

## Sublating reverence to parents

PFISTER, Lauren F

*Published in:*  
Journal of Chinese Philosophy

*DOI:*  
[10.1111/1540-6253.12011](https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6253.12011)  
[10.1163/15406253-04001005](https://doi.org/10.1163/15406253-04001005)

Published: 01/03/2013

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
PFISTER, L. F. (2013). Sublating reverence to parents: A Kierkegaardian interpretation of the Sage-King Shun's piety. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 40(1), 50-66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6253.12011>, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15406253-04001005>

### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent publication URLs

Lauren F. Pfister / 費樂仁

Professor in the Religion and Philosophy Department and Director of the Centre for Sino-Christian Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, Lauren Pfister has lived in Hong Kong since 1987. Since the Spring of 2011, he was made a Founding Fellow of the Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities, and has served on its Executive Committee since 2012. Being an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* since 1997, he has continued to pursue research in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Ruist philosophy, the history of sinology, hermeneutics as well as comparative philosophical and comparative religious studies.

Recently his major research efforts have focused on the relationship between Christian missionary-scholars and their impact in various dimensions of modern China, focusing on their translations of “classical” Chinese philosophical and religious works (especially by James Legge 理雅各, Ernst Faber (花之安 1839-1899), Richard Wilhelm (衛禮賢 1873-1930) and Solomon Caesar Malan (馬智庫 1812-1894)). He has worked steadily in broader realms of the history of Chinese philosophical traditions, with emphasis on their hermeneutic and metaphysical developments. A focus of attention in this realm have been evaluative studies of Feng Youlan’s (馮友蘭 1895-1990) philosophical system and his various histories of Chinese philosophy. In June 2012 a small volume of eight translated essays dealing with Sino-European themes by Zhao Fusan (趙復三 1926- ), former vice president of the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences, was introduced and published. Substantial work on the missionary-scholarship of James Legge (1815-1897) has resulted in a two volume work entitled *Striving for ‘The Whole Duty of Man’: James Legge and the Scottish Protestant Encounter with China* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004), and the republication in 2010 of Legge’s *Chinese Classics* (中國經典 in five volumes, with Chinese introductions) by the East China Normal Press.

Professor Lauren F. Pfister  
Religion and Philosophy Department  
Hong Kong Baptist University  
224 Waterloo Road  
Kowloon, Hong Kong  
China  
E-mail Address: [feileren@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:feileren@hkbu.edu.hk)  
Office Phone: [852] 3411-7494  
Office Fax: [852] 3411-7379

Running Title: “Sublating Reverence to Parents”

LAUREN F. PFISTER\*

SUBLATING REVERENCE TO PARENTS:  
A KIERKEGAARDIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE  
SAGE-KING SHUN'S PIETY

ABSTRACT

In the *Mengzi* there is a hypothetical situation relating how the ancient sage king Shun 舜 would respond if his father had committed murder. This has recently become a source of debate among Chinese philosophers. Here we will apply arguments made by Johannes *de silentio* (Kierkegaard's pseudonym) about the "teleological suspension of the ethical" related to the action of the biblical Abraham, and link them up to alternative interpretations the actions of Shun. This challenges the current and traditional interpretations of his actions, suggesting how this new approach can overcome ethical quandaries related to the Mengzian account of Shun's behavior.

Even though the sage-king Shun 舜 or emperor Shun (*Shun Di* 舜帝) is a prominent figure in the *Mengzi* 孟子 and other Ruist ("Confucian") canonical texts,<sup>1</sup> very little has been written about this ancient Ruist icon in philosophical studies produced in non-Chinese languages.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there has been a major debate brewing in China,<sup>3</sup> also being extended into Anglophone philosophical discussions,<sup>4</sup> regarding problems related to certain stories about Shun found in the *Mengzi*. One of the main concerns has been to address the implications of a hypothetical story

LAUREN F. PFISTER, Professor, Religion and Philosophy Department, Director, Centre for Sino-Christian Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University; Founding Fellow of the Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities; Associate Editor, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*. Specialties: Qing Dynasty philosophy, Ruist-Christian dialogue, hermeneutics.

E-mail: feileren@hkbu.edu.hk

related to Shun's way of handling a case of his putatively murderous father (appearing at *Mengzi* 7A: 35); though there are many other passages dealing with his historical and virtuous achievements, it has been this contrived story which has been addressed by Mengzi in order to resolve what is presented as an obvious ethical dilemma.

Recent reflections on this problem cause some to condemn Mengzi's answer as a corrupting influence; the charge is that it has led many Ruist scholars to promote generalized practices which condone nepotistic forms of corruption and oppose social justice, because such practices (following Shun's precedent) subvert the rule of law.

The on-going debate has focused on the inherent dilemma related to the fulfillment of "filial piety" or, more precisely, reverence for parents, without any reference to relevant background information related to Shun's metaphysical beliefs and ritual practices which might suggest other interpretive possibilities.

It is therefore incumbent upon us to describe features of the classical or orthodox image of Shun, adding some information about his ritual practices and metaphysical beliefs which have been regularly left unstated in other accounts of the ancient sage-king. Whether these factors reveal a new motivation which informs Shun's actions in ways similar to what is described in Kierkegaardian terms as a "teleological suspension of the ethical" will be explained here in detail. We will explore two dimensions of this Kierkegaardian understanding of theistic faith, one involving the

ethical dilemma, and the other addressing the possibility of interpreting Shun's action as a sublation of the situation involving his father. By sublation we mean that Shun must slough off other aspects of the ritual form of parental reverence, adding to this a sacrificial will to abdicate his throne, and doing both under the motivation of "serving *tian*." We will suggest that this interpretive approach provides new ways of explaining how Shun overcame the inherent clash of values between his political duty and his parental reverence,<sup>5</sup> inspired by this Kierkegaardian understanding of the nature of theistic faith. We will suggest how the questions related to the justification of Shun's protection of his father parallel the account given of the biblical patriarch, Abraham, as portrayed in the work by the pseudonymous Johannes *de silentio*, *Fear and Trembling*, particularly in the manifestation of what appears to be an absurdity from certain ethical points of view. We will explore why the application of a "teleological suspension of the ethical" accompanied by a sublating transformation may be a better way of interpreting the putative actions of Shun in this hypothetical case. The further implications of this new interpretation of Shun's action will be developed in its response to both traditional and post-traditional accounts, and so offering a post-secular and transformative hermeneutic framework to reveal new ways of reinvesting in the significance of Shun's actions.

## I. REHEARSING THE ORTHODOX RUIST ACCOUNT OF SAGE-KING SHUN

According to accounts found in both the *Shangshu* 《尚書》 (*Book of Historical Records*) and the *Mengzi*, as Shun grew up into adulthood his father was still an “obstinately unprincipled” person (*wan* 頑); his step-mother, insincere (*yin* 嚚); his half-brother Xiang, arrogant (*ao* 傲). At least twice they plotted together to kill Shun when he was already an adult, and one time having thought they had succeeded, Xiang was laying claims to Shun’s family and personal belongings when he discovered, unexpectedly, that Shun had managed to escape the trap and was still alive.<sup>6</sup> Though Shun is identified as a peasant working in the fields, it was his moral bearing that won him the attention of the Lord Yao (*Yao Di* 堯帝).<sup>7</sup> But how was this moral attitude expressed during the time Shun lived under oppressive conditions within his own family? In the first passage within the fifth book of the *Mengzi*, half of which is completely devoted to describing Shun’s character and situation, Shun is described as “weeping and crying, calling upon merciful Heaven” (*haoqi yu mintian* 號泣于旻天).<sup>8</sup> Though “complaining” and “dissatisfied”, filled with a “yearning” to have a balanced relationship with his parents and step-brother, Shun remained courteous and loving toward all three of them, until they finally learned restraint and did not pursue heinous evils as they had previously done.<sup>9</sup> It was because of this

virtuous strength that Shun was noticed by others, and ultimately granted audience with his lord, who determined to offer this unmarried and faithful son his own two daughters in marriage.<sup>10</sup> In Kongzi's eyes it was Shun's reverence for his parents that was outstanding,<sup>11</sup> but it was his reliance on and acceptance by *tian* 天 or Heaven that ultimately earned him the throne after Lord Yao retired from office.<sup>12</sup> How was he known to be "accepted by Heaven" (*tian shou zhi* 天受之)? According to Mengzi, when Shun presided over the religious sacrifices to various spirits, the hundred spirits "were pleased with them" (*bai shen xiang zhi* 百神享之), and so it was understood that this is how Heaven manifested its acceptance.<sup>13</sup>

Once Shun assumed the throne, it is notable that he initiated his rule by performing all the appropriate sacrificial rituals to the Supreme Lord (*shangdi* 上帝), the six honored ones (*liu zong* 六宗), the spirits of the hills and rivers (*shan chuan* 山川) and then to the "host of spirits" (*qun shen* 群神).<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, Shun's attentiveness as the ruler to the Chinese Deity and the many other spirits was undergirding his *virtue* as it had been while he was working in the family's fields. Consequently, he stifled the wicked activities of four major criminals,<sup>15</sup> and brought peace to both his own home as well as to the kingdom. A nobleman was given responsibilities over the three major religious rites under Shun's rule.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Shun considered all the ministers under his authority working with him to perform the

services of Heaven (*shi liang tian gong* 時亮天功).<sup>17</sup>

Mengzi later claims that one “serves Heaven” by preserving one’s heart-mind and nourishing one’s nature (*cun qi xin, yang qi xing, suoyi shi tian ye* 存其心，養其性，所以事天也),<sup>18</sup> but it also appears in Shun’s life that Heaven nourished and preserved him when it accepted his sacrifices and affirmed his rule as sage-king, as previously mentioned.<sup>19</sup> Having been nurtured by Heaven in the times of his distress, Shun went on to teach and guide others, so that a more enlightened culture of humaneness might pervade the kingdom. In fact, it is a principle of Heaven’s generation and sustenance of a people that the human person who is first to grasp heavenly wisdom should teach those who have not yet grasped it.<sup>20</sup> This is something which Shun did, and so it furthered his own virtuous influences.

Consequently, Mengzi regularly placed Shun’s virtuous achievements along with those of Yao, claiming that they were men “born virtuous” even though they bore the same nature as other humans;<sup>21</sup> nevertheless, elsewhere he also explains that “the conduct of the sages is not always the same” (*shengren zhi xing, bu tong ye* 聖人之行不同也),<sup>22</sup> and we are told that in applying wisdom and benevolence, they did it carefully. They did so not on the basis of a simple version of equality related to a strictly quantitative understanding of that value, but with an insight into what was most important (*ji wu* 急務).<sup>23</sup> Here we sense that Shun’s sagely wisdom had



attained something like “an absolute relationship to the absolute end, and a relative relationship to relative ends” as described by Johannes Climacus in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.<sup>24</sup> Worshipping the ultimate source of life, Shun’s wise discernment drew upon that experience to establish a set of hierarchical values – among spiritual beings and their relevant sacrifices, as well as among various levels of humans who lived within the political realm where he was sovereign – so that a form of life based on those values could be worked out in the light of their relative importance. If all this is true for Shun, then we should not separate his reverence for his parents from his worship of *shangdi* or *tian* and the other spirits; they were interrelated in a spectrum of values framed and shaped by Shun’s service to and reliance on Heaven.

How would Shun’s prevailing interest to “serve Heaven”<sup>25</sup> become a hermeneutic pivot to reconsider the claims willingly giving up his right to rule and arranging for the putative concealment of his murderous father? Here we have the interpretive means to anticipate a sublation of traditional accounts of *xiao*, and discover the value of asserting that a “teleological suspension of the ethical” is actually at work in the context of Shun’s hypothetical choice informed by his life-long ritual attunement to *tian* and other spirits. We understand the sublation here to involve a double negation – the first negation being the illegal act of murder by his father, and

the second negation being Shun's abdication of the throne in order to protect his father's life and to open the way toward his father's own personal transformation. Therefore we need now to learn more about Kierkegaard's account of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" offered under the name of a pseudonym, Johannes *de silencio*.

## II. JOHANNES *de silencio* AND THE BIBLICAL ABRAHAM

The fact that Kierkegaard employed pseudonyms to present various monographs has become a matter of increased interest in both philosophical and literary studies,<sup>26</sup> but will not be developed here.<sup>27</sup> The larger philosophical significance of *Fear and Trembling* produced by Kierkegaard in 1843 under the pseudonym, Johannes *de silencio*, rests solidly on its anti-Hegelian reconception of the nature of human existence and the importance of the individual.<sup>28</sup>

Rather than serving the Christian position Kierkegaard himself would present in writings published with his actual name later in life, this volume was pseudonymously written to portray a person with religious interests,<sup>29</sup> exploring the implications of a universalistic ethicist, but not involved existentially with Christian faith, even though he was certainly aware of biblical traditions and contemporary Danish Christian

institutions. Nevertheless, even though the three “problemata” within *Fear and Trembling* do start off with claims relating “the ethical” to the “universal”, it is manifest from reading each of the *problema* that Johannes *de silentio* challenges these claims throughout the balance of those discussions.<sup>30</sup> Even though we will see in the following that his stance toward the alternatives in these discussions is ironic, the basic concern of Johannes *de silentio*’s arguments is to show how Abraham’s faith, and ultimately all authentic monotheistic religious faith involving a self-revelatory deity, cannot be subsumed within the limits of a universalistic form of ethics.

Who is the Abraham described in *Fear and Trembling*?<sup>31</sup> He is decidedly the one presented in the Genesis account, but with elaborations that indicate that Johannes *de silentio* was also aware of the later Christian interpretation in the New Testament book of Hebrews. Called by the God (*ha’elohim* הֵאֱלֹהִים) in a test (*nissah* נִסָּה) of his faith, Abraham was commanded to take his only son, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice to this self-revealing God.<sup>32</sup> The next morning, we are told in the Genesis account, Abraham left on a donkey with Isaac and two servants joining him, travelling together until the third day, when they reached the place of sacrifice.<sup>33</sup> Directing the servants to stay behind, and stating that both of them would return, Abraham then went with Isaac alone to the mountain of sacrifice.<sup>34</sup> The one question Isaac asked during this trip was about the lack of a “sheep for the burnt offering” (*hasseh le’olah*

הַשֵּׁה לְעֹלָה), and Abraham responded that “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering, my son.”<sup>35</sup> At the right place they stopped, an altar was built and the wood placed upon it. Without further explanation, the text tells us that Abraham “bound (ya “god יַעֲקֹב)<sup>36</sup> his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.”<sup>37</sup> Taking a sacrificial knife and raising it above his head in preparation to stab the boy, “an angel of Yahweh” called out his name twice, ordering him not to harm the boy.<sup>38</sup> Right at that instant Abraham saw a ram whose horns were caught in a nearby thicket, and so he captured the animal, believing it to be the sacrifice to replace Isaac which was prepared by Yahweh.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, major blessings and promises of Yahweh were communicated to Abraham,<sup>40</sup> including the promise that “all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command.”<sup>41</sup>

### III. CONCEIVING ABRAHAM’S THEISTIC FAITH AND “THE ETHICAL”

In *Fear and Trembling* Johannes *de silentio* does not rehearse all the details of Genesis 22, but focuses instead on details related to Abraham’s “test” of faith: the motivations fueling his willingness to sacrifice Isaac on the basis of the command from Yahweh, his responsive obedience in spite of his paternal feelings, the ponderous

silences between Abraham and most others, and some of the oblique statements made by Abraham to discern whether he was truly trusting in Yahweh.<sup>42</sup> Though no direct reference is made to the promises and blessings which followed,<sup>43</sup> Abraham is regularly honored by the author as “the father of faith”, and so his actions are consistently contrasted to those of tragic heroes who act without such an existential faith. But we must deal with how Johannes *de silentio* presents all these issues within the context of his indirect and ironic communication. Having portrayed that stylistic element carefully, we can then quickly move to an interpretive position related to the teleological suspension of the ethical, in order to prepare the way for a Kierkegaardian interpretation of the hypothetical ethical dilemma faced by the sage-king Shun.

Within *Fear and Trembling* there is a litany of praises given to Abraham, but they are immediately followed by Johannes *de silentio* admitting that he cannot understand or practice what Abraham chooses to do,<sup>44</sup> that he is dazzled and even repelled by Abraham’s act of faithful obedience,<sup>45</sup> and that he finds Abraham’s faith resting upon a paradox<sup>46</sup> that is ultimately unthinkable.<sup>47</sup> From this standpoint, Johannes *de silentio* appears as a universalizing ethicist who is a theist, but not an existential or evangelical Christian,<sup>48</sup> and who like Hegel (and perhaps even Kant) identifies the religious only from within the realm of this rationalized ethical

framework. Because he is portrayed as a theist, Johannes *de silentio* still honors the image of Abraham (and even Mary, the Mother of God<sup>49</sup>) as a suffering “knight of faith”, but repeatedly finds himself “appalled” at the thought of a father ready to slay his son. He is unable to follow the step of faith Abraham takes in believing that God could even “give him a new Isaac”, and so “could recall to life him who had been sacrificed”.<sup>50</sup> This belief, Johannes *de silentio* insists, comes “by virtue of the absurd; for all human reckoning has long since ceased to function.” Ultimately, for Johannes *de silentio*, Abraham’s faith rests upon this absurdity as seen and interpreted from universalistic ethics. Though he senses the biblical patriarch’s greatness, and realizes that Abraham’s faith is not limited to the actions of past tragic heroes,<sup>51</sup> Johannes *de silentio* can only sit in awe of what he ultimately cannot understand: the faith which inspires Abraham to do with Isaac by YHWH’s command what appears from a universalistic ethical perspective to be nothing less than murder.

What does the teleological suspension of the ethical involve as it is expressed by Abraham? Debates have raged over whether this suspension leads to a radical form of religious irrationality, to some higher ethical value, or to an alternative religious plane where a new ethical consciousness sublating the older ethical universalism is in place and relativized within the context of an absolute passion for “the absolute”, which is God. It is this final position – articulated by John Davenport as an

“eschatological trust” which embodies an “eschatological suspension” of the ethical in order to achieve this sublated form of authentic religious life – that presents the most convincing account to this reader.<sup>52</sup> What Johannes *de silentio* presents through his ironic gestures of mixed admiration and rejection is a position where Abraham, as a self-conscious individual in response to the self-revealing and supreme Lord who encounters him within specific historical times and places, becomes an individual who responds to a divine command, trusting that all previous promises of that Deity will be fulfilled even in spite of the nature of the command presented to him. In the face of the overcoming of this text, Abraham experiences a “eucatastrophe”, the “working of a hidden power that makes possible an indispensable good that no human agency could bring about”.<sup>53</sup> In the eucatastrophic event, what may well be lost is regained, but now with a new depth of significance, *reflecting a dialectical pattern very similar to sublation as mentioned earlier*. In the case of Abraham, “God sends His angel to stay Abraham’s hand as he raises the knife, and then He sends the ram to replace Isaac (and along with this ram, implicitly, the message that human sacrifice is now forever forbidden).”<sup>54</sup> The teleological suspension of the ethical, therefore, is not a leap into irrational and anarchistic faith, but a sublation of previous cultural norms and ethical attitudes, reconceiving them in relative terms within a new and vital relationship with God fulfilled in the absolute passion of eschatological trust built upon divine promises

of grace, guidance, and renewal. It does involve an “infinite resignation” of his immediate love for Isaac, but does so in the context of an absolute passion in trusting the promises of God that Abraham through Isaac would have many progeny, and all nations would be blessed through him. Without this kind of faith, there could be infinite resignation in the form of a tragic hero, full of pathos and pain, all performed within one’s own powers, and not reliant on any divine transcendent reality. Only with faith could there be the sublation of past ethical norms, so that Abraham’s faith would receive its highest expression in the continuation of love for Isaac and the reaffirmation of the future promises of divine blessing.

#### IV. A KIERKEGAARDIAN INTERPRETATION OF SHUN’S REVERENCE

From the ethical point of view drawing upon the four germs of moral character which Mengzi advocates as inherent in human nature – humane cultivation (*ren* 仁), rightness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智) – Shun’s putative actions in this hypothetical case appear to prefer humane cultivation over rightness, neglecting ritual propriety and revealing attitudes which some might question as lacking wisdom. Nevertheless, if we adopt a position that valorizes Shun’s worship of *tian* or *shangdi*<sup>55</sup> and other spirits, emphasizing how his concern for his father’s very existence



preempted both his capacity and his will to rule as king; consequently, we could read his act of declining to maintain his regal authority and hiding his father as a matter of divine destiny (*tian ming* 天命)。 Acting in this way, from a will inspired by reference for *tian* or *shangdi*, Shun discovers a transformative pivot within his life; he is trusting *tian* to lead the way toward providing another qualified ruler to take his place, and so allowing Shun himself to take a final step in seeking to guide his father to a repentant and reformed attitude of life. This would involve a “teleological suspension of the ethical” in the light of the sage’s reverence for the divine or heavenly mandate, and so would also make clear where there are parallels with various aspects of the story of the biblical patriarch Abraham.

Here, then, a summary of significant parallels related to the lives of these two ancient figures will be identified in order to justify further the use of a Kierkegaardian interpretation of Shun’s putative actions. Both Abraham and Shun are engaged in religious rites and communications with the supreme deity they worship; both are also pre-Christian and pre-Islamic expressions of monotheistic worship; both serve as leaders in their different communities. Both seek blessings from the heavenly power they worship to guide them in their lives and duties; both have become exemplary persons within the larger cultural traditions where they are identified as forerunners of those traditions. While some might argue that a major difference comes in the fact

that Abraham received verbal communications from Yahweh, while Shun lived under a condition where “Heaven does not speak”; nevertheless, it has already been noted above that *tian* would use other means to communicate the heavenly will, and this was recognized by both the sage-king Shun and Mengzi. One manifest difference is that the story of Abraham is presented as an actual series of events, while Shun’s ethical dilemma is only hypothetical. Still, what we have documented is the fact that the moral renewal of Shun’s parents was a recorded fact in ancient Chinese history, so that the resolution of the hypothetical problem could have access to this important transformative fact, one that would be consistent with the eschatological trust in *tian* for the purpose of the virtuous renewal of one’s own parents.

Another parallel which presents itself is related to the “absurdity” of Abraham’s faith. From an ethical point of view, Shun’s actions also appear to be “absurd,” especially because they putatively valorize a personal virtue toward his father over the ethical responsibilities of his regal rule. But from a transformative perspective his act would reveal how his personal sacrifice under the awe of *tian*, **being the negation of the murderous negation of the law of the land**, sets forth a new standard of care for parents.<sup>56</sup> It sublates a normal pattern of reverence for his father within a transformative decision, opening an opportunity for Shun to submit his own life in “infinite resignation” to the bonds of this familial relationship, but also with a faith in

the guidance of *tian* to lead his father into a renewed, humble, and moral way of life.

## V. AFFIRMING A POST-SECULAR AND TRANSFORMATIVE

### INTERPRETATION OF SAGE-KING SHUN

#### 1. Overcoming Competing Ethical Challenges by Religious Sublation

Liu Qingping claims against Guo Qiyong and others that there is an internal contradiction within Mengzi's account, one that can be given an alternative interpretation from other and later Ruist sources, but must in the end overcome what is an inherent contradiction within the text of the *Mengzi*.<sup>57</sup> Liu's criticism of the Mengzian accounts of Shun's hypothetical concealment of his murderous father challenges these claims on the basis of other Mengzian concerns related to humane cultivation (*ren*) and rightness (*yi*). Always working within the context of a universalistic form of ethics, and then applying this to Ruist ethics particularly in the form of the system produced by Mengzi, Liu asks the following questions: How can humane government and dutiful care for the common people reflecting a generous form of justice be maintained if Shun simply puts aside his royal responsibilities? Is there any sense of justice preserved by running away from the authorities within his own kingdom, and subsequently living willingly as a reverent refugee? Presumably

Shun would be helping his father escape the severe penalties of proper justice in doing so. Since this would normally be seen as obstructing justice, what other motivations or concerns would make such a sacrificial act on his part appear to be other than anti-authoritarian and unrighteous?

In the Kierkegaardian interpretation of Shun's actions presented above, all of Liu's questions are now offered new answers. Shun's teleological suspension of regal justice is not an opposition to social justice, but is a sacrificial response to *tian*'s bidding for him to allow others to take up the call for justice, and he himself as a devoted son to commit himself to the moral regeneration of his father. This amounts to a sublation of the whole situation, leading to a heightened affirmation and transformation of Shun's reverence for his father. Though this hypothetical choice is unexpected under normal ritual conditions of a son's devotion to his father, it is feasible and redeemable within the understanding that the sovereign Lord known as *tian* will supply the next ruler and allow Shun the privilege of seeing his father's life renewed by heavenly nurture. Recourse to *tian* releases Shun from the ethical dilemma and sustains the social values which he upholds, but only through the sacrificial choice of leaving his regal throne behind him.<sup>58</sup> It may appear absurd and corrupt to a universalistic ethic that is thoroughly secular, but it can be understood in a post-secular context as a transformative alternative that resolves the dilemma in

ways that brings hope to many through the suffering, resignation and eschatological trust in *tian*'s guidance.

## **2. Adopting a Post-Secular Ruist Understanding of Ethics**

Marxist and other secular influences in contemporary Chinese settings have ideologically shaped contemporary interpretive accounts of Shun, allowing under the current post-secular setting a reassertion of some traditional ethical values, but oftentimes still under the constraint of a principled doubt related to religious worldviews and their related claims.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, this new Kierkegaardian interpretive approach revalidates the significance of the ancient monotheistic trends of some persons such as the sage-king Shun, and offers a creative way of overcoming what would otherwise remain a deeply divisive ethical dilemma within Chinese philosophical circles. Textually speaking, it is the case that theistic elements in Shun's worldview appear more often than in classical texts related to him than to those of other sage-kings; it suggests that this dimension of Shun's values was a prominent feature that was unusual in relationship to some other ancient rulers. We should assert here on the basis of the traditions in the *Mengzi*, which we referred to earlier, that while he was working in the fields as a commoner, Shun's "dissatisfaction" and "yearning" before *tian* over his familial situation manifested an existential desperation

tantamount to the “fear and trembling” which Abraham also faced. Precisely because of this, then, it should now be considered as all the more significant in interpreting his well-known reverence for his parents. Whether these reassertions also provide a contemporary option for modeling by Chinese philosophers through the life and values of this ancient exemplary person is a matter of interest, but will not be discussed here.

By opting for this revalorization of Shun’s theistic beliefs and practices, it leads to the affirmation of the “orthodox” account of Shun’s history, and would tend to cast further doubt on the accounts found in the unofficial record of the ancient Bamboo Annals<sup>60</sup> and the Freudian or anthropological reinterpretation of ancient history from interpretations relying on certain psychoanalytic principles as pursued by Whalen Lai.<sup>61</sup>

## VI. A FRUITFUL CONCLUSION ?

By carefully reconstructing the larger textual contexts for the lives and actions of both the sage-king Shun and the Hebrew patriarch Abraham, we have identified a new comparative interpretive approach to the famous Mengzian statement presenting Shun’s hypothetical ethical dilemma. By means of reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> century account of the concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical presented in Johannes *de silentio*’s *Fear and Trembling*, the dialectical sublation of child sacrifices

which Abraham overcame by his submission to YHWH, as well as its recent reinterpretation by 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophers and scholars, we have presented a Kierkegaardian alternative to interpreting Shun's situation. Rather than rest in the putative ethical dilemma contrasting social justice and familial virtues, we have suggested how Shun's devotion to *tian* or shangdi as well as other spirits in the ancient Chinese context could provide for him a transformative understanding of his family duties. On that basis, then, Shun's devotion to his father could be transformed into an eschatological trust in *tian* to provide the appropriate ruler to take his public place of service, as well as to hope in the correction and renovation of the life of his putatively murderous father. Rather than supporting a form of nepotistic corruption, this sublation of Shun's devotion to his father under the passionate trust in *tian*'s ever-creative renewal of life provides a hope for personal and relational renewal, while allowing social justice in the ancient context of China's relatively limited kingdoms to prevail. Shun's self-conscious sacrifice in leaving the throne of the kingdom to another and taking up concerns for his father's personal transformation under *tian*'s calling balances the maintenance of social justice with the heavenly hope of seeing his father's wicked life regenerated by humane virtues nurtured by *tian*'s oversight.

Following the Kierkegaardian precedent, we have found that by reaffirming the

significance of religious orientations in Shun's life we gain a new interpretive approach which overcomes previous ethical debates. It does so by relativizing the universalistic ethical claims made by some Ruist and others scholars by reducing those claims to matters of *Sittlichkeit* or cultural norms which are more limited in scope. The eschatological trust in *tian* provides a transformative interpretive option, the sublation of *xiao* under the worship of *tian* or *shangdi*, not generally discerned from the strictly ethical points of view used in recent debates. When seen from the current post-secular affirmation of religious experience in contemporary China, this Kierkegaardian interpretive approach both revalorizes Shun's unusual sagely character, based upon his putative personal sacrifices relying on *tian*'s guidance, and reconceives his actions in the light of both a sublated understanding of his reverence for his father and the new inspiration gained from his religious engagement in the worship of *tian* or *shangdi*.

HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY  
Hong Kong

#### ENDNOTES

The author would like to thank Mr. Jesse Ciccotti for making suggestions regarding a religious interpretation of Shun's actions, though what is presented here has developed far beyond our initial discussions.



---

<sup>1</sup> In the *Mengzi*, the name Shun appears 97 times in 40 passages, indicating his iconic status as a sage-king. More than one full chapter in the earliest sections of the *Shangshu* 尚書 is devoted to the life and policies of Shun.

<sup>2</sup> There is no article devoted to the life of this sage-king, or even the five sage-kings in Ruist traditions, found in either Xinzhong Yao, *RoutledgeCurzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) or Antonio S. Cua, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Translations of Ruist canonical literature still present early Ruist accounts about Shun and his origins (as in James Legge's and Richard Wilhelm's renderings of the *Four Books* and Legge's version the *Book of Historical Documents*). See also D. C. Lau's "Ancient History as Understood by Mencius," which reveals the prominence of Shun's place in pre-Qin Ruist traditions (see D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983): 223-227). For an alternative account, see Whalen Lai, "Unmasking the Filial Sage-King Shun: Oedipus at Anyang", *History of Religions* 35, no. 2 (November 1995): 163-184.

<sup>3</sup> See Guo Qiyong 郭齊勇, ed., *Rujia lunli zhengming ji – yi "qinqin huyin" wei zhongxin* 《儒家倫理爭鳴集 – 以「親親互隱」為中心》 (A Collection of Contentious Essays on Ruist Ethics – Focusing on "Mutual Concealment among Relatives") (Wuhan: Hubei Educational Press, 2004), a volume which includes nearly 50 essays written by more than 30 authors in just over 970 pages.

<sup>4</sup> As announced and elaborated in Liu Qingping, "Confucianism and Corruption: An Analysis of Shun's Two Actions Described by *Mencius*," *Dao* 6 (2007): 1-19. Liu had written his first essay about the topic in Chinese in 2002, and since then has published ten articles (including the one above) on the topic (bibliography, *Ibid.*, 19).

---

<sup>5</sup> This conception of *Aufhebung* / sublation comes originally from Hegel, but is reconceived in Kierkegaard's work by not leading to a universal concept, but to an individual life devoted with absolute passion to the absolute. Here the distinction between the "universal" and the "absolute" is critical, reflecting a distinction between Kierkegaard's account of universal ethics and his understanding of any human's possibility of relating religiously to the divine absolute. From the Hegelian point of view, the basic structure of the movement of *Aufhebung* is a negation of a negation, or what Brinkmann refers to as "the coexistence of two opposites of unequal value in a unity, one of which also functions as the unifying concept". In our account here, we will be arguing that in the tension between social justice and parental reverence as portrayed in the ethical dilemma found in the *Mengzi*, Shun's abdication of the throne in order to extend his parental reverence involves an *Aufhebung*. By this act he negates the murder, and simultaneously forms the stronger of the two negations honored by Heaven, allowing for the sublated condition which overcomes the opposition in a newly transformed social context. The quotation above comes from Klaus Brinkmann, "The Dialectic of the Inverted World and the Meaning of *Aufhebung*" in Nectarios G. Limnatis, ed., *The Dimension of Hegel's Dialectic* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 123.

<sup>6</sup> Initial quotations come from James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics, Volume 3 – The Shoo King: The Book of Historical Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), 26. Subsequently CC3. References to the attempted murders and Xiang's action are recorded in the *Mengzi* 5A: 2-3. Though questions about the early traditions related to Shun can be taken as mere fable or as authoritative myth, for the sake of this study I will assume that the canonical Ruist texts reveal a standard account of the man.

---

<sup>7</sup> See *Mengzi* 6B:15.

<sup>8</sup> Citing *Mengzi* 5A:1; see also D. C. Lau, *Mencius*, 138, and James Legge, *The Works of Mencius* (New York: Dover Pubs., 1970), 342. This text of Legge's will be subsequently referred to as CC2.

<sup>9</sup> See CC3, 26 and *Mengzi* 5A: 1, as in Lau, *Mencius*, 138 and Legge, CC2, 342.

<sup>10</sup> Also in CC3, 26 and *Mengzi* 5A: 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in *Mengzi* 6B: 3. Richard Wilhelm refers helpfully to this virtue in German as *Kindlichkeit*, "childlikeness". See Richard Wilhelm, trans., *Mong Dsi (Mong Ko)* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1914), 99 (at 5A:1).

<sup>12</sup> See *Mengzi* 5A: 5.

<sup>13</sup> See *Mengzi* 5A: 5, here following Legge, CC2, 356.

<sup>14</sup> See Legge, CC3, 33-34.

<sup>15</sup> Mentioned in both Legge, CC3, 39-40 and *Mengzi* 5A: 3.

<sup>16</sup> See Legge, CC3, 47.

<sup>17</sup> See Legge, CC3, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from *Mengzi* 7A: 1, English relying on Legge, CC2, 448-449.

<sup>19</sup> There is within the *Mengzi* a manifestation of mutual recognition and creative affirmation, so that even as Heaven accepted Shun and made him the king, also Shun revered Heaven and other spirits to the point that they were "pleased" and affirmed his role as a sagely ruler able to transform the social order around him. This will prove to be a critical element in what we conceive is Shun's motivation to abdicate and adopt an abnormal form of parental reverence. Therefore, we underscore its importance here as well on the basis of the previous *Mengzian* passages.

<sup>20</sup> See *Mengzi* 5A: 7.

<sup>21</sup> See *Mengzi* 4B: 32 and 7B: 33.

---

<sup>22</sup> See *Mengzi* 5A: 7, this quotation coming from Legge, CC2, 364. Note that the term “always” included in Legge’s rendering is not present in the standard Chinese text.

<sup>23</sup> See *Mengzi* 7A: 46.

<sup>24</sup> This volume written under this Kierkegaardian pseudonym originally appeared in February 1846. The quotation above comes from the English rendering of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* produced by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 371. Cited in Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 243, footnote 10. For a helpful “Chronology of Kierkegaard’s Writings”, consult this same work, xi-xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Here we are thinking not only of the claims in *Mengzi* 7A: 1, but also in the description of human responses to spiritual beings including *shangdi* in the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (The State of Equilibrium and Harmony), Zhu Xi’s standard text, Chs. 16-19.

<sup>26</sup> The “polyonymity” of Kierkegaard’s works involving points of view not representing Kierkegaard’s own position is now generally understood. In fact, Kierkegaard produced as many as eight volumes under different pseudonyms, each representing varying perspectives on human life and the world; these pseudonyms include Anti-Climacus, Constantin Constantius, Frater Tactiturnus, Johannes Climacus, Johannes *de silentio*, Nicolaus Notabene, Victor Eremita and Vigilius Haufniensis. For further details, consult Roger Poole’s two articles: “ ‘My wish, my prayer’: Keeping the Pseudonyms Apart – Preliminary Considerations” found in Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Jon Stewart, eds., *Kierkegaard Revisited: Proceedings from the Conference “Kierkegaard and the Meaning of Meaning It”, Copenhagen, May 5-9,*

---

1996 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 156-176, and “The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions” in Hannay and Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 59-66.

<sup>27</sup> More about Kierkegaard’s purposes in using pseudonyms is revealed in articles by Eva Kit Wah Man and Richard C. K. Lee in this issue, which interested readers should consult. The term “Kierkegaardian” in the subtitle of this paper does not intend to camouflage the pseudonymous character of the work we are studying, but to give credit to Kierkegaard for the creative work produced under this pseudonym.

<sup>28</sup> As argued cogently by Merold Westphal in his essay, “Kierkegaard and Hegel”, in Hannay and Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 101-124.

<sup>29</sup> Lowrie claims that Johannes *de silencio* is theistic but not Christian, belonging to “Religiousness A”. Consult Lowrie, *Fear and Trembling*, 256, endnote 24. Others see him as an “ethically religious” person who identifies universalistic ethics with religious spirituality. For the category of “ethical religiosity”, consult Taylor, *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship*, 224-236. Our position provides justifications for Lowrie’s claim. See also Jack Mulder, Jr., “Re-Radicalizing Kierkegaard: An Alternative to Religiousness C in light of an Investigation in the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 36 (2002), 303-324.

<sup>30</sup> Problema I, answering the question, “Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?”, begins with “The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone . . .”. Problema II, answering the question, “Is there an absolute duty to God?”, begins with “The ethical is the universal and as such, in turn, the divine.” Problema III, answering the question, “Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his purpose from Sarah, from Eleazar, from Isaac?”, begins with

---

“The ethical is as such the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed.” The balance of each of the discussions is to indicate how Abraham ultimately does not fit into the realm of the ethical, and so from the ethical point of view cannot be understood. This is to say, if Abraham’s religious experience of God’s command is authentic, what he experiences requires an explanation not envisioned within universalistic ethics. Otherwise, as Johannes *de silencio* points out a number of times, Abraham must be immoral, if all actions, including those which are religious submission to the divine, can only be assessed on the basis of those universalistic ethics. Quotations above come from Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric* by Johannes *de silencio*, trans. by Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 83, 96, and 109 respectively.

<sup>31</sup> This question arises because there are at least three classical religious perspectives of Abraham one can take from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim scriptures. Scriptural texts related to these perspectives include Hebrews 11: 17-19, Genesis 22: 1-19, and “Those Ranged in Ranks” (Sura 37): 102-113 respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Summary presented with reference to the text of the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), and the English rendering of the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), here Genesis 22: 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> Genesis 22: 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Genesis 22: 5.

<sup>35</sup> Genesis 22: 7-8.

<sup>36</sup> According to John Davenport it is on the basis of this one action verb, “to bind up”, that Jewish scholarship has referred to this passage by the transliterated noun related to that verb, *Akedah*. See his reference to this term as well as to the Jewish

---

scholarship related to Johannes *de silencio*'s interpretation of Abraham's act in John J. Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*" in Edward F. Mooney, ed., *Ethics, Love and Faith in Kierkegaard: Philosophical Engagements* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 198-199. See also the article by Eric Nelson in this issue.

<sup>37</sup> Genesis 22: 9.

<sup>38</sup> Genesis 22: 10-12. Here it should be noted that a shift in the naming of God occurs, moving from the more general term, *elohim*, to the personal name of the tetragrammaton, YHWH or "Yahweh". This change suggests a deepening of relationship between God and Abraham.

<sup>39</sup> Genesis 22: 13. Notably, Abraham in the next verse names the place after this experience as "the LORD will provide" (NIV), or "the LORD will see" (JPS).

<sup>40</sup> Genesis 22: 15-17.

<sup>41</sup> Genesis 22: 18.

<sup>42</sup> The fact that Johannes *de silencio* is selective in his highlighting certain parts of the story and deemphasizing or even overlooking other parts is another root of contention among Kierkegaardian scholars. See how this problem is used to support an argument that Johannes *de silencio* is only promoting ethical religiosity, and nothing more, in Daniel W. Conway, "Abraham's Final Word" in Mooney, ed., *Ethics, Love and Faith in Kierkegaard*, 175-195.

<sup>43</sup> This lack of emphasis on the promises does not mean that Johannes *de silencio* denies that there is a hope in Abraham's faith that God will in fact provide an answer to the dilemma. This Davenport refers to as an "eschatological trust" involving an "eschatological resignation". See Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust", 217-223, 227-231.

---

<sup>44</sup> For example, Johannes *de silencio* claims, “Abraham I cannot understand, . . . there is nothing I can learn from him but astonishment. . . . For my part I can well describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them.” *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 48.

<sup>45</sup> Early in the text Johannes *de silencio* confesses, “. . . [W]hen I have to think of Abraham, I am as though annihilated. . . . [E]very moment I am repelled. . . . I strain to get a view of it – that very instant I am paralyzed.” Later he admits, “Whenever I essay to make this movement [of faith], I turn giddy, the very instant I am admiring it absolutely a prodigious dread grips my soul, . . .” While discussing the teleological suspension of the ethical, he intones, “[T]hough Abraham arouses my admiration, he at the same time appalls me.” Quoted from *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 44, 58, and 71 respectively.

<sup>46</sup> So he states, “. . . [T]he paradoxical movement of faith I cannot make (be that a duty or whatever it may be), in spite of the fact that I would do it more than gladly.” Here the ironic character of Johannes *de silencio*’s position is fully manifest. At the end of the section on the teleological suspension of the ethical, he summarizes: “. . . [T]he individual [Abraham] became higher than the universal. This is the paradox which does not permit of mediation. . . . If such is not the position of Abraham, then he is not even a tragic hero but a murderer.” *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 62 and 77 respectively.

<sup>47</sup> After confirming that the story of Abraham’s test as including a teleological suspension of the ethical, Johannes *de silencio* adds, “It is just as inexplicable how [Abraham] got into [the situation of being required to sacrifice Isaac] as it is inexplicable how he remained in it.” Yet having said so, and in ironic contrast to his name, Johannes *de silencio* pours out many words to describe this movement and to



---

reveal the points where his own universalistic ethical standards are unable to decipher the full nature of Abraham's faith. See *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 77.

<sup>48</sup> So he speaks of believing that God is love, but that this belief is very different from the faith of Abraham, which he describes as "much higher". *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 44-45.

<sup>49</sup> Referred to in *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 75-76.

<sup>50</sup> This quote, which glosses the Christian passage in the book of Hebrews mentioned earlier, is found in *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 47. The quotation which follows comes from the same location.

<sup>51</sup> The tragic heroes involve the Greek king Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia, the Jewish judge Jephtha sacrificing his daughter, and Brutus handing down a decision of penal justice against his own son. See *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie, 68-69.

<sup>52</sup> Consult Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*."

<sup>53</sup> Quoting from Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust", 204. The term "eucatastrophe" is borrowed from J. R. R. Tolkien's study of fables, and is explained fully in this same place.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted from Davenport, "Faith as Eschatological Trust", 205.

<sup>55</sup> Reference to both *tian* and *shangdi* occur here because the former is consistently employed by Mengzi in describing Shun's situations, while the latter appears in the ancient Ruist scriptures including the *Shangshu* and *Zhongyong*, as already mentioned above. We assume that these two terms refer to the same supreme deity, and so form the basis for a Ruist form of monotheistic religious life.

<sup>56</sup> One helpful description of the double negation leading to sublation is noted

---

within Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and elaborated by Brinkmann. A kingdom with laws is established, but a criminal acts in opposition to those laws, and so negates them. The first negation is further negated by the apprehending of the criminal and judgment by a court of law, leading to a society which has a more self-conscious and refined understanding of the justifications for the laws being dealt with. Similarly, Magee describes sublation by means of an example in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, where the developments of family, civil society, and the modern state are dialectically related; civil society to some degree cancels the powers of the family, but in the modern state the powers of the family are reinstated within a larger framework that includes both family structures and civil society. Consult, Klaus Brinkmann, "The Dialectic of the Inverted World", pp. 129-131, and Glenn Alexander Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 238. For an example of the use of *Aufhebung* in literary criticism, consult Jennifer Anne Bates, *Hegel and Shakespeare on Moral Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Consult Liu Qingping, "Confucianism and Corruption".

<sup>58</sup> It is precisely here that we see parallels with Abraham's faith in YHWH, his infinite resignation, and the final result of receiving his son, Isaac, back from the precipice of death, accompanied by the profound lesson that prohibits child sacrifices from ever occurring again under any understanding of divine sanction.

<sup>59</sup> See an account of the post-secular openness and its limits in certain circles within Lauren F. Pfister, "Post-Secularity within Contemporary Chinese Philosophical Contexts", *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* Vol. 39: No. 1 (March 2012): 121-138.

<sup>60</sup> An earlier rendering of the Bamboo Annals with a critical interpretation appears in Legge, CC3, 108-183. An updated study of these matters can be found in the

---

Chinese text by Shao Dongfang 邵東方 entitled *Zhushu Jinian Yanjiu Lungao* 竹書  
紀年研究論稿 (Critical Reflections on Current Debates about **The Bamboo Annals**)  
(Taipei: Ariti Press, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> See Whalen Lai, “Unmasking the Filial Sage-King Shun: Oedipus at Anyang.”