though it would be too prolix for me to write them all down”. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 56.

mistic category of resignation.⁷⁰) But if such conclusions do pertain to the world, then faith is possible, and the world may be ripe for new forms of faithful politics, in which love for the neighbor may be a central element.⁷¹

In the passages excerpted above, Kierkegaard refuses to supply any reason to persuade us one way or the other. This is intentional, for *Fear and Trembling's* presentation of Abraham's crisis serves as the pivot point on which the book's reader must make their own meta-decision. I, the single individual – based on no universally accessible rational grounds – must decide whether I am so constituted as to be capable of faith. If Abraham was faithful, then so could I be. But how convinced am I that Abraham was faithful, rather than a mere murderer? How is faith possible? On what basis can I decide?

Distinguishing between the task of faith and other efforts which fall short, Kierkegaard writes, “Here it does not help to have Abraham for a father [Mt 3:9] or seventeen ancestors; the one who wants not to work, him it fits what has been written about the Israel's virgins: he births wind [Isa 26:18]—but the one who wants to work, he births his own father.”⁷² The image of faith as the task of birthing one's own father suggests that faith is implicated in establishing the conditions of its own possibility. From this passage, it is clear that one cannot inherit faith by being a biological descendant of Abraham. Instead, one manifests faith in the decision to recognize faith as possible on earth (as incarnate). One births one's own father by having faith that faith became possible in the world. Faith thus involves a form of recursivity—it is a (meta-)decision about whether one can genuinely have faith, which is to say, whether one can genuinely refuse the worldview of Kierkegaard's tragic heroes, or of a Schmittian political theology.

In faith, the single individual decides whether faith is possible, or whether the tragic heroes exemplify the highest possible life. In this moment the individual commits themselves either (optimistically) to a world where they do not need to decide between the law and the lives of sons, between a war and the life of a daughter, and between friends and enemies; or (pessimistically) to a world in which such decisions must inevitably be made. In this tension, Kierkegaard is revealed to be a theorist of the conditions of a genuine liberalism. If faith is possible, a liberal order may exist, which would not require a Schmittian sovereign

70 E.g., Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 35.

71 See, e.g., Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 70: “[I]f this duty [to love God] is absolute, then the ethical is reduced to the relative. From this it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated; rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, such as, for example, that love to God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor—an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty.”

72 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 27. [translation modified]

who stands transcendently outside it to support it.⁷³ Such a law – like the covenant with Abraham, on Kierkegaard’s reading – may very well be sufficient to execute *itself* for faithful subjects, and to this extent bears closer similarity to the incarnate God than Schmitt’s image, which more readily treats the sovereign as a transcendent Atlas, propping up the whole system from outside it.

But has faith entered the world? Has it never existed, or is it incarnated? Schmitt himself hints at this possibility: “But whether the extreme exception can be banished from the world is not a juristic question. Whether one has confidence and hope that it can be eliminated depends on philosophical, especially on philosophical-historical or metaphysical, convictions.”⁷⁴ In this moment, a sliver of Kierkegaardian faith enters Schmitt’s world, and Schmitt himself opens a space for religious critique of the exception.

I have suggested that there may be dangers involved in resigning ourselves to a Schmittian realism that accepts the tragedy of political decisions, a realism which Kierkegaardian faith refuses. But it is also necessary to inquire into the possible dangers of an undue optimism. Jayne Svenungsson, following thinkers such as Daniel Bensaïd and Daniel Boyarin, has criticized what she identifies as an undue optimism in left-wing decisionist political thought. In the case of Alain Badiou, the “voluntarist and decisionist elements of his thinking betray a disregard for the specific historical, social and cultural conditions that surround any emancipatory movement.”⁷⁵ Put bluntly, according to Svenungsson, in Badiou’s commitment to the openness of the event as a bearer of political truth, his interest in universalism discourages getting one’s hands dirty in the particular sufferings and identity constellations that so often constitute bulwarks for resisting power.

Similar critiques could be leveled at *Fear and Trembling*’s optimism about faith. Indeed, Schmitt’s deep-cutting claims about the pretensions of liberalism may be a necessary bitter pill. But as Kierkegaard fully understands, he can offer

⁷³ One recalls Kant’s formula of the kingdom of ends. See Kant, *Groundwork*, 83–85 (4:433–4:436).

⁷⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 7.

⁷⁵ Jayne Svenungsson, “Radical Incarnation: The Dangers and Promises of Christian Universalism in the Wake of Badiou’s *Saint Paul*,” *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* 76, no. 1 (2022): 71–87, 77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2021.1946421>. See also Daniel Bensaïd, “Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event,” in *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 98: “By refusing to venture into the dense thickets of real history, into the social and historical determination of events, Badiou’s notion of the political tips over into a wholly imaginary dimension: this is politics made tantamount to an act of levitation, reduced to a series of unconditioned events and ‘sequences’ whose exhaustion or end remain [sic] forever mysterious.”

no definitive defense of a faithful politics apart from challenging the individual to decide on the issue themselves. Here, I simply raise the question whether the meta-decisionism I have attributed to *Fear and Trembling's* articulation of faith might provide a frame through which we keep in view the goods surrendered, should we resign ourselves to the inevitable tragedy of politics.⁷⁶

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