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# An Exposition of the Existential-Ethical Meaning of Self-Realization in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*

Ilya Winham

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) invented the term "Existentialism."<sup>74</sup> His most famous work, *Fear and Trembling*, is an important book because it contributes to the ancient philosophical problems of the relationship between reason and faith, ethics and religion, the worldly and the divine. The value of the book lies less in a particular demonstrable prophetic theme than in its presentation of interplaying contradictions between different ways of looking at the world and the self. *Fear and Trembling* continues to haunt us like the spirit and shadows of holy ghosts. Its depiction of hell-bent religious obedience fans the flames of fears rekindled after September 11. Abraham is a bright beacon to all those who knowingly suspend the ethical in an openhearted admission of sin and look to God alone for their salvation. The story of Abraham, of his willingness to take his son's life in obedience to a divine command, has made him the father of faith to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. To others, however, Abraham remains a figure of shock and horror.

The sole subject of *Fear and Trembling* is apparently Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. From the human, the ethical viewpoint, Abraham is a murderer. He runs up against a devilish choice between the ethical duty

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<sup>74</sup> Mary Warnock, *Existentialist Ethics* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1969), p. 2.

not to kill, and a divine command which demands obedience to God's will. The question arises whether there is an absolute duty to God that can suspend ethical obligation. Kierkegaard answers affirmatively. The answer proffered contains multiple levels of meaning that we will uncover in this paper.

Kierkegaard named his book *Fear and Trembling*, as the standard view has it, because the life it describes and praises—the life of the believer—involves the willingness of such an individual to obey a divine calling, but he<sup>75</sup> is never certain what that calling will entail, and whether it is always God, and not a demonic self or the Devil, who calls. My thesis, however, is that Kierkegaard named his book *Fear and Trembling* because the life it describes and praises involves the willingness of the individual to work out his own salvation—to sew his life for himself—in absolute isolation surrounded by objective uncertainty, and yet stubbornly, with fear and trembling, renounce the universal in order to be the particular *and* have the courage to embrace the universal without it defining his essence. I speak not as a biblical scholar, but as a literary critic writing from a philosophical standpoint.

In this paper, "Kierkegaard" will simply be a term for the figure speaking in the literature under discussion, which in reality means that in the case of *Fear and Trembling* the views under discussion are actually those of the pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio (John of Silence). It does not particularly matter that Kierkegaard penned his book under a pseudonym thereby making it reasonable to assume that the

book does not fully reflect his true beliefs. For what we are presently about is ascertaining what Kierkegaard has to say—explicitly and implicitly—about the relationship between reason and faith and the existential-ethical meaning of self-realization in *Fear and Trembling*.

## THE ETHICAL

Kierkegaard makes two principal assumptions about ethics: that “the ethical as such is the universal,”<sup>76</sup> and the universal is higher than the particular (see FT 83-85). Another way of expressing the second assumption is that if ethical duty is absolute, then the universal is the individual’s ethical obligation and telos; the ethical task of the individual is to “be doing something for the universal” (FT 16).

It is unquestionably clear that for Kierkegaard the ethical is what he terms “the universal.” For the purpose of our analysis, it is important to recognize that the universality of moral laws, in principle, renders them comprehensible to all rational beings. In Kierkegaard's words:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal, it applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies at every moment. It rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *telos* [end, purpose] but is itself the *telos* for everything outside, and when that is taken up into it, it has no further to go. (FT 83)

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<sup>75</sup> I use the androcentric terms he/his/him/man/men only to be consistent with the lexicon of those authors I quote, with no intention of excluding women. Indeed, Kierkegaard would not have it otherwise.

<sup>76</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 83. Subsequent citations to this work will be to this edition and will be given in parenthesis as follows: FT 83.

From these words we may safely gather that Kierkegaard minimally regards the ethical as involving the normative, understandable, communicative and universal categories of right and wrong, which neither admit of nor require higher categories of conduct. In Kierkegaard's words, "For if the ethical life is the highest and nothing incommensurable is left over in man, except in the sense of what is evil, i.e. the single individual who is to be expressed in the universal, then one needs no other categories" (FT 84). We may further infer that the ethical is construed as the realm of reason. Thus, as Joseph A. Magno states, "For *qua* universal, the ethical is perforce a function of reason, since the universal as such is reason's object."<sup>77</sup>

Following each *Problemata* is a characterization of "the ethical" and its requirements. We find it repeated that if the ethical is correct, then Abraham is a murderer and unjustified in keeping silent (see FT 95, 108, 135-137). All moral principles point to condemnation. If he had acted ethically, he would have acted as a father, refusing to even contemplate bringing ruin to his beloved son. Read as an ethical treatise, then, Abraham is a sinner. Thus it is surprising and telling that *Fear and Trembling* is empty of analysis of sin and its psychology.

Kierkegaard, however, tells us that Abraham is not a sinner, meaning that somehow he does not violate his ethical duty as a father. Kierkegaard writes that "within its own compass the ethical has several rankings" (FT 86). This leaves open the possibility that Abraham acted

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<sup>77</sup> Joseph A. Magno, "How ethical is Abraham's 'suspension of the ethical'?", *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January 1985, p. 54.

on behalf of a higher expression of the ethical. Indeed, Kierkegaard ruminates on the question of whether the story of Abraham contains a "higher expression of the ethical which might explain his behavior ethically, justify him ethically for suspending the ethical duty to the son, yet without thereby exceeding the ethical's own teleology" (FT 86). Kierkegaard, as we shall see, gives a negative answer to this question. He can see no such higher expression of the *ethical* available to Abraham.

### THE TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL

Ethics must not be the highest possibility of human existence. Kierkegaard suggests that it must be possible for there to be an ethical break or a teleological suspension of the ethical. The difficulty arises in saying just what is involved in such a suspension. There are those who contend that Kierkegaard supplies no ethical warrant or justification for Abraham's act, and so view Abraham's suspension of the ethical as opposing the ethical. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who argue that Kierkegaard shows that there is no incompatibility between Abraham's act and ethics, and so regard Abraham's suspension of the ethical as transcending, not negating, the ethical.

To say that the ethical is teleologically suspended is to say that an act which, from the ethical viewpoint, would be called murder and would be wrong, is from a non-ethical viewpoint—in this case the viewpoint of faith—properly called sacrifice and is justified. In the words of Edmund N. Santurri, "In saying that Abraham suspends the ethical,...[t]he status of that act is to be regarded as *non-ethical*,

metaethically speaking, rather than as *unethical*, normatively speaking."<sup>78</sup> Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac constitutes a "suspension of the ethical" insofar as it can be categorized as non-ethical.

Any defense of Abraham's teleological suspension of the ethical must prove that Abraham's actions do not violate the ethical prohibition of murder. Kierkegaard unquestionably believes that Abraham is not a murderer. Abraham's religious-based duty is so exceptional that it suspends the ethical, and thus his ethical duty not to kill Isaac is overridden. Because this duty is overridden, Abraham would do no wrong if he killed Isaac. Hence, for Kierkegaard, Abraham's situation is not a tragic dilemma because his circumstances do not prevent the fulfillment of two valid ethical claims, since the ethical is suspended altogether. In choosing to obey the divine command, Abraham "has no higher expression of the universal that overrides the universal he transgresses" (FT 89).

Kierkegaard states that praise is to be attached in Abraham's case for reasons that are not moral reasons but reasons that take precedence over moral reasons. Abraham's virtue is a personal rather than a moral one because his sacrifice was, in the main, a private undertaking. That is, Abraham acted simply as a person before God rather than in any special capacity that relates a duty to his actions, and, therefore, he should be praised for having the courage to sew his own destiny. Abraham, *qua* the individual, by this interpretation, is thrust out of the sheltered nest that society provides its constituents. He learns that

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<sup>78</sup> Edmund N. Santurri, "Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in Logical Perspective," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1977, p. 227.

the solitude of the self is an irreducible dimension of human life no matter how completely that self had seemed to be contained in its social sphere. Nevertheless, Abraham's teleology looks uncomfortably forced from the viewpoint of ethics.

## **DIVINE COMMAND ETHICS INTERPRETATION**

Resting between the competing interpretations of Abraham's actions as unethical or supra-ethical is a third interpretive option worth noting—that of a divine command ethic which proffers a wholly positive ethical judgement of Abraham. The idea of divine command morality—that *every* duty is a duty toward God—is discernible in *Fear and Trembling*. Some have argued (Bruce Russell<sup>79</sup>) that Kierkegaard does not intend to depict the ethical as a system of duties that correspond to particular social capacities one embodies in society, i.e. duties Abraham has as a father. Rather, Kierkegaard thinks that moral duties are based on universal principles that are divine commandments.

If God is the author of life and death, it follows that God may give orders to take life with moral impunity. Moreover, should God so choose to take human life, innocent or not, God may choose to do so through human mediation. Hence, God could conceivably command a person—Abraham—to take even innocent human life—Isaac. The person so enjoined would be at once obligated and justified to commit an otherwise heinous act.

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<sup>79</sup> Bruce Russell, "What is Ethical in Fear and Trembling?" *Inquiry*, Volume 18, 1975, pp. 337-43.



Implicit in *Fear and Trembling* is a divine (Christian) ethic that commands “duty to love one’s neighbor” and “to love God” (FT 96). Indeed, Kierkegaard is convinced that God is love: “I am convinced that God is love; this thought has for me a pristine lyrical validity” (FT 63). Abraham is faced with a divine command to love his son and a divine command to sacrifice his son, the former command expresses an ethical duty because it applies to all sons and fathers, the latter an absolute duty because it only applies to Abraham’s particular plight. At first glance these duties clash. On closer inspection, however, Abraham’s teleological suspension of the ethical may be interpreted as a suspension of a lower ethical duty (love your son) by a higher, absolute ethical duty (obey God’s will). This idea can also be expressed by saying that the moral clash that Abraham encounters is not a clash between God’s command and society’s command but between God’s command and God’s command. This viewpoint sees Abraham as taking his orders as an individual from God and involves the extension or application of the ethical rather than an abrogation of it.

This interpretation flies in the face of Kierkegaard’s repeated statements that Abraham’s conduct is totally beyond the pale of ethical justification. Moreover, apart from one passing remark about God’s love in the *Preamble From The Heart* (FT 63), there is no discussion of the divine nature of Abraham’s relationship with God that would render his actions morally intelligible. Instead, all attention is given to the horrific command itself and how it leads Abraham outside of any conceivable realm of ethical justification. Furthermore, Kierkegaard repeatedly affirms that in suspending the ethical, Abraham moved entirely outside

of its sphere. There is no "higher expression whatever of the universal (as the ethical) which can save him" (FT 102). In this light, it is difficult, if not impossible, to construe Abraham as seeking a more nuanced understanding of the ethical.

While we may dispute whether God could ever truly issue such a command, it is certainly possible to understand the nature of the obligation upon Abraham. Such a choice between eternal and earthly happiness, between duty to God and to others, presents a devilish but comprehensible choice.

### **THE FIRST MOVEMENT: INFINITE RESIGNATION**

Kierkegaard repeatedly writes that Abraham acted on faith as opposed to on ethical grounds. For Kierkegaard, to have faith, *true faith*, one must first come to, and pass, the movement of infinite resignation. The movement of infinite resignation is characterized by the willingness to renounce the possibilities and understanding of the finite world—to make a clean break from all external premises and laws (FT 73)—to reconcile oneself with eternal existence and gain “eternal consciousness” (the love of God, see FT 77). In other words, infinite resignation is the process whereby individuals, by their own strength, renounce “the whole of temporality in order to win eternity” (FT 77). Abraham meets this criterion by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, to give up his finite world to gain an absolute relationship with the absolute. This movement, which is logically prior to faith, affords him who makes it an infinite or eternal self, relationship with God, *and* worldly existence.

Thus far we have established that the first movement, infinite resignation, demands that Abraham resign himself to the loss of this world—that he give up Isaac. The second movement, the movement of faith, as we shall see, presupposes the first and involves Abraham's steadfast belief that Isaac, in the end, will not be lost.

## THE SECOND MOVEMENT: FAITH

Kierkegaard portrays Abraham in the full-fledged terror of his encounter with a devilish divine command. The sight of Abraham upon Mt. Moriah would have struck terror in temerity itself if he had not been arrested by an angel. At the moment that Abraham takes "the knife to kill his son" (Genesis 22:11), God rewards his faith by sending an angel who stops the command. "The angel of the Lord said, 'Do not raise your hand against the boy; do not touch him. Now I know that you are a God-fearing man. You have not withheld from me your son, your only son'" (Genesis 22:12-13).

Kierkegaard reveals faith to the reader as a way of life. The concept of "faith" is employed ambiguously in *Fear and Trembling* and we are prone to fall into confused readings; sometimes it is applied to the believer's belief (form), other times it is applied to the believer's relationship to God (content). It is referred to as a passion (FT 95), as a dialectic (FT 66) and as the absurd (FT 67, 76).

Interpreting faith in *Fear and Trembling* involves an exploration of the psychology of faith. One thing, however, is clear about Kierkegaard's discussion of faith: what is important is not outer acts, but

quiet and difficult inner movements of the spirit that pave the way to faith's knight.

The idea that faith involves believing the impossible is connected with the use of the concept "the absurd." Indeed, Kierkegaard tells us repeatedly that Abraham acts "on the strength of the absurd" (FT 65, 67, 85). The concept of the absurd qualifies not the act, or the state of faith, but an essential part of its content. The essential content of Abraham's faith, according to Kierkegaard, was his belief that he would get Isaac back. Therefore, when Kierkegaard says that "faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off" (FT 82), he means that faith involves suspending rationality. Abraham makes the movement of faith *because* what he believes is absurd. One interpretive option is to accept Kierkegaard's characterization and assume that faith can just embrace such absurdity. It is worth quoting Kierkegaard at length on this point:

Faith is just this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified before the latter, not as subordinate but superior, though in such a way, be it noted, that it is the single individual who, having been subordinate to the universal as the particular, now by means of the universal becomes that individual who, as the particular, stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation occurs precisely by virtue of the universal; it is and remains in all eternity a paradox, inaccessible to thought. And yet faith *is* this paradox. (FT 84-85)

The whole point is that to have faith is to give up (infinite resignation) whatever is required of one (ethics) and to believe that one will get it all back—this is precisely the absurd. Hence, Abraham could not only have

believed that God required the sacrifice of Isaac, he also believed that by God's agency he would get Isaac back. This logically implies that he believed that he would not have to sacrifice (kill) Isaac. But this belief can also be called absurd, for Abraham already believed that God had commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, and had therefore no rational reason to expect that he would get Isaac back. Kierkegaard maintains that faith is irreducible to evidence and rationality.

To maintain that faith is irreducible to evidence is to affirm that faith is unverifiable. Faith is, by definition, unsupported by argumentation. Faith is unsupported by argument because its object exceeds reason. Therefore, to purport to demonstrate (explain and justify) one's faith in purely rational terms is either to commit the fallacy of contradiction, or else to reduce an object of faith into an object of reason. However, to disallow, as we must, the reducibility of faith to reason is not to disallow the existence of evidence supportive of faith. It is only to disallow the existence of rational supportive evidence. It is very tempting to infer from this that faith must be a self-contradiction. For are we not saying that it is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of the state of faith? Moreover, does this not amount to saying that to describe someone as having true faith is equivalent to saying that a self-contradictory proposition is true? This is not necessarily the case.

Faith is described as a paradox in many different, but essentially similar, terms:

“the paradox is that he puts himself as the single individual in an absolute relation to the absolute” (FT 90).

"Faith...is this paradox, that interiority is higher than exteriority..."(FT 97).

"The paradox can also be put by saying that there is an absolute duty to God; for in this tie of obligation the individual relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the absolute" (FT 98).

"[A] concealment which has its basis in the single individual's being higher than the universal" (FT 109).

From these words, we see that what is paradoxical is that the individual can make the movement of faith. Hence, we speak of the state of faith itself as a paradox: it is a paradox that the individual has faith, since to have faith involves believing what is absurd or impossible. The concept of paradox is used by Kierkegaard not as a state of affairs in which two contradictory claims are both true, but as a state of affairs in which its truth is difficult, if not impossible, to logically unravel.

To admit the possibility that life can be understood in a religious way is also in part to acknowledge that there can be a direct relationship to God that goes beyond our appreciation of universal obligation and rationality. Kierkegaard insists that if faith is to be a reality, there must be space for the individual beyond the realm of morality. He is concerned to show the inadequacy of any purely rational conception of morality that does not admit faith as a personal relation of the individual to God. Kierkegaard provides a way of conceiving of ethics and ethical meaning as emerging out of particular situations moral agents find themselves in, rather than being imposed on those situations as a derivation from some predetermined, abstract rule, principle, or right.

Through Abraham's experience on Mt. Moriah, we learn that God can transcend the ethical and enter the lives of those who have also

transcended the ethical. Without God, we are told that Abraham is "done for" (FT 108). With God, Abraham the murderer becomes Abraham the knight of faith.

## THE KNIGHT OF FAITH

Only the individual becomes a knight of faith as the individual, "so even if someone were so cowardly and base as to want to be a knight of faith on someone else's responsibility, he would never become one; for only the single individual becomes one, as the single individual, and this is the knight's greatness" (FT 99). A knight of faith does not forfeit the highest thing for human beings (ethics). The knight of faith renounces the finite and wins it back! In the words of Edward F. Mooney, "He gains an eternal love, but *temporal* loves are his as well. He is at home in the eternal, but happy also in the midst of the world."<sup>80</sup> The knight of faith gets back the finite because he believes that "for God all things are possible" (FT 75). Having renounced all claims to Isaac (but not all love for him), the knight of faith is ready to welcome him back. His only hope is to believe on the strength of the absurd that he will get Isaac back.

The task set for the knight of faith is this: "to live joyfully and happily in this way every moment on the strength of the absurd, every moment to see the sword hanging over the loved one's head and yet find, not repose in the pain of resignation, but joy on the strength of the absurd" (FT 79). In Abraham's case, he does not merely see the sword hanging over one he loves, he is asked to wield it, but he has faith that it

is "a two-edged sword, bringing death and salvation" (FT 61). Abraham has faith that Isaac will not be lost.

The knight of faith is required merely to believe what is absurd/irrational. This means that he suspends nothing more than his rationality. He does not, and could not abandon his faculty of reason, for if he did, he could not recognize the substance of his belief. He accepts that God can do what rationality does not admit. This is merely to say that God's actions cannot be predicted by the worldly laws of logic. There is nothing intrinsically absurd or self-contradictory in this general belief. It is both absurd and self-contradictory only from the viewpoint of rationality—this is precisely Kierkegaard's point.

For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the paradigmatic knight of faith, not the man of faith or father of faith but *knight* of faith. The use of the word "knight", instead of other words to convey Abraham's movement of faith, merits attention that few scholars have given it.

Kierkegaard must have been familiar with the novel *Don Quixote*, Cervantes' greatest work and possibly the first modern novel, which is all about a knight. The most illustrious Don Quixote of La Mancha is torn between a drive to do great, one might say heavenly, things, while his squire, Sancho Panza, clings to his master and tries to keep his feet firmly planted on the ground. The character of Don Quixote both supports and challenges our existential reading and interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*.

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<sup>80</sup> Edward F. Mooney, "Understanding Abraham: Care, Faith and the Absurd," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1981), p. 105.



Abraham is like Don Quixote in that the property they share is resistance, as individuals, to all outward pressure (the universal). Neither Abraham nor Don Quixote ever doubts his cause for one moment ("He did not doubt, he did not look in anguish to left or right, he did not challenge heaven with his prayers" (FT 55).) The life of a knight-errant and a knight of faith are both subject to perils and mischance. The knight of faith is free from all universal duty, his law is his faith, its call his courage, heeded solely by (the form of) his relation to God. Similarly, Don Quixote, the paradigmatic knight-errant, is characterized by Cervantes as "free from all jurisdiction, that their law is their sword, their charters their courage, their statutes their own will."<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, what a knight-errant promises he tries to fulfill, "even at the cost of his own life."<sup>82</sup> As faith's knight, Abraham is called to trial, even at the cost of his own son. Don Quixote's motto is steadfastness, Abraham's is faithfulness. Both know independence, and do not find "the law for their [his] actions in someone else" (FT 73). Perhaps Cervantes was the first modern existentialist, as he agrees with Kierkegaard on the essential nature of man: "But I [Don Quixote] must tell you that there is no such thing as Fortune in the world. Nothing that happens here below, whether of good or evil, comes by chance, but my [by] the special disposition of Providence, and that is why we have the proverb: 'Every man is the maker of his own fortune.'"<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote* (London: Macmillan, 1964), p. 462.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 769.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 999.

On the other hand, the concept of "knight-ness" and the use of the word "knight" also challenges our interpretation of Abraham as an individual who boldly casts off the chains of society to define himself as the individual. From William Barrett we hear that "It has become a law of modern society that man is assimilated more and more completely to his social function."<sup>84</sup> In this sense, the charge that can be leveled is that Abraham could simply be acting on behalf of his socially defined role as a knight of faith. His whole act, from the viewpoint of a knight of faith, then, is called for by his position in life as a knight of faith, which overrides his duty or social role as a father. A person who does what he does *only* because it is his duty means that he does what he does for no other reason than that his position calls for it. We know that the knight of faith has an absolute duty to God (FT 101). However, to prove that Abraham was acting merely as a knight of faith rather than as an individual, one would have to prove the nature of his duty to be *solely* motivated by an absolute duty to God bound up with his position as a knight of faith. In the words of James Bogen, "An 'absolute duty toward God' would be a duty which is determined solely by one's relation to God and is not bound up with positions established in any social form of life."<sup>85</sup>

There is not very compelling evidence in support of this charge in *Fear and Trembling*. To be sure, Abraham's position established in life is that of a father and of an existential individual, the latter, as I have argued, taking precedence over the former, existence preceding essence.

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<sup>84</sup> William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), p. 5.

Moreover, Abraham manifests himself as a knight of faith only after making the movement of infinite resignation. In no way is that his default position, but one that he chooses. There is also no reason given why the knight of faith as a social role would trump Abraham's role as a father.

Finally, it appears as though this charge is purely semantic, as it could apply to all particular characterizations of human actions. That is, language expresses the universal, and *qua* the universal, essentializes its object, as opposed to particularizing its object. This is the dilemma that critical race theorists, feminists, existentialists and other social scientists struggle with: how can we talk about the real social characteristics of human beings that matter, like race and gender, and people's social functions like fathers, wives and knights, without defining or essentializing people by these very roles and social characteristics?

The very nature of language renders it unable to capture or represent faith. Between the believer and the unbeliever a barrier demands silence. If Abraham tries to explain his trial to others, he necessarily misrepresents it. To speak is to disrupt the very ground necessary—silence—for the proper relationship of an individual to God. Grounded in silence, unable to communicate with others, the taciturn and ineffable, yet estimable, knight of faith is held by fear and trembling.

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<sup>85</sup> James Bogen, "Kierkegaard and the 'Teleological Suspension of the Ethical'," *Inquiry*, Vol. 5, 1962, p. 314.

## THE SOUND OF SILENCE

The use of a pseudonym named Johannes de Silentio (John of Silence), and thus an ever-present emphasis on silence, suggests that the author's message is a hidden, *secret* one, or at least an unspoken one. Repeatedly, Kierkegaard (Silentio) remarks on the difficulty of understanding Abraham's actions. From Abraham, no explanation is proffered; he remains silent. Abraham's silence requires multiple explanations and interpretations because it means different things at different stages of existence.

The most forceful explanation of Abraham's silence about his intended actions is that he is going through a personal trial. As such, "his whole action stands in no relation to the universal, it is a purely private undertaking" (FT 88). Abraham cannot speak because the moment he does he expresses the universal. Thus, by this token, he must remain silent and, consequently, not be understood. By the same token, his silence is also the result of his special relation to God. Abraham believes that he is God's confidant and witness—an immediate and unmediated friend of the Lord (FT 105). He keeps silent for "the knight of faith who, in cosmic isolation, hears never a voice but walks alone with his dreadful responsibility" (FT 107). Kierkegaard emphasizes that Abraham, as the knight of faith, is "unable to make himself intelligible to others" because he is essentially "a witness, never a teacher" (FT 107).

Kierkegaard states that he "cannot understand Abraham", he can only "admire him" (FT 136). His point is that he cannot think himself into Abraham's shoes. Abraham cannot make himself intelligible and still be Abraham (FT 139). Abraham cannot speak because his life is so

paradoxical that it "simply cannot be thought" (FT 85). This can be interpreted as the existential proposition that to believe what is impossible to understand requires one to believe that the understanding cannot understand everything, including the possibility of an individual having an absolute relation to God. This particular proposition would be logically fallacious only if we presuppose that the understanding can understand everything, that is, if we identify rationality with absolute knowledge.

From the ethical viewpoint, silence is regarded quite differently. Ethics abhors all forms of silence, regardless of motivation. An individual has a moral obligation to reveal himself through free communication with others inasmuch as moral community is impossible without communication. Secrecy and concealment unravel the moral fabric of society. As Kierkegaard writes, the ethical says "You must acknowledge the universal, and you do that by speaking" (FT 135). For Abraham to assert himself in his particularity over and against the universal would be to sin, for ethics obliges Abraham to speak to his wife, his son, and the whole community the demand that God is making upon him. The point is that the silent individual may act *in line with* duty, but it is not evident to others at large whether the individual acts *from* duty. This notion is similar to Kant's categorical imperative, according to which the morality of an act is determined by its ability to be universalized—applied under any circumstance.

Silence also runs up against the demonic. Silence may be "the demon's lure" (FT144). The demonic may be the opposite or annulment of the divine, but it shares the essential property of the divine: "the

individual can enter into an absolute relationship to it" (FT 123). However, Kierkegaard rules out the demonic in Abraham's actions by assuring us that he is "the righteous man who is God's chosen" (FT 124). We have good reason to believe Kierkegaard on this point because we know much about Abraham. He is a mature man capable of strong leadership and is presented to us not as a warning but as an example to be followed: "I can only admire him" (FT 136).

Kierkegaard also recognized that there would be occasions where silence would be motivated by the aesthetic life—the egoistic quest for pleasure. Abraham, however, does not fit into the category of the aesthetic and cannot be justified in aesthetic terms whatsoever. His silence is not intended to spare Isaac suffering. To be sure, Kierkegaard points out that "the whole task of sacrificing Isaac for his own and God's sake is an outrage aesthetically. Aesthetics can well understand that I sacrifice myself, but not that I should sacrifice another for my own sake" (FT 136-137).

In short, as Mark C. Taylor writes, "Abraham does not try to speak, he endures silence. A man of faith cannot speak; he must be silent."<sup>86</sup> To those who do not share Abraham's personal relationship to God, there is nothing he could say that would make any sense. To an onlooker, Abraham's relationship to God is absurd, he himself is incomprehensible. In his silence—his absence of self-expression—we see an essential aspect of the nature of faith: the cleavage it constructs between the believer and the unbeliever. We learn from Kierkegaard that

silence is an intrinsic dimension of the life of the knight of faith, and that while silence "utters no untruth," it also does not say anything, for it "speaks in a foreign tongue" to everyone (FT 143).

## THE PROBLEM OF HEARING

Another way of looking at Abraham is from an extremely theological viewpoint. From this viewpoint, we could say that Abraham was justified in acting as he did because he was *certain* that the command came from God. For textual evidence of this, we can point out that Kierkegaard writes that Abraham

had faith and did not doubt.... he did not challenge heaven with his prayers. He knew it was God the Almighty that tried him, he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him; but he also knew that no sacrifice was too hard when God demanded it—and he drew the knife. (FT 54, 55)

However forceful this passage may be, its meaning is elusive and hard to reconcile with textual evidence later in the book.

It is clear from what Kierkegaard says elsewhere that faith always involves uncertainty (objectively speaking). What is more, God being God, the possibility of an actual immediate relation is impossible, despite what Kierkegaard says about the knight of faith (FT 105). For that reason, I think one must assume that while Abraham may be resolute, he cannot be *certain* that the command comes from God. Thus we speak of the problem of hearing. After all, he cannot seek knowledge

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<sup>86</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "Sounds of Silence," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals* (Alabama: University of Alabama

in the universal, for existing in a state of "absolute isolation," he "has only himself" (FT 106). Subsequently, the knight of faith "hears never a voice but walks alone with his dreadful responsibility" (FT 107). Hence, it is the task of the individual to decide what God requires of him.

Being certain of God's command or not, we are still confronted with the disturbing figure of Abraham. Abraham might have been mistaken. Given the validity of the ethical, can Abraham be sure that God commands him to violate the ethical norm? If he is not sure, how can he justify transgressing the ethical? How could God command Abraham to sacrifice his son? How could faith and Love call for such a terrifying act? The theological answer, as we discussed earlier, is that Kierkegaard sees God as the Lord and giver of life. What God gives he can, obviously, take back. The feature that Kierkegaard insists upon is that Abraham *believed* that God required such a sacrifice of him. As it turned out, God did *not* require such a sacrifice.

The best we can do is to conclude that the Devil could be up to everything, merely hearing God's command admits ample space for deception. As the ancient proverb states, all that glitters is not gold, and behind God could stand the Devil. Furthermore, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, "anyone in such a case would wonder, first, whether it was indeed an angel and secondly, whether I am really Abraham. Where are the proofs?"<sup>87</sup> The problem of hearing can never be resolved since finite senses are blunt tools in the realm of the infinite.

#### **EXISTENTIALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CHOICE:**

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Press, 1981), p. 166.



## THE CALL FOR SELF-REALIZATION

The problem of choice arises after the problem of hearing is dismissed either out of utter despair or of stubbornness in the face of objective uncertainty. Granted that Abraham actually hears the voice of God, why is it self-evident that Abraham should be obedient to God? Is there not a choice between obedience to God *or* faithfulness to the ethical? Why does Kierkegaard assume that obedience to God must be the correct decision for Abraham? If moral or non-moral religious commands always trump universal ethical principles, then it seems that we have *ipso facto* eliminated the fear and trembling in *Fear and Trembling*. One way of approaching and resolving these questions is from an existential viewpoint. I agree with Jerome I. Gellman that for Kierkegaard, the point of *Fear and Trembling* has to do with self-definition, and not about paradoxical ethical dilemmas.

The voice of God that Abraham heard should not be taken literally—the book should be taken allegorically. The voice, allegorically understood, is a call out of eternal consciousness for self-definition as an individual, as opposed to self-definition from within the institutions of society, especially the family. The biblical yarn of Abraham and Isaac is “a metaphor for the struggle between these two kinds of self-definition” more than an exposition of the inherently incompatible nature of man-made morality and deity-decreed dogma.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism and Humanism," in Stephen Priest ed., *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 30.

<sup>88</sup> Jerome I. Gellman, "Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling," *Man and World*, Volume 23, 1990, p. 297.

The issue of self-definition does not require knowing if God speaks to us, but requires recognizing, in the eloquent words of Kierkegaard: "The secret in life is that everyone must sew it for himself; and the remarkable thing is that a man can sew it just as well as a woman" (FT 74). The story is about individuality, willingness to work out one's own salvation with fear and trembling, and Abraham's courage to realize himself not as a father, but as an individual.

In defense of this interpretation, I will begin with the concept of the ethical for Kierkegaard. Put concisely and explicitly, "Abraham's relation to Isaac, ethically speaking, is quite simply this, that the father should love the son more than himself" (FT 86). In the words of Gellman, "to love one's son more than oneself means to identify oneself first as a father, and only secondly as an individual."<sup>89</sup> Thus, what is at stake in Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical is Abraham's recognized social role as a father. What he is called upon to do is to renounce and thereby transcend the definition of himself as determined by his position in his family. The voice of God is (interpreted as) the call for Abraham to be an individual in transcendence of the tyranny of the universal. If this is true, it follows that "God's command" to "murder" Isaac is not actually a command to commit the act of murder, but a trial, to which Abraham must be prepared to sacrifice his son for God and to be able to act as an "individual as subjectively prior to regarding himself as a father" and to be willing to withdraw from his family-definition into individuality.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

As we know, God did not require murder, thus giving credence to the view that the sacrifice/trial is a metaphor for one's ability to transcend one's social role into individual subjectivity. By being willing to transcend fatherhood, Abraham gets fatherhood back along with a qualitatively different love of Isaac that does not demand the repression of his selfhood. By heeding the call of God, Abraham acted as an individual rather than as a socially defined being. Given the problem of hearing, the fact that Abraham acted in the face of objective uncertainty is already to transcend the ethical, "for what is to be gained by not acting, except the ethical!"<sup>91</sup>

Kierkegaard's contributions as an existential philosopher lie in his ability to show—through such concepts as the teleological suspension of the ethical—how much that passes as ethics is an attempt to shake off the burden of personal decision and responsibility. Choice is what he is concerned to show as the typically ethical act, and ethical choice involves for him two kinds of movement—free self-development and obedient fulfillment of divine purpose. The former because the individual is realized only by his own self-development; self-realization comes into existence in the very act of choice. The latter because the self which is chosen already exists, for a person does not create himself but only chooses himself.

What is required for true self-realization is that the individual humble himself in faith in order to gain himself (again). The individual must have the courage to lose himself in order to gain himself. However, the complete fulfillment of one's humanity, Kierkegaard suggests, cannot

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

be achieved apart from divine assistance/Christianity. That is, the individual is the synthesis of the finite and infinite whose task is to become himself, a task that must be performed by means of a relationship to God. As Sylvia Fleming Crocker explains, "Faith, then, is a kind of openness, a passionate receptivity on the part of the historically existing individual to the revelation of God as a Person; *and* it is receptivity to the power of God, the Power which both created the self and is the condition for its realization and fulfillment."<sup>92</sup> In other words, "Faith, then, as Kierkegaard sees it, involves more than trusting God. It is such a personal openness that the individual is able to hear and, by the repeated practice of such listening, to have his powers of self-determination *illuminated and transformed*."<sup>93</sup>

At this point, I can summarize the argument of my paper as follows. The voice of God that Abraham believes he hears is a call for self-realization free from the moral structures of society. This call is taken for granted and there is no real problem of hearing. Doubt about the call resolves into certainty once Abraham decides to have faith and disregard the doubt in favor of freedom and individuality. *Fear and Trembling* is not about the clash between ethics and religion but about individual freedom to embrace the universal without the universal defining individual existence. God's demand on Abraham is that he not become a one-dimensional, universal man, though in reality he is ethically obligated to live the life of ethics. The fear and trembling is in coming to terms with that demand. It ceases after a decision is made.

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<sup>92</sup> Sylvia Fleming Crocker, "Sacrifice in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 68, 1975, p. 135.

The point of choosing individuality is that our selfhood comes into being in the naked act of choice. If man is to be given meaning, Kierkegaard has shown us, it must be here and now. The choice to be an individual, the ground of all grounds, is without any foundation other than the foundational idea of human rights, that people probably are best suited, and in any case are entitled, to choose the good life for themselves. *Fear and Trembling* can be interpreted as a defense of the rights of the individual in the face of oppressive social collectivities. By affirming the priority of the individual, *Fear and Trembling* is proffering an important, though admittedly potentially dangerous, corrective to the loss of self.

This interpretation, however, is not without holes. It has the disadvantage of leaving the normative ethical import of *Fear and Trembling* in doubt. Like the divine command viewpoint, it may inappropriately ethicalize Abraham's conduct. It cannot satisfactorily explain why Genesis 22, of all Biblical stories, was chosen to make this point. It also runs up against Kierkegaard's repeated statements that Abraham cannot be understood.

Our existence is no longer (if it ever was!) transparent and understandable by reason, bound together into a tight, coherent structure. Think of the famous Chinese diagram of the forces of *yin* and *yang*. Instead of light and dark areas, think of divine and worldly areas, in which the divine and worldly exist beside each other within the same universe, the divine penetrated by a spot of the worldly and the worldly penetrated by a spot of the divine, to symbolize that each must borrow from the other in order for either to be complete. A combination or

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

synthesis, if you like, of the Aristotelian, Greek man—the man of reason—and the St. Paulian, Christian man—the man of faith. For Kierkegaard, truths of science and truths of faith exist side by side, valid in their respective spheres, and simultaneously available: thus is man a great and true being whose nature is disposed to live, not only like other men in divers element, but in divided and distinguished worlds. Most people in Abraham's case, confronting oneself in such a situation, would panic and try to take cover under any universal rule that will apply, if only it would save them from the task of choosing—not Abraham. Reason guides Abraham to faith, and faith takes over where reason is superfluous, such is the lot of man in Kierkegaard's universe.

Kierkegaard's treatment of the human subject is determined by the recognition that the human self is a finite temporal phenomenon. He speaks of self-realization as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, the finite and the infinite, the particular and the universal. The self is a relation between heaven and earth, eternity and time and more specifically, it is a relation that accepts its lot in this strange and burdensome tension. When man wills to be himself as a mixture of finite and infinite, he also wills to be what God ordained and is in a relationship with God; when he refuses to be himself he is disobedient to God. God is an existentialist. To exist means to realize the task that the synthesis presents: to bring the eternal into the temporal. Existence is the highest interest of the individual and this constitutes his reality.

Clearly, for Kierkegaard, being a Christian was the only way to be called on to be a man, however divergent our own choice of a way may be. Without the shudder of fear or the trembling of dread, man

would never be forced to stand face to face with life. Sometimes, as Rousseau said, we have to be forced to be free.

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