

# FACING THREATS TO EARTHLY FELICITY

## A Reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay offers a close reading of *Fear and Trembling* against the backdrop of what the author thinks are weaknesses in how the work has been interpreted by others. Some read the text allegorically, as containing a distinctively Christian message about Pauline soteriology. Others read it anagogically, with an emphasis on the moral psychology of Abraham as a human character. In partial disagreement with each, the present essay assembles and interprets the textual evidence around the threat to human happiness posed by our problematic reliance on what Aristotle calls external goods.

KEY WORDS: *Kierkegaard*, "*Fear and Trembling*," *religious ethics*, *faith*, *courage*

WITH THE RECENT PUBLICATION OF *Kierkegaard and "Fear and Trembling"* in the Routledge guidebook series, John Lippitt has given the diverse commentary on this pseudonymous masterpiece an impressive coordinated treatment. Following Ronald Green and Stephen Mulhall, Lippitt himself favors a Christian allegorical reading (Lippitt 2003). As a general message about Pauline soteriology, however, this interpretation is insensitive to the particulars of the binding of Isaac and how Johannes de Silentio describes and relates these particulars to other details, including the theme of sin itself finally announced in the penultimate section of the book. As a result, I prefer interpretations that focus on the moral psychology of Abraham as a human character. Nevertheless, such treatments have notorious difficulty relating the Eulogy and Preliminary Expectoration to the stark disjunct Problemas I and II pose between ethics and faith in the forms of a "teleological suspension of the ethical" and "absolute duty to God." To address these interpretive gaps, my own view is that *Fear and Trembling* is about the common challenge of love and loss, and that Abraham is extraordinary in facing ordinary threats to earthly felicity. His courage in this regard is what is so admirable and appalling, suspending him above reasonable views of human flourishing. On this reading, the story is *not* about a religious legitimation of child sacrifice, an assumption that drives sympathetic

readers to either explain Abraham's position as utterly unique, or posit an allegorical subtext (see Quinn 1990; Green 1993; and Lee 2000). To be clear, while Genesis 22 itself has clearly inspired such interpretations, they are of less particular help with *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Eulogy and Preliminary Expectoration

Johannes de Silentio seems aware of two characteristic responses to the binding of Isaac: naïve, unreflective acceptance and knee-jerk offense. Each of these reactions are inappropriately distracted, one by the knife and the other by the happy outcome. Focusing on the outcome fosters pious but Sunday-schoolish sentiments, while focusing on the knife confirms good old-fashioned moral humanism. More important is what each response assumes about Abraham along the way. The first response assumes Abraham does not really believe he will have to sacrifice Isaac. God will not finally demand this, as the end of the story confirms. The second response assumes Abraham really does believe he will have to sacrifice Isaac, that this is a foregone conclusion, and since he apparently accepts this, the fact that God stays his hand does not mitigate his willing criminality. In contrast, de Silentio claims that Abraham's belief is more complex, indeed paradoxical.

During all this time he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac. No doubt he was surprised at the outcome, but through a double-movement he had attained his first condition, and therefore he received Isaac more joyfully than the first time. Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago [Kierkegaard 1983, 35–36].

In due course, I must address what “human calculation” and “first condition” refer to and in what sense Abraham was “no doubt surprised.” For now, de Silentio clearly thinks that Abraham *both* believes that he will have to give up Isaac *and* that he will not. The divine command is correspondingly paradoxical: God *both* commands Abraham to give Isaac up *and* to fully love Isaac, explicitly promising him earthly felicity on the basis of this singular investment.

<sup>1</sup> When referring directly to biblical texts, I use the NRSV.

How should we evaluate someone who holds such opposing beliefs? Initially, we cannot tell the difference between madness and heroism, or how they might be related. The analogue de Silentio repeatedly draws between faith and courage is illuminating. "I am not unfamiliar," he writes, "with the hardships and dangers of life. I fear them not and approach them confidently . . . [But] my courage is still not the courage of faith and not something to be compared with it" (Kierkegaard 1983, 33–34). Considering this parallel generally, when I go to battle I believe I am under considerable threat, yet I also believe it is possible I will live through it. This takes courage. If I believe my death is a foregone conclusion, I will probably despair, or lose my mind. If I believe that the threat is not real, that living is a foregone conclusion, then my courage remains untested, a trivial thing, easy. Put differently, to love one's life is easy when there is no threat to it. Conversely, if the threat is so great that I simply give up, and just stop caring whether I live or die, and then I make it through, my taste for life may have become permanently drained, which is precisely the option de Silentio imagines for himself. If we take this a step further and apply this to sending a beloved into battle, where the center of gravity is not one's own life, but that of another, the question becomes, will I continue to love or despair, hold on to or renounce my beloved? The inner structure of courage/despair plausibly remains the same.

Typically, the threat one faces with courage is external; but what shall we make of Abraham's willingness to actually sacrifice Isaac *himself*? "Many a father has lost his child, but then it was God, the unchangeable, inscrutable will of the Almighty, it was his hand that took it. Not so with Abraham! A harder test was reserved for him, and Isaac's fate was placed, along with the knife, in Abraham's hand" (Kierkegaard 1983, 21–22). Abraham is so courageously prepared to face threats to his happiness that he makes ready to accept his son's death by his own hand. This is a crucial part of the story because it forces the issue by rendering the possibility of loss especially clear and present. For in going this far, Abraham must believe the threat is particularly real. Still, Abraham need not think there is a final threat to his son, his happiness. Why not? Because a gap remains, ahead of time, when the outcome remains uncertain; it remains uncertain whether he will literally have to render the outcome actual by his own hands. And even if he does, he believes that even this outcome does not settle the matter. "In other words, he is saying: But it will not happen, or if it does, the Lord will give me a new Isaac, that is, by virtue of the absurd" (Kierkegaard 1983, 115). Furthermore, Abraham *must* believe something like this if he is to hold God to his promise of earthly felicity. Here it is difficult not to be distracted by the knife. It is raised, no question about it; but de Silentio claims that the interior structure of Abraham's dual belief suspends his desire and obligation to love Isaac without thereby canceling that same desire and

obligation. That is, he remains emotionally prepared for and invested in receiving Isaac back.

Commentators often take pains to get around the apparent incoherence in Abraham's epistemic structure, again, by highlighting either the knife or the outcome. Andrew Cross proposes that Abraham really only believes Isaac must die, by his own hand, without recourse. On this view, faith cannot include a belief that God might miraculously restore Isaac to his father's bosom; otherwise, his willingness would thereby become unheroic. "Such an Abraham would merely be going through certain motions, calling God's bluff as it were" (Cross 1999, 234). Nevertheless, Cross suggests that from a purely "practical" point of view, Abraham acts as if all this does not finally threaten his earthly felicity. The problem is that, on this reading, we witness "a person whose beliefs have become detached from his attitudes and actions in the starkest possible way," which would surely not befit a hero, if that is what Abraham is supposed to be (Cross 1999, 246). Furthermore, a more global incoherence is thereby reintroduced, namely, that the whole ordeal really is over a literal sacrifice.

However, it would be a mistake to throw all the light on Abraham's belief that the sacrifice will be finally suspended. Other readers take this path, identifying Abraham's heroism with a unique confidence in the special relationship between Abraham and his God. C. Stephen Evans, for instance, writes that this "trust expresses itself cognitively in an interpretive framework by which he concludes, all appearances to the contrary, that this act really is the right thing to do in this particular case," or that he would "nevertheless receive Isaac back." But then Evans offers the comparison "with the confidence of a knife-thrower's assistant in the accuracy of the knife-thrower's aim" (Evans 1981, 145). The weakness in this interpretation is that suddenly the knife is taken out of Abraham's hand. And the problem with this is that we miss the whole point of why Abraham ought to be willing to throw the knife himself, and not with the aim of barely missing. The threat must be real, and must appear as such. Evans's clear intention is to describe the distinctive content of religious faith, irreducible to, but finally consonant with, ethical norms. But to do so, contra Cross, he favors significantly trimming the belief that Isaac must be sacrificed.

If we grant that the complex, paradoxical point of view de Silentio attributes to Abraham releases him from the straightforward charge of willing criminality, readers still want to know what positive virtue there could be in being so starkly prepared. The major theme here is "infinite resignation." *Fear and Trembling* supposes that the value and meaning of our lives crucially depends on what Aristotle called external goods, that "we do not altogether have the character of happiness if we look utterly repulsive or are ill-born, solitary, or childless; and we have it even

less, presumably, if our children or friends are totally bad, or were good but have died" (Aristotle 1999/1099b, 1–5). As I will elaborate later, de Silentio adds to this list the need for forgiveness, our reliance on which poses a particularly salient threat to personal integrity. In any case, our dependence unfolds a problem. These goods are beyond our control; they may be inaccessible or lost. Even so, they are also either sources or evident preconditions of moral delight. How much should our happiness rely on them? Realistically, how much can we—or should we—invest in them? In Martha Nussbaum's phrase, should we arm ourselves against the fragility of goodness?

With this problem in mind, de Silentio imagines a young man who, falling in love with a princess, realizes his love cannot be actualized. He states the lad "has grasped the deep secret that in loving another person one ought to be sufficient to oneself" and, understanding this, must renounce the finite terms of earthly felicity and, in pain, reconcile himself to existence. This does not mean that he simply gives up his love, for to do so would be to deny "the whole substance of his life and the meaning of actuality" (Kierkegaard 1983, 43). Rather, the singular desire "would become for him the expression of an eternal love, would assume a religious character, would be transformed into a love of the eternal being, which true enough denied the fulfillment but nevertheless did reconcile him once more in the eternal consciousness of its validity in an eternal form that no actuality can take away from him" (Kierkegaard 1983, 43–44). Sublimating in this way, the young man protects himself and achieves a clear equanimity without which his investment is too unstable, his happiness too fragile. "Infinite resignation is that shirt mentioned in the old legend. The thread is spun with tears, bleached with tears; the shirt is sewn in tears—but then it also gives protection better than iron or steel" (Kierkegaard 1983, 45).

However, it is vital that resignation not be the final movement. Resignation must *not* be performed in such a way that "the rich brewer's widow is just as good," or, presumably worse, than the brew itself (Kierkegaard 1983, 42). Paradoxically, the swain must believe, must remain prepared to get the girl. "To get the princess this way, to live happily with her day after day . . . to live happily every moment this way by virtue of the absurd, every moment to see the sword hanging over the beloved's head, and yet not to find rest in the pain of resignation but to find joy by virtue of the absurd—this is wonderful" (Kierkegaard 1983, 50). That is the full, dual-movement of faith. In more general terms:

He drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher, because his remaining in

finitude would have no trace of a timorous, anxious routine, and yet he has this security that makes him delight in it as if finitude were the surest thing of all [Kierkegaard 1983, 40].

In short, resignation is necessary in order to protect and ensure a sense of meaning and agency in human life against the throes of fate. But resignation must be closely tied with a real will to invest in what is significantly beyond our control. The result is a complex form of self-sufficiency, a mature and educated awareness of our fragility, in contrast to either an emotionally reckless naïveté or an iron-willed, self-enclosed immunity.

One cannot help but notice that in this analysis of the young man there is no mention of a divine requirement comparable to that in Abraham's case. The call for resignation comes about from within the drama of love and loss itself, and not in response to a divine command. If we recall that many a father has lost a child due to the inscrutable will of God, but that Isaac's fate was placed, along with the knife, in Abraham's hand, this contrast suggests Abraham is heroic in responding ahead of time, by being actively prepared. But what if explicit divine agency drops out of the equation? That is, if God does not demand this, does life, does fate? The implicit answer seems affirmative. Assuming this, to the degree that earthly felicity depends on a schedule of goods beyond our control, life may present each of us with a test similar to Abraham's. Abraham's ordeal, then, is not dissimilar to facing a terminal illness, or death generally, one's own or that of a beloved. In the words of Heidegger, death is the "indefinite certainty" we all must somehow face (Heidegger 1962, 310).<sup>2</sup> Ordinarily we might not think of this as a process of undespairing, though willful sacrifice as we contend with the relatively uncertain inevitability of loss; but to the degree that human life is a battle in which our lives and loves are regularly threatened, then existence presents each of us with a similarly paradoxical task. To live authentically takes courage/faith. We must be armed with and protected by resignation, we must ourselves raise the knife, but we must not despairingly resign ourselves "ahead of time."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Notably, for de Silentio, contending with another's death, rather than my own, is the more fundamental measure of authentic selfhood.

<sup>3</sup> Relevantly, de Silentio claims: "It is essential that it not be a unilateral result of a *dira necessitas* [cruel constraint of necessity], and the more this is present, the more doubtful it always is that the movement is normal. Thus, if one believes that cold, barren necessity must necessarily be present, then one is declaring thereby that no one can experience death before one actually dies, which to me seems to be crass materialism" (Kierkegaard 1983, 46). One might also wonder about the possible differences between faith and courage. As far as I can tell, de Silentio simply evokes the structure of this particular virtue to describe what it means to flourish in a very different kind of battle.

Unsurprisingly, de Silentio finds this both admirable and appalling (Kierkegaard 1983, 60). Who would not, since the view is that human life essentially consists in remaining young in one's love and hope for the future, knowing full well, and clearly, that all things are born to die? Not that understanding what de Silentio understands, or recognizing this as a common human problem, resolves the matter. On the contrary, the text simply presses the existential question: is Abrahamic faith great, or merely mad; and if mad, is it the "supreme passion, the holy, pure, and humble expression for the divine madness that was admired by the pagans" and which "disdains the terrifying battle with the raging elements and . . . forces of creation?" (Kierkegaard 1983, 23).

In an attempt to sort through this complexity commentators here again tend to soften, and therefore misrepresent, the paradoxical movement of faith, pitting the virtues of one movement against the vices associated with the other. Edward Mooney, for example, defends the virtue of resignation by contrasting it with a proprietary model of investment.

I may enjoy and warmly anticipate the appearance of a sparrow at my feeder. Yet I would claim no rights over this object of my enjoyment. The matter of its life and death is something over which I have no claim. Of course, I would feel indignant were someone maliciously to injure it. But in the course of things, the sparrow will go its way. Meanwhile, I will adjust myself to its goings and comings [Mooney 1991, 53].

Mooney is correct that we must somehow adjust ourselves to what is significantly beyond our control, and in such a way that real care is nevertheless a component of this process. The problem with his analogy is that the "selfless care" one can imagine in regard to a sparrow is not so easily figured when we turn to Isaac as a particular. In regard to a human beloved, such selfless care would tend toward carelessness. Furthermore, de Silentio assumes that Abraham's love for his son is perfectly legitimate in its own right, and that the point of resignation does not address a defect in his parental devotion. Still less does the call for resignation address a defect in the valued object, as if the goal were to renounce a partial good in order to affirm a more complete one.

Ronald Hall levels a similar criticism against Mooney, but softens the paradox in the other direction. Emphasizing how Abraham's faith is specifically "for this life," and therefore assumes and implies a powerful investment in finite particulars, he can only think of resignation as a form of despair. Faith proper thus includes resignation only as itself renounced, as an "annulled possibility" (Hall 2000, 26, 39). The reason Hall takes this track is because he exclusively associates resignation with inhumanely stoic, other-worldly forms of life; but this association blinds him to the virtue de Silentio clearly designates by resignation

as a positive inner activity, however incomplete as only one dimension of faith proper.

Evidently, we can associate virtues *and* vices with *both* movements internal to faith. Infinite resignation can result in stoic self-inclosure; but it is also the precondition of a mature moral outlook. De Silentio points this out by contrasting faith with a “childlike naïveté and innocence,” an “assurance” that “does not dare, in the pain of resignation, to look the impossibility in the eye” (Kierkegaard 1983, 47). In facing impossibility squarely, resignation must be real, neither feigned, nor calculated, and still less immediately annulled. Again, Abraham fully faced the impossibility of his love, dramatically represented by having the knife placed in his own hand. His resignation was real, yet this did not cancel his equally dramatic investment in Isaac’s well being. In terms of the second movement of faith proper, “believing in virtue of the absurd” can result in a reckless, ill-informed, or self-deceived point of view; but it can also heroically orient one toward a miraculous outcome. As part of a mature moral outlook, de Silentio hints that such an orientation is a precondition for even recognizing, and therefore taking delight in, everyday miracles when they do happen to occur. In one of his more amusing characterizations of the knight of faith, de Silentio has him think

that his wife surely will have a special hot meal for him when he comes home—for example, roast lamb’s head with vegetables. If he meets a kindred soul, he would go on talking all the way to Østerport about this delicacy with a passion befitting a restaurant operator. It so happens that he does not have four shillings to his name, and yet he firmly believes that his wife has this delectable meal waiting for him. If she has, to see him eat would be the envy of the elite and an inspiration to the common man, for his appetite is keener than Esau’s. His wife does not have it—curiously enough, he is just the same [Kierkegaard 1983, 39–40].

Although such a knight is far from Mount Moriah, it would be a mistake to brush him off as comparatively benign. On the one hand, we might consider the poor man’s attitudes and expectations dangerously out of touch with reality. On the other hand, the clear implication is that a life of one-sided resignation colors all there is to celebrate, not only if, but actually when, a great thing comes about.

I have argued that life, apart from an explicit divine command, presents each of us with a test similar to Abraham’s. However, does not Abraham’s specifically religious calling provide him with a special guarantee, not only an explicit requirement, but an explicit promise? Do religious presuppositions make the battle less terrifying? Is there less at stake, or more? Does the courage of faith require a divine guarantee lest the soldier suffer a motivation crisis? In partial response, de Silentio makes two relevant claims. First, with very little analysis, and



no explanation, he simply asserts that “only the one who was in anxiety finds rest, that only the one who descends into the lower world rescues the beloved, that only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac” (Kierkegaard 1983, 28). This sounds as if a divine promise does not put Abraham in a special position *vis-à-vis* the common human lot by providing what the rest of us might think of as a sound, reliable guarantee. The happiness of the outcome is clearly a function of squarely facing its uncertainty. Moreover, if one “deludes himself into thinking he may be moved to have faith by pondering the outcome of that story, he cheats himself and cheats God out of the first movement of faith—he wants to suck worldly wisdom out of the paradox” (Kierkegaard 1983, 36). Second, de Silentio says that part of what makes him admirable is how Abraham, in turn, “tempts God” by boldly holding him to his promise of Isaac as a finite particular. This seizes de Silentio with “great anxiety,” since for a mere human to bind God in this way seems brash (Kierkegaard 1983, 48). Putting these two claims together, believing that God will make good on one’s particular investment is arguably an especially intimate and personalized, but no less difficult version of thinking the same thing of “life” more generally.<sup>4</sup>

To say that *Fear and Trembling* invites us to think of Abraham as exemplifying an especially intimate and personalized, but no less difficult version of a common human task fits with Alastair Hannay’s helpful suggestion that Kierkegaard proposes specifically religious solutions to universal spiritual agonies rather than dogmatically presupposing them (Hannay 1984). I find it important to stress, however, that to cite an especially unique trust and intimacy between Abraham and his God, as a way of explaining his faith, detracts from the central relevance of the text as a whole. Readings that do so find it difficult to coordinate de Silentio’s clear assumption that Abraham is both great and to be imitated (Lee 2000).

## 2. Problema I and II

With the foregoing interpretive grid as a backdrop, we can now turn to the stark disjunct between faith and ethics posed by Problema I and II in the form of a “teleological suspension of the ethical” and “absolute duty to God” (Kierkegaard 1983, 54, 68). What can my interpretation offer to explain why de Silentio thinks Abraham is suspended above the ethical point of view, and to that extent unreasonable, solitary, and mute, yet heroically justified? Let us begin with his comparison to the tragic heroes Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus. Each of them must contend

<sup>4</sup> In contrast, Andrew Cross argues that Abraham’s theism actually counts against de Silentio’s analysis of faith (Cross 1999).

with a similar loss. However, their resignation is mediated, that is, rendered meaningful in the larger context of a social good. Their sacrifice, and the attendant threat to their felicity, while real, and tragic, does not bring with it the additional, qualitative threat of meaninglessness. They enjoy a shared network of collective aims through which their suffering can be explained, not just to others, but also to themselves. While their own feelings and expectations about life involve tremendous loss, their narratives include significant comfort. In contrast, it “is not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of the state that Abraham does it; it is not to appease the angry gods. If it were a matter of the deity’s being angry, then he was, after all, angry only with Abraham, and Abraham’s act is totally unrelated to the universal, is a purely private endeavor” (Kierkegaard 1983, 59). In comparison to the tragic heroes, Abraham is like one who must sacrifice a child for the sake of a battle which is itself pointless. His sense of loss is thus an entirely private burden, there being no collective purpose preserved by it. On this reading, Abraham’s “justification” must not be understood as an ethically arbitrary, though religiously sanctioned, manslaughter. Rather, his whole view of life is considered justified against what it would be reasonable to expect from a world in which particular losses are not teleologically, and therefore meaningfully, woven into a larger moral and emotional fabric. Furthermore, we must add that many of our most crucial losses, in fact, *cannot* be so articulated. Our experience includes much that is “incommensurable in a human life” (Kierkegaard 1983, 68). To this degree, only an appalling, unreasonable view of life would maintain and insist upon the integrity of earthly happiness in the dark of such pointless loss.

To illustrate, recall the scenario of the young lad and his princess. There we find that a clear option in the face of unhappy love is to diversify and trivialize one’s moral attachments and commitments, to act “as shrewdly in life as the financiers who put their resources into widely diversified investments in order to gain on one if they lose on another” (Kierkegaard 1983, 43). This is the strategy of the benchwarmers, the frogs in the swamp of life, the bourgeois philistines who are likely to react to *Romeo and Juliet* by saying, “what’s the big deal; there are other fish in the sea” (Kierkegaard 1983, 39, 41). Clearly, these believe it unreasonable, unjustified for the lad to maintain his love rather than settle for the rich brewer’s widow. Since some loss is inevitable, and much of it significant, given the “raging elements and forces of creation,” the overwhelming temptation will be to hedge our bets (Kierkegaard 1983, 23). What is therefore admirable, though unreasonable, about Abraham is that he does not cave into this normal, sagacious point of view. Stated from the other end, the benchwarmers, frogs, and philistines have nothing particularly great to sacrifice, since so little on their horizon seems worth it. Abraham, in contrast, has put all his eggs in one basket; and

the more significant and irreplaceable is one's earthly good, the more one must be prepared to sacrifice it.

The person who is able to face this ordeal will undoubtedly relate to the common, meaningful network of earthly life in a teleologically suspended manner. The knight of faith will fully identify with this meaningful network, to the point of bearing a "striking resemblance to bourgeois philistinism," and yet his inner life can neither merge with nor be read through that identity (Kierkegaard 1983, 38).

He knows that it is beautiful and beneficial to be the single individual who translates himself in the universal, the one who, so to speak, personally produces a trim, clean, and as far as possible, faultless edition of himself, readable by all . . . . But he also knows that up higher there winds a lonesome trail, steep and narrow; he knows it is dreadful to be born solitary outside of the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveler. He knows very well where he is and how he relates to men [Kierkegaard 1983, 76].

In other words, the knight is aware of no recognizable form in which the passion of faith can adequately express itself, not because there is so little worth loving, nor because his love is defective or lacking, but because there is no way to neatly coordinate his deep attachments with what is reasonable to expect. This is threatening to ordinary views of life in virtue of the implicit claim about how our earthly *telos* is fundamentally incomplete, full of reversals and uncertainties with which we must paradoxically contend in order to achieve authentic selfhood. The knight realizes human existence does not "round itself off as a perfect, self-contained sphere" (Kierkegaard 1983, 68). By investing oneself with the aim of complete and integrated finite wholeness, one is thereby threatened by disappointment. Yet the knight of faith refuses to lower his expectations and become either resigned or less loving. The knight fully invests in earthly felicity, and yet with the enormity and specificity of his love, remains suspended above it, a great offense to reasonable views of life, but views which fail to appreciate both why one should, and how one can, protect oneself with resignation *while* counting on a rich, meaningful earthly existence.

How might this interpretation get filled out in relation to the formulation from Problema II, in which the knight of faith "determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal?" (Kierkegaard 1983, 70). Here de Silentio pits the love of God against that of the neighbor and then clarifies that "it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated; rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, such as, for example, that love of God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor—an expression opposite

to that which, ethically speaking, is duty” (Kierkegaard 1983, 70). Recall that the young swain, in resignation, transforms his love for the princess into a love of the divine being, thereby gaining peace and rest, a sad but heroic immunity to fragile finite goods; and yet his religious sublimation must not amount to despair. He must remain invested, really believe his love for the princess is an integral part of the human drama. From this we can generalize and say that loving God must be closely tied to a tangible confidence in the created order through which the meaning of our lives is visible in the figure of the neighbor. Once again, we stand before a paradox, with attendant virtues and vices that must be existentially sorted out. It is just as much a mistake to make the Augustinian move to attach ourselves solely to what cannot fail us as it is to diversify or trivialize our investments (Augustine 1991, 4.3.6–4.10.15). Both of these are strategies for rendering ourselves immune to loss and betray a fundamental rejection of the human condition. Properly loving God, determining our relation to the universal by way of our relation to the absolute, manifests itself in developing our attachments to finite goods in a properly resigned, but richly invested manner.

Understanding Abraham as someone who faces the paradoxical moral ordeal in the way I have characterized it helps us interpret a cryptic interlocution de Silentio offers to illustrate what makes our hero a “single individual” above the universal.

What should Abraham have done, for instance? If he had said to someone: I love Isaac more than anything in the world and that is why it is so hard for me to sacrifice him—the other person would have shaken his head and said: Why sacrifice him, then? Or, if the other person had been smart, he probably would have seen through Abraham and perceived that he was manifesting feelings that glaringly contradicted his action [Kierkegaard 1983, 70].

What the imagined interlocutor does not understand, I would suggest, is the enormity of Abraham’s love, and the problem this poses as both necessary and dangerous, given the overall fragility of a meaningful human life. Far more sensible—more realistic, one might say, more universalizable—would be for him to hold on loosely without letting go.

Considering Abraham’s existential position in this way helps clarify more broadly how *Fear and Trembling* is and is not “about ethics,” whether Kantian or Hegelian. First, one can avoid claiming Abrahamic faith simply circumvents Kantian duties, since so much in the text suggests the story is not about God asking Abraham to prove his allegiance by literally breaking the law. Rather, the supra-ethical command represents the more ordinary terror of contending with the fragility of finite goods and our problematic reliance on them. On the other hand, if

the text is supposed to be a critique of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, the "social morality" under attack in this case is not a triumphal or complacent Prussian *Recht*, but a particular beloved with a face and name: Isaac. Still, it is more plausible to evoke Hegelian rather than Kantian universals insofar as the customs and mores of a people articulate reasonable expectations of what it means to love and invest in those particulars (see Westphal 1981; Dooley 2001). "Hegelian" would then signify either the benchwarmers, swamp frogs, and bourgeois philistines or the social aims of a particular cultural milieu. If the latter, the comfort Agamemnon enjoys in contrast to Abraham is dubious insofar as the specific manner of understanding and protecting the honor of Greek women is itself a suspect justification for war. In other words, perhaps Iphigenia's death *is* pointless, and the broader social narrative in which her father makes sense of it a moral-psychological delusion.<sup>5</sup> In that light, Abraham would be facing the limitations of ethical flourishing in a way the tragic hero does not, since Agamemnon, were he to see the Trojan war as pointless, would presumably have no other reason to carry through with his sacrifice.

Even so, does the interpretive circumvention of literal sacrifice not diminish the terror and anguish de Silentio is intent upon highlighting? I have argued that bracketing the outcome, and attending to Abraham's beliefs and attitudes *in medias res*, saves Abraham from a troubling breach of ethical humanism. However, that is fully consonant with "fear and trembling," for the relevant anxiety (and faith) is already captured in the *binding* of Isaac. It would be a mistake to relax, relieved that, *all along*, the story implied no violence. For the mere binding of Isaac clearly appears violent, and not because the cords must have been tightly wound. Freud, for instance, points out how the grieving process, when it turns south into melancholia, ends in self-contempt (Freud 1981). The evidence suggests that such self-contempt is an internalized hatred for a beloved or ideal that has somehow failed us, or that we must relinquish against our deepest wish. Interestingly, Freud can only imagine a healthy resolution to melancholia in the form of either simple withdrawal or fruitless exhaustion.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, he is not far from de Silentio, who certainly understands the faithful alternative, but cannot existentially imagine it for himself. "For my part, I presumably can describe the movements

<sup>5</sup> In a more recent article, C. Stephen Evans's assessment of the tension between faith and ethics bears a family resemblance to my own (Evans 1993). But along with Ronald Green, Evans imports a Pauline meditation on sin to interpret Abraham's struggle.

<sup>6</sup> De Silentio's references to a mother weaning a child of her breast supports how he thinks of Abraham's narrative in terms of the common human drama of love and loss, which begins early on in life, and flowers with a complex form of self-sufficiency (Kierkegaard 1983, 11–14).

of faith, but I cannot make them” (Kierkegaard 1983, 37).<sup>7</sup> In any case, the danger inherent to the psychic process need not be particularly unconscious or contemptuous. In response to an unfaithful, but repentant lover, it might be all I can reasonably do to achieve a clear, unattached disregard—which would, indeed, cut like a knife. Taking *Fear and Trembling* seriously is thus to entertain how such ordinary actions might be either holy or murderous.

Here one might raise a question about psychological realism: does Abrahamic faith pose disturbing Herculean requirements too distressing for the human spirit? De Silentio’s own view is that when understood honestly, faith will not be ventured lightly. Indeed, he assumes many of his readers, far from living a rich life without faith, have enough to do simply loving as Abraham loved. Most people, so thoroughly immersed in triviality, do not recognize the value of intense, evaluative, but problematic emotional investments. “On this point alone one could talk for several Sundays—after all, one does not need to be in a great hurry” (Kierkegaard 1983, 31). Hence, to simply love as Abraham loved, to recognize in some concrete particular the focused meaning of one’s life, would be enough of a task. By implication, grief and melancholia, however natural, unresolved, or faithless, already signify a high degree of greatness, and one not admired even by all pagans.<sup>8</sup>

De Silentio does alert us, however, to how such loving will introduce vulnerabilities rather unimaginable to the benchwarmers, frogs, and philistines. Therefore it would be good to count the cost, not in order to unduly protect oneself, but in order to honestly face the risk, without sagacity. Still, at his least sensitive, de Silentio writes:

All those travesties of faith—the wretched, lukewarm lethargy that thinks: There’s no urgency, there’s no use in grieving beforehand; the despicable hope that says: One just can’t know what will happen, it could just possibly be—those travesties are native to the paltriness of life, and infinite resignation has already infinitely disdained them [Kierkegaard 1983, 37].

<sup>7</sup> There is considerable debate over what exactly de Silentio claims to know, given his lack of faith, and whether we should attribute the supposed unreasonableness of faith to the pseudonymous persona or the phenomena under scrutiny. My own view is that the relationship between cognitive, reflective analysis and lived, existential knowledge is surely complex, and de Silentio appropriately does not draw a sharp distinction. He clearly understands Abraham’s position enough to distinguish it from the comparative failures recounted in the Exordium. Evidently, de Silentio would not want us to take at face value the fact that he is simply without faith, and therefore cannot understand it, any more than he would want us to draw authoritative conclusions about it from one who did claim to have it. The “autobiographical” pronouncements should thus be read as ironic, indirect, and provocative, leaving the reader to existentially settle how unreasonable faith actually is for oneself (Kierkegaard 1983, 32–33, 36–37, 47–48).

<sup>8</sup> A moving case study of such a pagan is the character of Rayber in Flannery O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear it Away*.

This is a heavy charge to level at the many of us who no doubt must and do honestly face the threats regularly posed by our experience. That said, the overall mood of the text suggests faith is an art, and its twofold requirement a regulative rather than constitutive ideal. By this I mean that faith is neither an all-or-nothing phenomenon nor a transparent standard we may foist on others, say, during a funeral. At that point an intensely individualized drama is already underway, and the appropriate response is surely to keep quiet. The knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher (Kierkegaard 1983, 80). Furthermore, when de Silentio says that he can resign himself all on his own, and that faith proper is beyond his power, this is probably not a mere autobiographical detail (Kierkegaard 1983, 47–52). Arguably he means no one can perform the full movement of faith on his or her own. Faith remains a gift of the gods, a holy passion. In other words, to the degree that one *can* existentially imagine it, it would not appear to be one's own doing. Remaining in love before, through, and beyond loss will be performed, if at all, by virtue of the absurd—that is, as I read it—by virtue of an unusual transformation of our native psychological capacities. That is a claim, understood normatively, one should not bandy about at a bargain price. I take it this is why de Silentio refers to Abraham's faith not only as a form of courage, but *humble* courage (Kierkegaard 1983, 49).

### 3. Problema III

Problema III presents four scenarios which purportedly contrast an aesthetic treatment of silence with that of Abraham's inability to ethically disclose himself to Sarah, Eliezer, and Isaac. This lengthy, penultimate section of the book has been notoriously difficult to coordinate with the rest of the work in terms of both structure and theme, and includes the important reference to sin and repentance which has inspired Christian allegorical readings of the text as a whole. In my view, these stories entertain obstacles that threaten the integrated happiness of the central characters in terms of some external earthly good. The nature of these obstacles and the responses to them differ from both each other and the case of Abraham. Nevertheless, they shed light on the virtue of faith and are to that degree comparable. In short, these narratives outline battles less grave than contending with death, although more significant than the improbable expectation of roast lamb's head with vegetables.<sup>9</sup>

The first scenario is the case of a bridegroom at Delphi, for whom the augurs predict misfortune as a result of his marriage. This seems

<sup>9</sup> The Hong translation includes a supplemental journal entry in which Kierkegaard suggests this very reading of his own pseudonym (Kierkegaard 1983, 258).

to be a borderline case between Agamemnon and Abraham. The personal sacrifice involved is more private; it cannot be explained in terms of a larger social aim, as would be the case if the marriage were interrupted by his being legitimately drafted and possibly killed. Still, the divine counter-order is publicly accessible, the "scene is Greece; an augur's pronouncement is understandable by all" (Kierkegaard 1983, 92). Nevertheless, the will of the gods remains inscrutable. "Is it not dreadful that the love that so often was an exile in life is now deprived of heaven's aid as well?" (Kierkegaard 1983, 89). The threat of pointless unhappiness is thus partially mediated by a common understanding of and sympathy for the groom's private dilemma. In addition, the specific content of the anticipated misfortune remains indeterminate, as is ordinarily the case. We cannot tell, for example, whether his unhappiness could be mollified by other benefits of going through with the marriage, whether his future bride might be implicated in whatever suffering results, or whether she would sympathize with his decision either way. All this suggests a situation that is more ambiguous and the corresponding call for faith less inexplicable.

The case of Sarah and Tobias is more concrete. According to the apocryphal tale, Sarah is barred from nuptial felicity by a demon bent on killing her betrothed on the wedding night. The focus is not on Tobias's courage to face the threat of death, but on Sarah's taking potential joy in Tobias after seven failed attempts. "What faith in God that she would not in the very next moment hate the man to whom she owed everything" (Kierkegaard 1983, 104). What is the issue here? De Silentio evokes the infamously deformed tyrant of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. This comparison suggests that physical deformity blocks the prospect of personal love, but that one must nevertheless believe one can be attractive, by virtue of a particular kind of absurdity. Deformity reasonably makes one unlovable. I could resign myself to that, and presumably must, but doing so initiates an internal drama in which I problematically contend with the value of physical beauty, the role it plays in personal commitments, and what I may realistically expect from them. If I resign myself in such a way that I grow immune to the unforeseen affection of another, or remain skeptical of its very possibility, I will likely mistake eventual love for mere pity. Less obviously, the deformity might become such an object of offense to my own self, I would actually disdain the person who fell in love with me anyway. *Richard III* exemplifies such a twisted state of inner affairs. De Silentio generalizes the problem: "If existence has not provided a person with that which could have made him happy, it is still consoling to know that he could have received it. But what an unfathomable grief to know that no amount of time can chase away, no amount of time can cure—to know that it would be of no help if existence did everything!" (Kierkegaard 1983, 102). Naturally, this example



is compelling only if one does not, in a fit of religious sentimentality, reduce physical beauty to a thing of no worth. However, taking it seriously, as does Aristotle, vividly evokes an array of ordinary threats in the face of which one must “be willing to let oneself be healed when from the very beginning one in all innocence has been botched, from the very beginning has been a damaged specimen of a human being!” (Kierkegaard 1983, 104). On this narrative revision, Sarah displays such courage by relinquishing a deformed physical anonymity to the gaze of a potential lover.

In the fourth scenario, Sarah’s virtue is contrasted with a version of Faust, who has seen through the vicissitudes of life, and is deeply and globally aware of the poor prospects of earthly happiness. As a result, he is able “to rouse men up horrified, to make the world totter under their feet, to split men apart, to make the shriek of alarm sound everywhere” (Kierkegaard 1983, 109). Still, he has a “sympathetic nature, he loves existence,” and remaining silent, “tries as much as possible to walk in step with other men, but what goes on inside himself he consumes and brings himself as a sacrifice for the universal” (Kierkegaard 1983, 109). Holding what he knows about life close to his chest, he refuses to rain on other people’s parades. To that degree, Faust is a hero. But his essential faithlessness is exposed when presented with Margaret, “in all her adorable innocence,” to which de Silentio adds: “since his soul has retained its love for people, he can also very easily fall in love with her” (Kierkegaard 1983, 109–10). However, to invest in this finite particular, to actually love her, would crush his brave, but sympathetically silent skepticism about whether earthly felicity is possible; and the courage to face *this* he lacks.

Placed after the bridegroom at Delphi, the case of the merman and his complex need for forgiveness is of particular interest. This need signals a new and uniquely urgent threat to human happiness, and also involves believing something rather unrealistic. The way de Silentio tells it, the wry merman seduces Agnes and then, confronted with her innocent trust, falls prey to a mixture of genuine love and subsequent guilt. The question is, what must he believe about her capacity for forgiveness if he were to disclose the history of his conquest? The merman’s guilt permeates not only the roots of this particular exchange, at a specific moment in time, but more globally, his entire self-understanding, his whole view of life and love up until that point. He is, after all, a seducer, and the momentous lapse in his case is only the first dawn of moral integrity. This would not be lost on Agnes, were she to find out. As de Silentio puts it, to be saved by Agnes “must not be interpreted to mean that by Agnes’s love he would be saved from becoming a seducer in the future (this is an aesthetic rescue attempt that evades the main point, the continuity in the merman’s life), for in this respect he is saved—he is saved insofar as he

becomes disclosed" (Kierkegaard 1983, 98). Facing the threat of initiating a beloved into the details of a local indiscretion would take courage enough. When we need forgiveness the most, however, such indiscretions are rarely local.

Immediately following this point about how forgiveness must address an entire personal history, de Silentio makes his famous comment about sin "that says more than has been said at any point previously," concluding that "nothing of what has been said here explains Abraham" (Kierkegaard 1983, 98–99). Specifically, with "sin, the single individual is already higher (in the direction of the demonic paradox) than the universal, because it is a contradiction on the part of the universal to want to demand itself from a person who lacks the *conditio sine qua non* [indispensable condition]" (Kierkegaard 1983, 99). In contrast, "Abraham did not become the single individual by way of sin—on the contrary, he was a righteous man, God's chosen one. The analogy to Abraham will not become apparent until after the single individual has been brought to a position where he is capable of fulfilling the universal, and now the paradox repeats itself" (Kierkegaard 1983, 99). Among others, Ronald Green argues that this discussion invites an allegorical reading of *Fear and Trembling* in which Abraham's ordeal prefigures the sacrifice of God's son, clearly echoed in the title's reference to Pauline soteriology (Green 1993, 1998). As indicated, I do not find this particularly illuminating in regard to the details of the text as a whole (Lee 2000, 380–85). However, what sense can we make of it otherwise?

While introducing sin does not "explain" Abraham's case, since his ordeal involves a perfectly legitimate love for Isaac, there is a real analogy between facing threats to physical and spiritual integrity. Thus, looking at the complex need for forgiveness as a specific reliance on a fragile external good does not require an interpretive, allegorical break with the detailed theme of faith and resignation de Silentio draws from Abraham's case. Furthermore, only after we have fully absorbed the complex world of Abraham's inner life can we tell what de Silentio is claiming about the content of working out one's own salvation, even as it is Christ who works in us. That work would refer to our passions having been forged in the furnace of a problematic reliance on earthly goods. This will take grace, in Abraham's case, even though he is described as without sin. As noted above, de Silentio claims human effort will only get you as far as infinite resignation, while the further step of receiving Isaac back in joy is miraculous, a gift of the Gods.

As one might expect, facing the need for forgiveness upon serious moral failure, and having lost the "indispensable condition" of believing one can survive the transparency of love, involves a corresponding effort. "The merman, therefore, cannot belong to Agnes without, after having made the infinite movement of repentance, making one movement more: the movement by virtue of the absurd. He can make the

movement of repentance under his own power, but he also uses absolutely all his power for it and therefore cannot possibly come back under his own power and grasp actuality again" (Kierkegaard 1983, 99). That is, to repent fully, rather than "a little and thinking everything will come out in the wash," is all we can do, while the further step of receiving forgiveness and having one's entire personal history thereby reintegrated seems miraculous (Kierkegaard 1983, 99).

The reason forgiveness appears miraculous, and a belief in it "absurd," is at least threefold. First, the quality of forgiveness is a function of the crime's seriousness. Serious crimes give rise to legitimate demands for justice. The greater the crime, the more mercy is at odds with it. Forgiveness is thus ethically confusing, and many, in fact, are reasonably offended by it. Second, even if forgiveness is not by nature at odds with justice, I might plausibly grow angry with the one I have betrayed, and on whom I depend for forgiveness, similar to Richard's aggravated contest with his own deformity, or Freud's melancholiac. Third, my own belief in forgiveness depends for its realization on the beloved's own faith in it. All these obstacles conspire to turn us around, to drive us outside the world of reasonable expectations in the direction of a "demonic paradox;" and they do so because our dependence on forgiveness is presumably more salient than our need for roast lamb's head or physical charm. Nevertheless, in having one's "indispensable condition" restored through a real belief in the efficacy of forgiveness, "the paradox repeats itself" in relation to other goods and different obstacles (Kierkegaard 1983, 99). Thus, *Fear and Trembling* does announce the Gospel, but in the form of its original question: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?'" (Mark 2:9). It takes courage to count on either, but both are fairly mad—that is, both admirable and appalling.

Finally, the sheer placement of the guilt-stricken merman indicates that de Silentio does not intend his comments about sin to overturn Abraham's case in light of a general kerygmatic proclamation. More plausibly, the list of scenarios suggests an overall contrast between faith and despair. Taken in turn, the examples of the bridegroom, the merman, Sarah, and Faust evoke the difficulty of believing in the prospect of earthly happiness given (a) that in loving we often must choose between rival goods, at considerable personal risk, and balanced against another's interests; (b) we rely on forgiveness to uproot entrenched moral failure; (c) that life engenders people who are deformed or unlovable in some way, through no fault of their own; and (d) the threat each of these pose to our perception of the meaning in human life generally.

That by the end of this list Abraham finally stands opposite a nihilistic Faust rather than the guilt-stricken merman fits with the opening of de Silentio's eulogy on the patriarch:

If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair? If such were the situation, if there were no sacred bond that knit humankind together, if one generation emerged after another like forest foliage, if one generation succeeded another like the singing of birds in the forest, if a generation passed through the world as a ship through the sea, as wind through the desert, an unthinking and unproductive performance, if an eternal oblivion, perpetually hungry, lurked for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrench that away from it—how empty and devoid of consolation life would be! But precisely for that reason it is not so [Kierkegaard 1983, 15].

Faust, it turns out, draws the opposite conclusion. Silent and aloof, like Abraham, his alarming point of view is not evident in what he does believe, but in what he resolutely does not. Thus, consistent with the central character of Abraham, father of many, this contrast throws faith as a common human task into dramatic relief against the backdrop of a detailed set of earthly struggles.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a fine, general treatment of Kierkegaard’s work similar to this specific reading of *Fear and Trembling* see Furtak 2005.

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