

**The Presence of Point of View:
To The Thing Itself**

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Introduction

“I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy!” The comprehension of such a sentence—goes without saying, entails the understanding of a linguistic corpus of semi-established significations for both the interlocutor and the recipient of such a message. However, the analysis of such a message from a mere linguistic perspective, or the dissemination of the semantics of such a sentence from an exclusive etiological perspective, misses the intentionality of the interlocutor—whether such a sentence was cast out of comedy, sarcasm, or deep sympathy.

When studying religions, a similar dialectic arises. Should scholars delve into the exegetical aspects of dogma, sacred texts, hermeneutical approaches, or social-ethical practices? The subjective perspective of an observer profoundly influences their interpretation—a reminder that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." It appears as if knowledge is something subjective and unreliable, especially now that modern epistemologies continue to alert us of the often-intentional agendas that seek to undermine specific groups of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religious views, such as social constructivism, feminist epistemologies, queer theory, critical race theory, decolonial epistemologies, and postmodernism, among others.

In essence, the localization and approach of a subject determines the experience of cognition. Given the significance of experience in human cognition, this paper will focus on three key aspects:

- a) Kant’s examination of the limits of human cognition and the role of subjectivity in understanding religious phenomena.
- b) Phenomenology’s assertion that objective knowledge exists beyond the subjective phenomena and how subjective experiences can be objectively validated.
- c) The Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), as a case study of a religious approach that involves an analysis of the subjective phenomenon of Judeo-Christian faith.

In doing so, this paper aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between subjectivity, objectivity, and the comprehension of religious phenomena manifested as faith.

Kant and the Limits of Cognition

The limits of cognition that Immanuel Kant discusses in his *Critique of Pure Reason*¹ and *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*²—among other works, regard the analysis of certainty in modern sciences. Eventually, during his exploration of the Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysical tradition, as he received from Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*³ work, he will also address those sciences that he labels pseudo-science (ontology, cosmology, psychology, and theology). Is human cognition something reliable? Can the experience of cognition provide certainty? Do ontological and cosmological matters pose a dogmatic view or a reliable account of reality? However interesting these questions may be; it is precisely his address to theology as a pseudo-science that this paper is most interested in addressing. How shall religious matters be addressed?

Before delving into the limits of human cognition addressed in the Transcendental Dialectic's section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is essential to first understand Kant's perspective on the nature of cognition. This involves an analysis of the Transcendental Analytic, the initial part of the Transcendental Logic, and an overview of the Transcendental Aesthetic. This is so because Kant addresses in positive undertones the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, and this may be most beneficial to establish first what Kant understands as cognition before moving towards the shortcomings of religious reflections.

In the introduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant presents his Copernican revolution in philosophy, introducing the concept of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, which is knowledge that is known

¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

² Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Gary Hatfield, trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³ Baumgarten Gottlieb Alexander, *Metaphysics: A Critical Translation with Kant's Elucidations, Selected Notes, and Related Materials*, trans. Courtney D. Fugate and John Hymers (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

independently of human experience.⁴ In mathematics, the intrinsic nature of a number does not automatically entail the operations leading to its derivation. This makes mathematical judgments like “7 + 5 equals 12” synthetic, as they extend beyond the information contained in the concepts of 7 and 5 alone.⁵ Yet, these judgments are also a priori, as their truth is known independently of empirical experience. Mathematical truths, therefore, do not require empirical verification to be recognized as valid.

In seeking to unravel the nature of synthetic a priori knowledge and how it is possible within human cognition, Kant develops a new science that he calls “transcendental” philosophy to investigate the conditions of the human experience of cognition. This science focuses on how cognition processes and interacts with objects of sense perception.⁶ Consequently, transcendental philosophy explores the a priori structures and principles that govern human understanding and interpretation of the world.

In the “Transcendental Aesthetic,” Kant observes the first fruits of this new science by realizing that space and time are the pure forms of all intuitions.⁷ In other words, all objects of cognitive experience are given under the conditions of the receptive faculty of sensibility in spatiotemporally human cognition. It is not that space and time do not exist empirically but rather that all objects of human cognition are bound to space and time.

For instance, when an external physical object is perceived by the human mind, it is necessarily perceived in space with a shape, a size, and a relation to other objects in space. These spatial characteristics are not properties of the object itself but of our spatial intuition. No object can be conceived without applying the concept of space, as one can easily verify by looking at a notebook, indicating its a priori status in human cognition.

⁴ Kant, Critique of Pure Reason.

⁵ Ibid. §A10/B15.

⁶ Ibid., §A11/B25.

⁷ Ibid., §§A21-2/B36.

Similarly to the a priori status of space, all cognitive experiences have a temporal dimension; they occur in a sequence. For example, when an individual auditive perception listens to a musical melody, such experience is dependent on understanding a sequence of notes over time. This temporal ordering is not a property of the notes themselves, but a feature of how human minds process these experiences.

Extending this discussion of a priori conditions, in the Transcendental Analytic, Kant introduces twelve a priori categories that are additional conditions of human experience manifested as understanding.⁸ These categories function in conjunction with the spatiotemporal a priori forms of intuition, which are derived from a table of the twelve logical functions or forms of judgments.⁹

	Quantity	
	Unity (measure)	
	Plurality (magnitude)	
	Totality (whole)	
Quality		Relation
Reality		Substance
Negation		Cause
Limitation		Community
	Modality	
	Possibility	
	Existence	
	Necessity	

These categories are manifested in the “transcendental unity of apperception,”¹⁰ which is the unification of various sensory perceptions into a unified coherent field of cognitive experience. When an observer sees a house, Kant explains, the house doesn’t appear as an amalgamation of incoherent sensory

⁸ Ibid. §A70/B95-A76/B101.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., §§B129-159.

inputs and disconnected objects.¹¹ Thus, the individual appears to prepare these perceptions in the self-conscious as a single and continuous experience.

Interestingly, to human cognition, these categories only manifest themselves within the transcendental schemata. In other words, each of these categories—derived from the logical structure of judgments—takes form within the spatiotemporal scheme. For instance, in the Second Analogy of Experience, Kant discusses causality, one of these categories, and explicates how it is inherently tied to the temporal schema.¹² Kant argues that our understanding of causality is not derived from empirical observation but is instead a necessary condition for the possibility of experiencing events as happening in a sequence over time. This means that the concept of causality is a mental structure that organizes our perceptions in time, ensuring that we perceive events in a coherent and consistent temporal order.

Furthermore, in the "Axioms of Intuition"¹³, Kant elaborates on the quantification of phenomena in space and time. He argues that our understanding of quantities—such as the size or number of objects—is dependent on the synthesis of the manifold of intuition in space and time. This means that the extensive magnitudes (like length, breadth, and depth) of objects are apprehended through the successive synthesis of parts in space, a process that is governed by the categories of the understanding, particularly those related to quantity.

Kant's exploration of these concepts in the *Critique of Pure Reason* fundamentally alters the philosophical landscape by proposing that our understanding of the world is shaped not just by what we perceive, but by how our minds are inherently structured to process and organize these perceptions. Thus, knowledge as described and understood by Kant, can only be knowledge of phenomena. This approach highlights his distinction between phenomena (the world as it is experienced and understood

¹¹ Ibid., §B162.

¹² Ibid., §§A189/B232-A221/B256.

¹³ Ibid., §§A162/B203-A176/B218.

through the lens of human cognition) and noumena (the world as it exists independently of our perceptions)—the thing in itself.

The significance of this Kantian theory affects both metaphysical and religious concepts because this limits the cognitive realm of humanity. In short, human cognition operates within the conditions of *a priori* intuitions and the mental structures of the categories that inevitably shape how a perceived thing appears to human cognition.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Kant did not assert either the non-existence of the noumena or the possibility of speaking about them. Yet, considering his epistemological and metaphysical analysis of human cognition, one may wonder about the faculties to speak about what lies beyond the phenomenal. Therefore, if “synthetic *a priori* principles of theoretical cognition are the necessary conditions of the application of the categories to sensible data structured by the pure forms of intuition,”¹⁴ what cognition knows is the phenomenological expression of the noumenal. Nonetheless, even the phenomenological expression of the known must be based on the noumenal even if the data is “tampered” with the forms of intuition given in the application of data to the cognitive structures of the human mind.

While Kant notices the active agency human minds have in knowing, he does not negatively portray the phenomenological expression of the noumenal as a “tampering” of the mind. What Kant, then, suggests is that theological reflection, even when thought of as “rational” theology, is a human attempt to extend cognition beyond the limits of sensibility.¹⁵ So then, what can be said about religion, theology, and the divine after Kant?

In a lecture that Kant gave in 1817 on the philosophical doctrine of religion, he describes theology as “the system of our cognition of the highest being”¹⁶ which comprises the speculative idea of a being

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 342.

removed from all ontological deficiencies, containing all realities in itself, and is the highest good.¹⁷

However, Kant knows that this cognition of the divine is not possible as pure knowledge of God: “God is no longer an object of knowledge but of hope.”¹⁸ It is as if were an illusion that humans are drawn as a reference point. This guideline is what Kant is most interested in when exploring the practical side of theology. In short, theology is not a matter of speculative knowledge but a practical necessity for humanity’s moral system.

Transitioning from the brief overview examining Kant's views on cognition to his approach to religion, theology, and the divine, we encounter a significant shift in focus. While Kant's exploration of human cognition delves deeply into the intricacies of human understanding, his approach to theological matters takes a pragmatic turn. Here, the question arises: How does Kant reconcile the complexities of human cognition, as previously outlined, with his interpretation of religion and theology? Kant’s pivotal move in his philosophy demands careful consideration of how he navigates between the cognitive limitations of human understanding and the practical necessities inherent in religious belief.

When Kant analyzes ontotheology in transcendental theology, he states: “we consider God as the *highest being*, or at least we make this concept our ground.”¹⁹ Then, he continues: “the question is whether this idea of ours also has objective reality, that is, whether there actually exists a being corresponding to our idea of God.”²⁰ With these two quotes, Kant summarizes the challenge he has brought himself into when speaking about morality and theology. God is the ground of human morality or an *ens realissimum* that humans cannot speak about but only in speculation. Yet, it is not only a speculation but a practical one out of the requirements of human curiosity.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 342.

¹⁸ Otfried Höffe, Immanuel Kant, trans. Marshall Farrier (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 201.

¹⁹ Kant, Religion and Rational Theology, p. 358.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 360.

When looking at different religious traditions, their scriptures and narratives, their dogmas, and the challenging demands they place on followers, Kant's explanation of God is as limited as the semantic analysis of a word within a sentence of an excerpt in a sacred book.

Drawing a parallel to the initial example presented in this paper's introductory section, the statement 'I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy!' transcends mere linguistic analysis. This prompts a reflection on whether Kant's pragmatic view of morality sufficiently captures its broader implications. If religion functions merely as a practical aspect of ethics, then why does Kant eventually link morality to human interpretations of ontotheological concepts? Is his approach a pragmatic necessity in the face of the overwhelming and ineffable nature of the unknown?

Phenomenological Response to Kant

Kant's characterization of knowledge, as dependent on the inherent cognitive structures of the mind, leaves religion and other academic disciplines relegated to cognitive intuitions that are practically necessary. If knowledge is to be understood as "*justified true belief*"²¹ (Hopp 2020, 213), Kant has made little progress when it comes to knowledge. Not only this is true of the metaphysical and theological realm but also of knowledge in general. Cognition only takes us so far to the phenomenological concept. Yet, it is unsure whether such a concept corresponds to anything outside of the conscious Cartesian *cogito*. From a phenomenological perspective, it is the other way around: "Knowing is what believing is when belief is what it ought to be."²²

This apparently innocuous upside-down sentence is anything but a wordplay. The reason why Hopp reorients knowing as a belief as it ought to be is precisely because, as Husserl will shortly show, knowledge's source is belief. It is the form that the individual's consciousness takes shape in experiencing the given. When Kant examines the structures of cognition, he stalls at the noumena. If Kantian

²¹ Walter Hopp, *Phenomenology: A Contemporary Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), p. 237.

²² *Ibid.*

retrospection of cognition takes him to the awareness of the transcendental aesthetics and the categories of the mind, why stop in cognition and not examine the phenomenological aspect of cognition? Husserl states: “It is [...] a fundamental mistake to suppose that perception [...] does not get at the thing itself, or to suppose that the thing is not given to us in itself and in its being-in-itself.”²³

While it is understandable to have a healthy dosage of skepticism after Descartes, Kant needed not to dismiss the phenomenal simply because the mind acted upon the sense-perception. What is sensed, is also something to be explored and examined not as a mere practical necessity but as a transcendental exercise of the experience of cognition. When the experience of cognition is examined, phenomenology becomes aware of a “proof” that has less to do with the argument of propositional truths than with the fulfillment of knowledge.

To understand what cognitive fulfillment or immediate verification is, take, for instance, a subject α who tells subject β that her son colored on the bathroom wall. The most common reaction would be for β to examine whether that is the case. When subject β sees that wall, β will recognize what α stated and her perception will be confirmed, or as Husserl puts it, β will: “experience how the same objective item which was ‘merely thought of’ in symbol is now presented in intuition, and that it is intuited as being precisely the determinate so-and-so that it was at first merely thought or meant to be.”²⁴

Fulfillment is neither perception nor the symbolic thought of cognition but rather the actualization of the intuited object as the intended object. In other words, the object must first be perceived as α 's intended object, then, β must intend the same object as α 's, and finally, β must be able to identify the perception of the colorful bathroom wall as the object β intended.

²³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2014), p. 76.

²⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 694.

This process illustrates how the concept of fulfillment operates in phenomenology. It bridges the gap between abstract thoughts and sensory perceptions, showing how intentional acts are validated through perceptual experiences. However, this concept can blur the distinction between fulfillment and perceptual verification. In Husserl's framework, fulfillment highlights the interconnectedness of intentionality and perception, but it doesn't necessarily require a specific form of verification—similarly to Kantian's synthetic a priori knowledge in that no verification is needed for such truths. It focuses on how cognitive acts find their validation in sensory experiences, making it a departure from Kantian epistemology, which emphasizes the categories of understanding.

This divergence from Kant's emphasis on the categories of understanding in Husserl's approach underlines a fundamental shift: the experiential validation of cognitive acts becomes central. In doing so, Husserl's phenomenology opens a new avenue for understanding the role of perception in knowledge acquisition. It suggests a more fluid interaction between thought and experience, where validation is less about rigid verification and more about the congruence of sensory experiences with cognitive intentions. This approach challenges traditional epistemological frameworks, offering a nuanced view of how knowledge and understanding are shaped by the dynamic interplay between the mind and the world.

This is of critical importance because human cognition is capable of “originary intuition,”²⁵ which describes the fundamental aspect of human consciousness and perception, where the subject directly and immediately apprehends an object or phenomenon without the need for prior concepts, representations, or inferences. This is how Husserl describes it: “each intuition affording [something] in an originary way is a legitimate source of knowledge, that whatever presents itself to us in ‘Intuition’ in an originary way (so to speak, in its actuality in person) is to be taken simply as what it affords itself as, but only within the limitations in which it affords itself there.”²⁶

²⁵ Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, p. 127.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

It may appear that Husserl would simply ascribe any type of intuition, such as imagination, hallucinations, and false cognitions, as a source of knowledge, however, that would be a misunderstanding of Husserl's point. According to Hopp, a better way of understanding Husserl's "Principle of All Principles" is by taking his argument in a weaker form: "*originary cognitive fulfillment* is a source of justification and knowledge."²⁷ This implies that what qualifies as reasonable to believe is not what qualifies cognition to be knowledge.

In other words, while Kant's philosophy acknowledges the limits of human reason and the role of categories of understanding, Husserl takes a different path, focusing on the examination of immediate, unmediated awareness as a valid source of knowledge. This tension arises from their distinct approaches to understanding the nature of human cognition, with Kant emphasizing constraints and Husserl exploring moments of direct intuition and consciousness.

Hence, if Husserl's unmediated awareness is considered a valid source of knowledge, it suggests that Husserl may have overcome the Kantian limitations on knowledge. This is not because Kant's analysis is flawed, but because Husserl's understanding of the source of knowledge doesn't necessarily require knowledge to be purely a matter of reason. This nuanced perspective highlights the ongoing philosophical discourse on the nature and scope of human knowledge in both Kantian and phenomenological traditions.

In the example *supra*, β 's perceptual experience of the colored bathroom wall happens through the act of *seeing*. This perceptual experience is itself a source of knowledge. Seeing is not the evidence of β 's evidence but rather the other way around. It is β 's act of seeing that provides β with awareness of the evidence for β 's originary intuition. There is no reason to discount mediated sense perception as a phenomenon distinct to the noumena. If anything, what Kant needed to develop is the argument by which the perceived is distinct from the noumena. If there are no grounds to suggest that the default assumption

²⁷ Hopp, *Phenomenology*, p. 218.

would be the phenomenal relation to the noumena, what is given “is to be taken simply as what it affords itself as,”²⁸ or the thing itself.

This, however, does not mean that to reach originary cognitive fulfillment, human cognition needs to rely solely on the originary intuition. The preponderance of evidence, verification events, and even other originary cognitive fulfillment experiences will build upon and enrich the belief system of an individual, such as mathematical knowledge does in Kant. In short, Kant’s work has not been in vain, and it is thanks to the experience of cognition and the development of the sciences that takes human cognition to enjoy more cognitive fulfillment. Correspondingly, even Husserl recognizes that originary intuitions come in different degrees of self-evidence, and not all of these intuitions have the same degree of adequacy. So, knowledge is not limited to a primitive intuition of immediacy but benefits from a “synthetic” epistemology.

Before moving forward to dive into a case study of how phenomenology approaches a famous Biblical narrative from a Levinasian perspective, one must first wonder how phenomenology approaches religion. In other words, is there such a thing as a religious experience that phenomenology can address? So far, Husserl has addressed originary intuitions of a perceptible world distinctively from Kant’s analysis. The fact that originary intuitions do not need originary fulfillment to be considered knowledge does not make any idea a qualitative originary intuition—as Husserl suggested in his *Logical Investigations* about the gradient of self-evidence. So, once again, what is it that phenomenology can examine in religion? The reference that comes to mind when thinking of a religious experience usually fits within an experience of the divine or of the absence of the divine whenever is intended.

Courtine states:

Up until its penultimate Heideggerian transformation, phenomenology let itself be fascinated by a Greek experience that lifts the opposition of appearance and appearing, and

²⁸ Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, p. 43.

thanks to which the thing ends up perfectly coinciding with the light of its manifestation, in a total presence, excluding all mediation. But one may immediately add, by reversing the consequence from an obvious rapprochement to a critical point, that the aforementioned theophany can equally permit one to make phenomenologically evident the essential connection that unites appearing to spatiality and to temporality, to historicity, and in general to the “passage” –that is to say, in a word, to the conditions of the sensible and of sensibilization. If the appearing of the god could be the precise figure of phenomenalization *κατ' ἐξοχήν*, when the face of Heaven—void of attributes—has ceased to veil some unknown god, it could still be reserved for a phenomenology of the inapparent to explore the Nameless through mediations, caesurae, divisions, and disseminations—no doubt at the risk of blurring the difference of the horizon or the backdrop against which figure, face, image, or icon would appear or come detached, indeed of striking out the difference between Being and beings, between the object and the clearing (*Lichtung*).²⁹

Courtine aptly summarizes the challenges and historical development of a phenomenological approach to religion. Phenomenology of religion today does not deal with that perfect fit of Greek theophanies—where the intuited object is portrayed as a sensible appearance—but is rather more aligned with the passing or absence of the divine. This is important because human cognitive experiences work simultaneously between what is present and what is not. The Husserlian acceptance of degrees of intuition, especially as experiences of a perceived sensible object, are in part the recognition that what is perceived is never presented to the observer in its totality. The contemporary religious experience is most often experienced as the absence of the divine. Yet, as it will be shown in the next section, it is in the heavy

²⁹ Dominique Janicaud, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, and Paul Ricoeur, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 126.

subjective intuition that the divine is in fact present, even when the divine appears to be absent, that allows a phenomenological approach to religion.³⁰

The Religious Demand: The Binding of Isaac

If there is a narrative that can challenge both a phenomenological analysis of religion and the Kantian philosophy of religion is the narrative of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22.³¹ On the one hand, the narrative is depicted as an ethical test, which would align well with the Kantian perspective of religion; but, on the other hand, it appears to be the actual contradiction of the ethical. Before deciding which one of those approaches is more fitting, let's dive into a phenomenological analysis of Abraham's "religious" experience following Sugarman's work on Emmanuel Lévinas's reading.

What light can the text shed about Abraham experience of the divine? The narrative immediately states that God "tested" Abraham. Yet, is this test an ethical test? Is it about Abraham's willingness to put God beyond the ethical? As Kierkegaard asks in Problem I of *Fear and Trembling*: "Is there such a thing as

³⁰ Chad Engelland, *Phenomenology* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020), pp. 83-85.

³¹ Here is the Biblical narrative referred to as the Binding of Isaac: "After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.'" So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba." (Genesis 22:1-19 NRSV)

a teleological suspension of the ethical?”³² Perhaps, it was just Abraham’s misunderstanding of the divine request. If God is truly asking to give up Abraham’s son, he is not only giving up the “promise” given by God, but also the ethical as it was established in the seven Noachide laws (Sugarman 2020, 39).³³ “What is striking about the binding of Isaac is that the religious does not appear to be the expansion of the ethical, but its very contradiction.”³⁴

Multiple features in the narrative would refute the argument that Abraham misunderstood the divine request. That is why he did not disclose this request to his wife, Sarah, nor did he tell Isaac anything other than the bare minimum. In addition, out of the other nine tests that Abraham faced, this is the only time where he did not immediately obey. Abraham first went to sleep, and, on top of that surely sleepless night, he took three days to arrive at a destination that should be reached merely in eight hours.³⁵ All these signs alone point out the deep discomfort and shock Abraham must have experienced. The text is clear, God requested Abraham to offer Isaac in sacrifice.

Now, even if the text proves that Abraham understood literally what the command was, Sugarman asks: “what does he [Abraham] see in the reflection of the gleaming knife that he lifts on the altar? Is it the face of a holy man or someone possessed by sacred violence?”³⁶ If Abraham were possessed by the sacred violence of his fanaticism, he surely would not experience the sacrificial demand with a deepest sense of sorrow as he is portrayed in the narrative. He would probably find his experience of soteriological fulfillment in the sacrifice of Isaac. After all, it is not Abraham’s desire to go forth with the sacrifice but the path to appease the divine. Furthermore, even if one were to adjudicate Abraham’s act as the egotistical need to find God’s acceptance, Abraham would be ultimately justified as one could attribute Abraham’s

³² Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling & Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

³³ Richard I. Sugarman, *Levinas and the Torah: A Phenomenological Approach* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2020), p. 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

actions to the sacred possession that takes control over Abraham's will. The sacred would make Abraham's ego disappear in the dissolution of the sacred. Again, this does not seem plausible based on the narrative as outlined *supra*.

Consequently, if Abraham knew exactly what the test's demand was, and if he acted as a holy man instead of a fanatic, and if he was well aware of the high price of the test's demand, if he also was aware—as it would have been expected—that he was breaking the ethical ruling of the Noachide laws, was this test about putting the divine beyond the ethical as Kierkegaard wonders? Could the test have been designed to discern whether Abraham was merely a religious fanatic or a truly devout follower of God? As if Abraham had to push against God's command and ground his ethical firmness in the adopted Noachide laws and call God's bluff or perish with "ethical" honor as if it were so?

There is another alternative, and this is located in the concept of death. Why would Abraham's duty supersede Isaac's life? Here is the crux of the problem. The test is not about the heteronomy and exteriority of the ethical law, nor is it about the interiority and autonomy of one's character. In other words, Abraham is not being tested to see if he upholds the ethical framework against the divine command, and neither is he being tested about the integrity of the "I" of Abraham. This test is neither about him doing what is expected of him nor about doing what he wants to do. He is being tested in the realm of the "yours," the "other"³⁷ as Levinas would call it. The "yours" is really what challenges the morality of the "I." "The "yours" would normally pertain to the other person, in this case Isaac, and the absolutely Other as well. Here, the collision between the ethical and the religious is a virtual biblical anomaly."³⁸ Abraham is not being measured by his internal morality, nor is he tested in the Noachide laws, what Abraham is being measured against is his intentionality towards the divine, the "Other," by means of Isaac, the "other" that is also the "yours," to make the divine, the "Other," Abraham's "Yours." In other words, what was initially Abraham's test

³⁷ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 212-214.

³⁸ Sugarman, *Levinas and the Torah*, p. 39.

became God's test. Will Abraham's originary intuition of the divine find its verification in the originary cognitive fulfillment of the divine? Yes, the narrative confirms that. This is why Abraham is the father of "faith." He is not the father of integrity, law, and any other ethical framework—whether it is internal or external. He is the father of faith, because he "knew" the divine "Other" as Abraham's "Yours."

Yet, if the test were still to be considered an ethical test, Abraham would have to question whether going through with this test is worth it. After all, Abraham was old of age at this time, so, at this point, he could have asked, is being obedient to God worthy at all? Abraham is getting at the uttermost complete expression of the religious, the originary cognitive fulfillment of "faith." Is Abraham justified in going through with the test? Certainly! Abraham has been tested by God before, and he has had his immediate verification (or originary cognitive fulfillment) of God with Isaac himself. The fact that Abraham delays his trip, slowly journeys toward Moriah, and delays any explanations of the event, shows Abraham's bid for God. He, while struck by God's request, kept walking in disbelief hoping that God would stop him.

He is certainly startled by this test, but he transforms God's question from "Will you, Abraham, obey me even if I ask you to sacrifice what you love most?" to "Will you, God, allow me to lose what you give me (Isaac) to love the most?" This seems clearer when Abraham is near the destination and Isaac—having left behind Abraham's servants—startled, asks his father: "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Genesis 22:7 NRSV). Then, Abraham specifically answers: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." (Gen 22:8 NRSV). He specifically turns the responsibility from him to God. Contrary to Abraham's initial reaction where most of his journey to Moriah was surrounded by silence and abstraction, now, he explicitly dares to say that God will provide a sacrificial lamb for the burnt offering.

Abraham's faith in God is neither a simple "leap" of irrationality, nor is it a complex elegance of pure reason in operation, but it is indeed an experience—a singular experience one may add—that involves

reason, ethics, and permeates all realms of human cognition. Nevertheless, faith, analogous to rational knowledge, comes in degrees of perception. Not every religious devotee would pass Abraham's test, and one would easily say at this point: "I wouldn't wish this [test] on my worst enemy!" Yet, it is not needed. Religious devotees only need a religious experience that convinces them of truth, a cognitive fulfillment. Faith is not something that people have, "but something toward which we are incessantly moving, [...] faith is intimately linked with transcendence. For this reason, we can speak of faithfulness or fidelity. This means affirming that life lived righteously is the most dynamic, active expression of faith."³⁹ Abraham's encounter with the divine renders faith, which is not a lower form of reason, but knowledge manifested as faith, the intentionality of the divine.

This test only showcases a snapshot of Abraham's life and epistemological condition. However, when looking at Abraham's overarching experience with the divine, which moves Abraham out from his land, and gives him a son against all possible expectations, Abraham "knew" that God would provide the sacrificial lamb. Even in the remote possibility that God would not provide such a lamb, and that the divine were to take away his promised son, Abraham would have refused to devalue the divine. Ultimately, bidding on Abraham's God would have been worth it.

The narrative of the Binding of Isaac, as examined in this paper, serves as a profound illustration of the intricate relationship between faith and knowledge. Abraham's experience, analyzed through the lens of phenomenology and contrasted with Kantian philosophy, reveals a nuanced understanding of faith. It emerges not as blind adherence to the divine command but as an informed, cognitively rich engagement with the divine will. This experience of Abraham transcends the Kantian ethical framework between autonomy and heteronomy, moving into a realm where faith and knowledge are not opposing forces but complementary facets of a deeper understanding of the divine.

³⁹ Sugarman, Levinas and the Torah, p. 39.

Abraham's journey, marked by intense deliberation, struggle with ethical norms, and ultimate faith to a divine command, reflects a profound synthetical cognitive process. This process is not just about adherence to external commands but involves a deep internalization of the divine will, an understanding that surpasses mere rational or ethical comprehension. Abraham's faith, as depicted in this narrative, is not an abandonment of reason or ethics; instead, it is an elevation of them, integrating them into a more comprehensive understanding of his relationship with the divine manifested as faith.

This transformative experience of Abraham highlights that faith, in its deepest sense, is a form of knowledge – a knowledge that is experiential, relational, and deeply personal. It is a knowledge that transcends the conventional boundaries of pure reason and enters the realm of the divine, where human understanding is both challenged and enriched. In Abraham's response to the divine command, faith is an active, dynamic process of understanding, a journey towards a deeper, more profound realization of the divine presence and purpose.

Therefore, the Binding of Isaac's narrative does not merely present a theological conundrum or an ethical paradox but offers a window into the complex dynamics of faith as a form of knowledge. This faith is not static or dogmatic but is a living, evolving understanding that engages with the deepest questions of existence, morality, and divine intention. In this light, Abraham's story is not just a tale of submission but a narrative of profound cognitive and spiritual insight, offering a compelling vision of faith as an integral and valid form of human knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper has journeyed through the intricate landscapes of Kantian philosophy, phenomenology, and a phenomenological reading of the Binding of Isaac narrative, converging on a singular, profound insight: faith is not merely a spiritual sentiment or an irrational leap into the unknown, but a legitimate form of knowledge, deeply rooted in human cognition and experience.

Immanuel Kant's exploration of the limits of human cognition underscored the boundaries of understanding, particularly in relation to religious phenomena. However, this paper suggests that Kant's delineation between phenomena and noumena, while highlighting the limitations of cognitive faculties, does not preclude the possibility of knowledge in the realm of faith. Rather, it opens up an understanding of faith as a unique cognitive experience, one that transcends but can have empirical validation, yet is deeply embedded in human experience.

Phenomenology, especially as articulated by Husserl and further explored by Levinas, offers a crucial counterpoint to Kant's epistemology. By emphasizing the role of originary intuition and the immediacy of lived experience, phenomenology considers faith as a form of originary cognitive fulfillment. Faith, in this view, is not a departure from reason but an extension of it, grounded in the immediate and direct apprehension of the divine or the transcendent.

The narrative of the Binding of Isaac, as interpreted through a phenomenological lens, vividly illustrates this conception of faith. Abraham's ordeal is not merely a test of blind obedience but a profound engagement with the divine that transcends conventional morality and rationality. His journey reflects the movement towards an originary cognitive fulfillment, where faith becomes an experiential knowledge that deeply engages with the ethical, the spiritual, and the existential dimensions of his being.

In sum, this paper argues that faith, far from being an irrational leap, is a form of knowledge — a knowledge that arises from the deepest levels of human experience and consciousness. It is a form of knowledge that engages with the mysteries of existence, the nuances of ethical living, and the profound encounters with the divine. As such, faith merits recognition as a vital and legitimate dimension of human cognition and understanding.

The implications of this study are manifold. For scholars of religion and philosophy, it invites a reevaluation of the epistemological status of faith. For practitioners of faith, reaffirms their deeper

appreciation of their spiritual experiences as cognitively meaningful and valid. And for the broader society, it suggests a more nuanced understanding of religious belief and its role in human life.

Future research might further explore this intersection of faith and knowledge, perhaps examining other religious narratives or traditions through this philosophical lens. Such studies could continue to enrich the understanding of faith as a profound and integral aspect of the human quest for understanding and meaning.

In this exploration of the Binding of Isaac and the philosophies of Kant and Husserl, this paper finds a compelling case for reimagining faith not as a mere belief but as a profound form of knowledge, one that is integral to the human experience and worthy of deep philosophical exploration and respect.

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