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978-0-521-84810-7 - Fear and Trembling: Søren Kierkegaard

Edited by C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh

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KIERKEGAARD  
*Fear and Trembling*

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SØREN KIERKEGAARD

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*Fear and Trembling*

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## Introduction

*Fear and Trembling*, written when the author was only thirty years old, is in all likelihood Søren Kierkegaard's most-read book. This would not have surprised Kierkegaard, who wrote prophetically in his journal that "once I am dead, *Fear and Trembling* alone will be enough for an imperishable name as an author. Then it will [be] read, translated into foreign languages as well."<sup>1</sup> In one sense the book is not difficult to read. It is often assigned in introductory university classes, for it is the kind of book that a novice in philosophy can pick up and read with interest and profit – stimulating questions about ethics and God, faith and reason, experience and imagination. However, in another sense the book is profoundly difficult, the kind of book that can be baffling to the scholar who has read it many times and studied it for years – giving rise to a bewildering variety of conflicting interpretations.

Many of these interpretations have focused on the book's relation to Kierkegaard's own life, and in particular on the widely known story of Kierkegaard's broken engagement to Regine Olsen. There is little doubt that part of Kierkegaard's own motivation for writing *Fear and Trembling* was to present a disguised explanation to Regine of his true reasons for breaking off the engagement. However, it is just as certain that the philosophical importance of the book does not depend on these personal and biographical points; the book can be read and has been read with profit by those with no knowledge of Kierkegaard's own life.

<sup>1</sup> *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vols. 1–vii, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1967–78). Entry no. 6491 (vol. vi).

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*Fear and Trembling* is described on the title page as a “dialectical lyric,” and this description accurately captures its paradoxical character. On the one hand the book is indeed lyrical, with intensely poetical and moving passages that engage the imagination as well as the emotions of the reader. Poetic figures such as the “knight of faith,” the “knight of infinite resignation,” and the “tragic hero” move before the reader’s eyes and take shape in story and myth. However, the book is also “dialectical” in the sense that it poses sharply defined philosophical and theological questions about such issues as the relation between a life of religious faith and the ethical life, and the relation between personal virtue and integrity and social and political duties.

*Fear and Trembling* takes as its point of departure the biblical story of the “binding of Isaac” from Genesis 22, in which God tests Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. Kierkegaard’s book as a whole can best be described as a poetical and philosophical response to this biblical story. In the Genesis account Abraham shows his willingness to obey God, but at the last moment God sends an angel to stay his hand, and Abraham discovers a ram that he sacrifices in place of his son.

This story from the Hebrew Bible is reprised in the New Testament in Hebrews 11, where the “heroes of faith” are listed and described. Abraham has a prominent place in this list of exemplars; his action in being willing to sacrifice Isaac is singled out by the author of Hebrews in verses 17–19 as a key part of Abraham’s story and a major reason why Abraham is a paradigm of faith. The book of Hebrews thus provides a clear illustration of the status Abraham enjoys for both Jews and Christians (as well as Muslims) as the “father of faith.” There is a long tradition of commentary on this Genesis story, from both Jewish and Christian thinkers, and the questions the story raises seem no less relevant today than in previous centuries.

Among these questions some of the most pressing concern the relative value and danger of religious devotion as a source of action. *Fear and Trembling* shows a clear awareness that the story about Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is in many ways a dangerous narrative. We live in a world where religious fundamentalists try to justify violence against innocent people by appealing to what they perceive as God’s commands. Deranged parents sometimes kill their children in the belief that they have been commanded by God to do so. *Fear and Trembling* rightly

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worries about people who may respond to the story in these kinds of ways, asking whether one should dare think about the Abraham story: “Can one then speak candidly about Abraham without running the risk that an individual in mental confusion might go and do likewise?” (p. 23) Religious faith seems to some people to be too dangerous to tolerate, something that leads to war, terrorism, and fanaticism. We can see this in John Lennon’s famous line in his song “Imagine,” where he dreams of a world where “there’s no heaven, and no religion too.” Though *Fear and Trembling* shows a deep understanding of this kind of worry about religious faith, it also tries to show that to lose the possibility of genuine faith is to lose something of incalculable value. To eliminate faith in order to eliminate fanaticism is to deify “the established social-political order.” Such a secularized society might eliminate fanatics, but it would also eliminate such figures as a Martin Luther King, Jr., who mounted a religious critique of the established order. Most importantly from Kierkegaard’s perspective, such a secularized society would remove any transcendent meaning that gives the lives of individual humans depth and value.

**Who is the “author” of *Fear and Trembling*?**

Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* was published in Copenhagen in 1843 as part of an outpouring of pseudonymous books which he wrote at a furious pace, and most of which appeared in just three years between 1843 and 1846. Other books in this group include *Either/Or*, *Repetition*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, *Prefaces*, *Philosophical Fragments*, *Stages on Life’s Way*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. At the same time as Kierkegaard was producing these pseudonymous books, he also published a series of devotional *Upbuilding Discourses* under his own name. The pseudonymous books are attributed to a variety of characters with names such as Victor Eremita (Victor the Hermit), Vigilius Haufniensis (The Watchman of Copenhagen), and Johannes Climacus (John the Climber). Thus, the name that appears on the title page of *Fear and Trembling* is not Kierkegaard’s own, but “Johannes de silentio.” This fact is of great importance.

Why did Kierkegaard employ these pseudonyms? Clearly it was not to preserve anonymity. Within a short time of the appearance of the first of these volumes the identity of the true author was widely known. In fact



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Kierkegaard went so far as to put his own name on the title page as “editor” of two of the volumes, a move which clearly shows that he was not trying to hide his connection to the writings. The reasons for the pseudonyms lie in Kierkegaard’s understanding of himself as a “Danish Socrates,” who attempted to help his contemporaries discover truth for themselves, much as did the actual Socrates, who compared himself to a midwife who helped others give birth to ideas. Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms can usefully be compared to characters in a novel, who have their own viewpoints and voices that may or may not overlap with those of the author of the novel. In creating the pseudonyms Kierkegaard attempts what he calls “indirect communication,” which he sees as vital when one is dealing with moral and religious insights that bear directly on the self, and that can only be properly understood when personally appropriated. Kierkegaard does not didactically tell us what is what, but creates characters who embody various views of life and the self. The reader who encounters these characters is thus forced to think for himself or herself about the issues.

Virtually all Kierkegaard scholars today agree then that distinctions between the various pseudonyms, as well as the distinction between Kierkegaard and the pseudonyms, must be respected. It is a mistake to blend together passages from Johannes the seducer in *Either/Or* I, from Vigilius Haufniensis in *The Concept of Anxiety*, and from Johannes de silentio in *Fear and Trembling* as if they all reflect Kierkegaard’s own views. Most scholars today therefore respect Kierkegaard’s request to distinguish the words of the pseudonyms from those works he wrote under his own name: “Therefore if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the [pseudonymous] books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author’s name, not mine . . .”<sup>2</sup> However, many textbook characterizations of Kierkegaard still ignore this literary dimension of his writings, and thus misinterpretations are common. A proper interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* must therefore try to understand the figure of Johannes de silentio. Unfortunately, all we can know about this Johannes must be derived from his book, and thus an understanding of his

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 627. This passage occurs as part of “A First and Last Explanation” that Kierkegaard appended to this pseudonymous book under his own name.

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standpoint as an author must go hand in hand with an understanding of the work itself.

One important clue in understanding the pseudonymous author may be the name itself: John of silence, silent John. Though Johannes is in one sense talkative, we shall see that at key points it is what he does not say that may be most important. Another clue may be found in the “Motto” from Johann Georg Hamann that appears at the beginning of the book: “What Tarquin the Proud communicated in his garden with the beheaded poppies was understood by the son but not by the messenger.” The reference is to an ancient story of Rome in which the son of Tarquin, the king of Rome, had gained power in the rival city of Gabii. The son sent a messenger to his father to ask for advice about what he should do, but the father did not trust the messenger. Saying nothing, he simply walked around in the garden and struck the flowers off the tallest poppies. When the messenger related this behavior to the son, the son correctly inferred that he should try to bring about the death of the leading citizens of the city.

Mottos are by their nature enigmatic and suggestive, and one cannot be sure what is meant by this reference to the story. However, it certainly seems plausible that Johannes as the author of the book is himself the “messenger” in this case, and thus in some ways is communicating through his work something he himself does not fully understand. It is perhaps less clear who is the “father” from whom the message comes, and who is the “son” who is supposed to receive the message with understanding.

**Imagining Abraham and Isaac**

*Fear and Trembling* begins with an amusing preface that cleverly satirizes both modern philosophy and modern European culture in general, focusing on the concepts of doubt and faith. According to Johannes, everyone in the modern world has apparently doubted everything, just as everyone is supposed to possess genuine religious faith. Johannes is clearly not so enamored with these alleged achievements of modernity, which he, through irony, compares unfavorably with the practices of the ancient Greeks and early Christians. For the ancient Greeks, “proficiency in doubting is not achieved in a matter of days or weeks” (p. 4). Supposedly everyone in our age begins with the stance that those Greek philosophers worked a lifetime to achieve. In a similar

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manner, “in those olden days” faith was “a lifelong task,” but modern people must “go further” since they all begin “where those venerable figures arrived” (p. 5). What do doubt and faith have in common? For Johannes they are both human activities, and he clearly thinks that neither is as easy as modernity assumes. Perhaps once the difficulties of these human tasks are appreciated, people will be less eager to “go further” to the intellectual challenges of the “System,” the grand speculative attempt by the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel and his followers to understand the whole of nature and human history in terms of “Absolute Spirit.”

After this satirical preface, Johannes offers us a section called “Tuning Up,” a kind of lyrical prelude that consists of a series of imaginative variations on the biblical story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God’s command. It is clear that Johannes pays attention to this story about Abraham and Isaac because he wants to understand faith and looks to a universally recognized exemplar of faith for help. This fact provides a baseline insight that must be constantly kept in mind; *Fear and Trembling* is primarily a book about faith, not a book about ethics. However, even the discussion of faith is indirect in character. Johannes does not really tell us what faith is but what it is not, even though he says a lot about faith. He primarily helps us understand faith more clearly by distinguishing genuine faith from counterfeits and easily confused relatives and substitutes. The imaginative versions of the story that Johannes produces in “Tuning Up” all in some way picture an “Abraham” who differs from the biblical Abraham by lacking faith.

In the first variation, Johannes imagines an Abraham who tries to explain to Isaac that God requires him as a sacrifice, but who is unable to make Isaac understand. In response to Isaac’s horror, Abraham pretends to Isaac to be a moral monster, an idolater who is going to sacrifice Isaac “because it is my desire” rather than because of God’s command, telling himself that it would be better for Isaac to lose faith in Abraham than to lose his faith in the goodness of God (p. 9). In the second variation, everything is as it is in the biblical story, except that Abraham as a result of the experience “saw joy no more” (p. 9). As we shall see later, a crucial dimension of the actual Abraham is Abraham’s joy, his ability to be happy with Isaac, trusting in God’s promise. In the third version Abraham decides that he is wrong to have been willing to sacrifice Isaac and repents, but finds himself vacillating in his repentance, unsure that it

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was a sin “to have been willing to sacrifice to God the best he owned,” but worried that if it was a sin, “how could it be forgiven, for what sin was more grievous?” (p. 10) In the fourth and final version, Abraham draws the knife, but his “left hand was clenched in despair” and “a shudder went through his body,” and as a result Isaac, who has observed this, loses his faith (p. 10).

All these imagined stories are related by a man (perhaps Johannes himself) who is transfixed by the story of Abraham and Isaac, a man who seems obsessed with understanding Abraham, but whose energetic intellectual strivings only show him more clearly how difficult, perhaps impossible, the task is. Every time the man returns home from one of his imaginative pilgrimages to Mount Moriah, he collapses “from fatigue,” and says: “Surely no one was as great as Abraham. Who is able to understand him?” (p. 11) The point of the variations clearly lies in their differences from the Abraham story. The alternative “Abrahams” are in some way, unlike the actual Abraham, understandable; in looking at them we understand Abraham better in the sense that we know better what faith is not.

“Tuning Up” is followed by “A Tribute to Abraham,” which tells the story of the actual biblical Abraham as a person of faith, again interspersing the tale with imaginative variations on the story. Johannes sets the story in context, beginning with Abraham’s willingness to emigrate from the land of his fathers to a foreign country and continuing with God’s promise to make of Abraham’s descendants a mighty nation. This promise is one that Abraham believes despite having no child of Sarah his wife until he is a hundred years old. This context makes the test to which God puts Abraham by asking for the sacrifice of Isaac seem all the more pointless and absurd. How can God’s pledge that Isaac will be the child through which God fulfills his promise to Abraham be fulfilled if Abraham is himself going to end Isaac’s life?

Several themes dominate Johannes’ version of the story. One is that Abraham’s faith requires him to believe what is preposterous or absurd. This is not only true for Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but is present from the very beginning of Abraham’s story. When he left the land of his fathers, “he left one thing behind and took one thing with him. He left his worldly understanding behind and took faith with him; otherwise he undoubtedly would not have emigrated but surely would have thought it preposterous” (p. 14). Note that there is a perspectival

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dimension to this claim. Faith is said to be absurd from the perspective of “worldly understanding,” and this leaves open the possibility that things look different from the perspective of faith. Since Johannes himself repeatedly says that he does not possess faith, this may explain why Johannes has so much difficulty in understanding Abraham.

A second dimension of the story that Johannes emphasizes is that Abraham’s faith is a “this-worldly” faith. Christian theologians traditionally have held that faith involves not only a belief that God exists, but a belief that God is good, and hence can be trusted, following Hebrews 11:6: “And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”<sup>3</sup> So Johannes emphasizes that Abraham believes in God’s promises and has an expectation of happiness and joy, and for Johannes God’s goodness must be understood in relation to our earthly, temporal lives. Because he is a person of faith, Abraham gives us no “song of sorrow” (p. 15). “Abraham believed and believed for this life” (p. 17). He did not merely believe that after death he would experience God’s goodness and be rewarded for his faithfulness, but that “he would grow old in the land, honored by the people, blessed by posterity, forever remembered in Isaac, his dearest one in life” (p. 17).

A faith that only pertains to some other world is not really faith at all, says Johannes, “but only the remotest possibility of faith, which faintly spies its object at the edge of the horizon yet is separated from it by a yawning abyss within which despair plays its tricks” (p. 17). In some ways this characterization of faith as something dimly and distantly recognized fits Johannes himself. He explicitly says that his own “faith” resembles this kind of “other-worldly faith,” and thus we may here have an account of how Johannes can say some true things about faith, insofar as he “faintly spies its object at the edge of the horizon” and yet in many ways does not understand faith at all. As we shall see, what is distinctive about Abraham as a person of faith is not his willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God’s command. He shares that trait with several other characters who lack faith. What is distinctive about Abraham’s faith shows itself in his joyful ability to “receive Isaac back” and resume ordinary life with him, trusting in God’s promises.

<sup>3</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), new revised standard version.

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The bulk of *Fear and Trembling* is devoted to three philosophical “Problems” that Johannes poses, but before settling down to philosophical business, he provides a kind of extended preface to this section of the book, which he entitles “A Preliminary Outpouring from the Heart” (in Walsh’s free but insightful translation). This “outpouring” is dominated by two ideal figures, whom Johannes designates as “the knight of infinite resignation” and the “knight of faith.” Both of these knights, according to Johannes, have made what he calls the “movement of infinite resignation.” Resignation is a willingness to sacrifice the whole of the finite world, all that a person values in this life, for the sake of what Johannes variously calls “the infinite,” “the eternal,” or “God.”

Johannes illustrates infinite resignation by picturing a young man whose identity is completely concentrated in his love for a princess; this youth has the strength “to concentrate the whole content of life and the meaning of actuality into one single wish” (pp. 35–36). The love turns out to be one that cannot be consummated in time, and this young man shows himself to be a knight of infinite resignation by renouncing his temporal hopes for happiness with the princess: instead,

the love for that princess became for him the expression of an eternal love, assumed a religious character, was transfigured into a love of the eternal being, which to be sure denied the fulfillment of the love but still reconciled him once again in the eternal consciousness of its validity in an eternal form that no actuality can take from him. (pp. 36–37)

Infinite resignation then embodies a kind of other-worldly religiousness, a life-stance that Johannes himself claims to understand and even to be able to realize. Johannes is “convinced that God is love,” but God’s love for him is “incommensurable with the whole of actuality” (p. 28). As a result he does not relate to God in the details of his life: “I do not trouble God with my petty cares” (p. 28). If Johannes himself had been asked to sacrifice Isaac, he affirms that he would have been willing to obey and make the sacrifice, but at the expense of any happiness in time: “Now all is lost; God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and with him all my joy – yet God is love and continues to be that for me, for in temporality God and I cannot converse, we have no language in

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common” (p. 29). Johannes knows that some people might confuse his “immense resignation” with faith, but he knows that such resignation is just a substitute for faith. The difference between the two shows itself in their respective post-trial attitudes towards Isaac:

What came easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me – once again to be joyful with Isaac! – for whoever has made the infinite movement with all the infinity of his soul, of his own accord and on his own responsibility, and cannot do more only keeps Isaac with pain. (p. 29)

Infinite resignation by itself is a substitute for faith, and yet Johannes also describes it as an ingredient in faith: “Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that whoever has not made this movement does not have faith” (p. 39). Abraham has then made the movement of infinite resignation, but resignation is not what is distinctive about his faith. Rather that distinctiveness is found in the “second movement” by which the person of faith, having resigned the whole of the finite, receives it all back again. Abraham, “by a double movement . . . had regained his original condition and therefore received Isaac more joyfully than the first time” (p. 29). Johannes describes this second movement as made possible by a faith or belief<sup>4</sup> “by virtue of the absurd” (p. 30).

This joy in the finite makes it difficult to recognize the genuine “knight of faith,” for in his external appearance he bears a suspicious resemblance to a “bourgeois-philistine” who simply lives for the finite. Johannes imagines such a knight of faith, and finds himself taken aback: “Dear me! Is this the person, is it actually him? He looks just like a tax collector” (p. 32). The knight of faith’s footing “is sturdy, belonging entirely to finitude” (p. 32). Johannes pictures the knight of faith as imagining a wonderful roast lamb dinner he believes his wife has made for him; if she really has the dinner, “to see him eat would be an enviable sight for distinguished people and an inspiring one for the common man, for his appetite is heartier than Esau’s” (p. 33). Yet if the wife does not have the dinner, he is not disappointed. Somehow the knight of faith has made “the movement of infinity” by “renouncing everything,” and “yet the finite tastes every bit as good to him as to someone who never knew anything higher” (p. 34). In the same way, Abraham has given up Isaac

<sup>4</sup> Danish has but one word, *tro*, for both English terms.

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to God and yet is able to receive him back with joy; in fact he expected all along to receive him back with joy.

What exactly does Abraham believe? What does he think as he rides to Mount Moriah with Isaac and the knife? Commentators have found this a difficult question. On the one hand, Abraham knows, says Johannes, that Isaac is to die by his own hand: “at the decisive moment he must know what he himself will do” (p. 105). Yet Johannes insists that Abraham continues to believe “by virtue of the absurd” that God will not in fact require Isaac of him: “He climbed the mountain, and even at the moment when the knife gleamed he believed – that God would not demand Isaac” (p. 29).

One could of course simply take this as implying that Abraham has a contradictory belief, that he believes both that Isaac will die and that he will not die. However, it is unclear what such a contradictory belief would amount to or whether it would have any clear meaning at all. Psychologically, the only way such a contradictory belief would be possible would be if Abraham were self-deceived in some way, so that he could have a belief without realizing that he had it and therefore also could have a contradictory one. It is certain that Johannes does not think of Abraham in this way, for there would be nothing admirable about such a confused, or self-deceptive, contradictory belief.

Does Abraham then believe that God will not in fact require him to sacrifice Isaac? Has he guessed that this is “only a trial,” cleverly discerning that he must play his part and appear to be willing to do something that he knows he in fact will not have to do? We have just quoted a passage in which Johannes does attribute to Abraham the belief that God will not in fact demand Isaac of him. However, it cannot be right to picture Abraham as someone who has cleverly figured out how to play along with God’s game, so to speak. For one thing Johannes says explicitly that the rightness of Abraham’s act and its greatness cannot be a function of the outcome (p. 55). Abraham, says Johannes, does not know what the outcome will be, and thus we cannot emulate him if we interpret the story in light of the result. When Abraham begins to act he does not know the result, and if we wish to be people of faith we must put ourselves in his shoes, so to speak, and also be willing to act without knowing what the results of our actions will be. If we imagine Abraham acting because he has craftily figured out what the outcome will be, Johannes’ comments here make no sense.



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Johannes actually goes to some pains to distinguish Abraham's faith from "worldly wisdom," the calculations of human probability, which even infinite resignation has already transcended (p. 31). Faith is not merely a vague hope that this or that could possibly happen if something else happens. For example, Johannes distinguishes faith from one of its "caricatures," which he describes as a "paltry hope" that says "One can't know what will happen, it still might be possible" (pp. 30–31).

Yet we should remember that caricatures do contain a likeness to what they are caricaturing, and there is something in such vague hope that bears a resemblance to faith. Johannes does picture Abraham as uncertain about what is going to happen. Though Abraham definitely knows what he is going to do, says Johannes, he also believes that "surely it will not happen, or if it does, the Lord will give me a new Isaac, namely by virtue of the absurd" (p. 101). What is the difference between this attitude on the part of Abraham and what we might call a clever Abraham, a worldly wise Abraham?

I think there are two differences and one similarity between the genuine Abraham and a clever Abraham. The similarity has just been pointed out: it lies in the fact that Abraham does indeed have some uncertainty about what is going to happen. One might say that some of what he knows and believes consists of conditionals. He knows, for example, that he will sacrifice Isaac *if* God does not revoke the command. Obviously, this kind of conditional belief or knowledge suggests that there is some possibility that God could revoke the command and that Abraham is aware of this possibility. To that extent such an attitude looks like the "paltry hope" mentioned above. Yet there are two important differences.

The first difference lies in the ground of the hope. The "paltry hope" that Johannes describes as a caricature of faith is grounded in human experience, which gives us our sense of what is probable and what is possible. Faith, however, has an entirely different ground. Johannes is enigmatic in describing faith's ground; perhaps since he lacks faith himself he does not fully understand what this ground is. However, one thing is clear. He consistently says that faith holds to various possibilities "by virtue of the absurd," and he is clear that someone who looks at things from this viewpoint of the absurd has completely rejected human calculative reasoning. On the contrary, faith requires a clear-headed understanding that from the perspective of human experience the situation appears impossible. The knight of faith

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therefore acknowledges the impossibility and at the same moment believes the absurd, for if he imagines himself to have faith without acknowledging the impossibility with all the passion of his soul and with his whole heart, then he deceives himself . . . (p. 40)

Abraham's mental state seems complex. Johannes says that throughout the time of his testing, "he [Abraham] believed; he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he still was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He believed by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question. . . ." (p. 29).

The second clear difference between faith and this "paltry hope" that is its caricature is that faith has a kind of confidence and sureness that worldly shrewdness lacks. At bottom calculative shrewdness in this case would be irrational, for it amounts to believing something *will* happen that one knows to be highly improbable merely on the grounds that it is possible. Such a hope can never be free of doubts. However, Abraham, according to Johannes, "believed and did not doubt" (p. 17). Is Abraham's belief also irrational? It certainly is from the viewpoint of worldly wisdom, and Johannes often describes faith from that viewpoint as believing what is "preposterous" (p. 17). Yet it also seems clear that things do not appear that way to Abraham himself. I have already quoted the passage in which Johannes says that when Abraham emigrated from his native land, he "left his worldly understanding behind and took faith with him; otherwise he undoubtedly would not have emigrated but surely would have thought it preposterous" (p. 14). The Danish term for preposterous here is *urimeligt*, which could also be translated as "unreasonable." If Abraham had not had faith, then he would have seen his actions as unreasonable; with faith it is clearly a different matter.

But what exactly is Abraham confident of? I think the answer can only be that Abraham is confident that God will keep his promises. For Abraham, as for Johannes, God is love, God is good. However, for Abraham, unlike Johannes, God's goodness must translate into the concerns of daily, temporal life. Abraham, says Johannes, had "received the promise that in his seed all the generations of the world would be blessed," and Abraham believes that God will fulfill this promise in Isaac, even if Abraham does not understand how God will do this or even how it is possible (p. 14). This does not mean that Abraham knew for sure that God would do what he in fact did, i.e. revoke the command to sacrifice Isaac. Johannes pictures Abraham as a man who simply rests in

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his confidence that God will fulfill the promise without knowing exactly how this will come about.

Johannes does picture Abraham as thinking that it is *possible* that God may not require him to make the sacrifice. However, he does not know this will happen, and he does not count on it happening, but is willing to go through with the sacrifice if that is required. Even if he does sacrifice Isaac, he believes God will fulfill his promises. Humanly speaking, this is indeed irrational, but Johannes makes it clear that Abraham does not evaluate his actions from this perspective. In a clear allusion to the writer of Hebrews' reading of the story, who makes this point central in Hebrews 11:17–19, Johannes says that Abraham could actually have carried out the sacrifice, because Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac from the dead, if that were necessary to fulfill God's promise that Isaac would be the father of many nations:

Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham believed. He did not believe that he would be blessed one day in the hereafter but that he would become blissfully happy here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, call the sacrificed one back to life. He believed by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since ceased. (pp. 29–30)

I conclude that Abraham does not, at the crucial time, hold the contradictory belief that he will and will not sacrifice Isaac. Nor is his mental state that of the shrewd person who has used experience to figure out the outcome and adjust his behavior accordingly. Rather, Abraham simply rests unwaveringly in his trust in God's goodness; he believes that God will keep his promise to him in this life, even though he does not know exactly how God will do this, and realizes that from the perspective of human experience it looks impossible.

**The knight of faith vs. the tragic hero**

After the "Preliminary Outpouring" Johannes launches into the philosophical meat of *Fear and Trembling*, which consists of detailed discussions of three philosophical problems. The first problem posed (Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?) is closely related to the second (Is there an absolute duty to God?). To ask whether there is such a thing as a "teleological suspension of the ethical" is to ask whether "the ethical"

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represents the highest task for humans, or whether there might be something, such as a relation to God that might involve “an absolute duty to God,” that is “higher” than the ethical and for which the ethical could rightly be suspended. Johannes argues that if Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is justifiable or admirable, then one must affirm that there is indeed such a thing as a “teleological suspension of the ethical” and that Abraham does indeed have an absolute duty to God that trumps his ethical duty.

To understand Johannes’ discussion of these questions (as well as his third problem) it is crucial to understand clearly what he means by “the ethical,” since for some philosophers ethical duties are simply defined as a person’s highest obligations, and the question of whether there could be a higher obligation than the highest makes no sense. For example, if someone accepts a “divine command” account of moral obligations, which claims (in one version) that all moral obligations are divine commands, and that whatever God commands thereby becomes a moral obligation, then Abraham, if commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, has a moral or ethical obligation to do so.<sup>5</sup> The idea that his obligation to obey God might be a higher obligation that would trump his ethical obligation would on this view be nonsensical.

So what does Johannes mean by “the ethical?” Johannes often describes the ethical as identical with “the universal,” and this term suggests to many a Kantian conception of the ethical, since Kant identifies moral obligations with those imperatives that can be universalized: “The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which may be expressed from another angle by saying that it is in force at every moment” (p. 46). However, this use of Kantian language is not decisive, since Hegel also appropriates this language for his own purposes.

The differences between Kant and Hegel are crucial for understanding what Johannes has in mind by “the ethical” when he denies that faith can be understood in ethical terms. For Kant the fundamental precepts of morality apply directly to individuals as rational beings; ultimately our

<sup>5</sup> I believe that Kierkegaard himself does accept this view of moral obligations and thus has a different view of the ethical than does Johannes de silentio. See my *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For an extended explanation and defense of a divine command theory of moral obligation, see Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). I do not, by the way, make a distinction between morality and ethics as some philosophers such as Hegel do, and I do not believe that Kierkegaard accepts such a distinction either.

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knowledge of morality must be a priori and not derived from experience. Each of us can grasp the “categorical imperative” by the use of reason and apply it for himself or herself as a touchstone to evaluate concrete moral duties. For Hegel, however, Kant’s categorical imperative is overly formal and cannot guide human beings to act in particular situations. Rather, for Hegel the demands of reason must become embodied in the laws and customs of a people. The individual satisfies the demands of reason not by legislating for himself or herself, but by recognizing and affirming the rational character of the customs and laws of society. This higher social ethic is called by Hegel *Sittlichkeit*, and it is *Sittlichkeit* that Johannes has in mind when he affirms that if Abraham is not to be condemned then there must be something higher than the ethical, something higher than the customs and laws of a society.

That Johannes has something like Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* in mind when he speaks of the ethical is clear when one examines the actual characteristics of the ethical. Those characteristics are best seen in the character Johannes calls the “tragic hero,” who is described by him as the “beloved son of ethics” (p. 99). Johannes gives three examples of the tragic hero from antiquity, all of which bear a superficial resemblance to Abraham. Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia so as to make it possible for the Greeks to sail to Troy. Jephthah, in the Old Testament, in order to secure a victory for ancient Israel, vows to sacrifice the first creature he sees when he returns from the battle, and that creature turns out to be his daughter. Brutus, an early consul of Rome, had his sons executed for treason when they participated in a conspiracy to restore the former king.

Each one of these tragic heroes, says Johannes, “remains within the ethical.” Each “lets an expression of the ethical have its telos in a higher expression of the ethical” (p. 51). This is quite right from the point of view of Hegelian ethics, which sees duties as linked to the social institutions people participate in and views the state and the duties associated with it as higher than the duties linked to participation in family life. These tragic heroes, like Abraham, are called to sacrifice children, but the sacrifices in their case are for the sake of a higher ethical end or telos, which relativizes their familial duties. The sacrifices are justifiable and understandable to others in society (a point Johannes discusses at length in Problem III).

One can see that for Johannes there is an historical and cultural component to what is “ethical.” Ethical duties are not derived from

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some timeless rational principle, as would be the case for Kant, but from the concrete customs of a people. When Johannes says that “everyone” can understand and approve of the actions of his tragic heroes, he clearly means everyone in their respective societies. Jephthah’s actions were consistent with the views of his society, understandable and justifiable to his contemporaries, but one would have a difficult time finding an ethicist today who would approve of someone executing a child because that person had rashly promised to sacrifice the first creature he saw on returning from a battle.

Some people (Kantians, for example) might think this is a very inadequate conception of the ethical life, and if it is an inadequate conception of the ethical life, one might conclude that *Fear and Trembling* itself suffers from a deep flaw. Perhaps if the primary purpose of the book were to develop an account of ethics, this would be a flaw. However, as I have already argued, *Fear and Trembling* is not a book about ethics; it is a book about faith. The ethical life is discussed because Johannes thinks that his contemporaries are likely to confuse what they thought of as ethics with faith, and he thinks it is important that faith be distinguished from the ethical life in this sense. If that is his major purpose, then it is logical that Johannes should employ the conception of the ethical life that he believes is pervasive in his own society, whether that view of the ethical life is correct or not. This is so even if Kierkegaard himself holds a different view of the true ethical life.

There is little doubt that Kierkegaard himself saw Hegel’s philosophy as the dominant view among his intellectual peers, and that fact alone, along with the many jabs at Hegel in *Fear and Trembling*, gives one reason to think that Hegelianism might be the main target of the book. One might object that this is an overestimation of the importance and pervasiveness of Hegelianism. However, Kierkegaard himself did not view Hegelianism as merely an esoteric intellectual view; he saw it as an intellectual expression of the kind of society he saw around him in Europe, the society that he called “Christendom.” Kierkegaard tells us that he saw his own mission as the “introduction of Christianity into Christendom.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, “*The Single Individual*”: *Two Notes Concerning My Work as An Author*, published in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 102–26, especially 123–4, and also p. 42 in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*.

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What does Kierkegaard mean by “Christendom” and why is it a problem? Christendom, according to Kierkegaard, embodies the “enormous illusion” that “we are all Christians” as a matter of course.<sup>7</sup> In such a situation being a Christian is simply identified with being a nice person, a good Dane, or a good European, the kind of person who lives respectably and fulfills his or her social roles and responsibilities. In short, being a Christian is identified with someone who has actualized “the ethical” in the sense of *Sittlichkeit*. Hegel and the Hegelians did in fact see the cultures of western Europe as the culmination of the development of “Absolute Spirit.” One could actually say that Hegel saw modern Western culture as the coming of the kingdom of God on earth, and thus the citizen who participated in its *Sittlichkeit* was also a member of that kingdom.

The practical and exoteric complacency about Christian faith that Kierkegaard sees in the society around him, where it is assumed that every Dane is a Christian (unless that Dane happens to be Jewish), is thus the perfect counterpart to the esoteric philosophy of Hegel. On this Hegelian view, God is no longer a metaphysical abstraction but a concrete reality, actualized in human community. On such a view everyone has faith, and this helps to explain Johannes’ barbs against the people of his own day who have already achieved the highest tasks and thus need to “go further” than faith to something difficult and significant.

Hegel claims that his own philosophy is Christian, and his Danish followers, such as the theologian H. L. Martensen, certainly claimed to be Christians. As Christian thinkers they are of course conversant with the biblical narrative about Abraham and see themselves as defenders of biblical faith. Johannes’ argument leads to conclusions that put such thinkers in a tight spot. Faith, he says, involves the paradox that “the single individual is higher than the universal,” a view that is incompatible with *Sittlichkeit*, which must judge an individual who violates social norms as sinning (p. 47). What does Johannes mean in saying faith involves such a “paradox?” He does not mean, I think, that faith requires a belief in what is logically contradictory. Rather, faith requires a belief that makes no sense from the point of view of “worldly wisdom,” a belief that contradicts what appears to be the case. Normally, a person who deviates from social norms is just a bad person. Abraham may *appear* to

<sup>7</sup> See *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, pp. 42–3.

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be such a person, but, paradoxically, according to Johannes, actually represents something higher than the ethical.

This creates a problem for the Hegelian who claims that “the universal” is the highest, but who also wants to continue to honor Abraham as “the father of faith.” Johannes says that “if this [recognizing the single individual as higher than the universal] is not faith, then Abraham is lost and faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed” (p. 47). In other words, faith as a rare and admirable quality for which Abraham serves as a notable exemplar does not exist because faith has been identified with the commonplace quality of conforming to the norms of one’s own society.

What is at stake here, theologically speaking, is the transcendence of God. Is God a real person, capable of communicating to and having a relation with God’s human creatures? Or is the term “God” simply a symbol for what is regarded as “divine,” the highest and truest values that lie at the heart of a particular social order? In Problem II Johannes says that in the latter case, “if I say . . . that it is my duty to love God, I am really only stating a tautology insofar as ‘God’ here is understood in an entirely abstract sense as the divine, i.e. the universal, i.e. the duty” (p. 59). This means that “God becomes an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought” (p. 59). If Abraham’s faith is to make any sense, God must be a transcendent personal reality. A relationship with God must be “the highest good” for the sake of which the socially assigned roles that make up “the ethical” are relativized (teleologically suspended). There can be duties to such a God that are not reducible to the duties given by one’s human social relations.

That Johannes’ target is Christendom and its Hegelian rationalization is confirmed by his discussions of Problems I and II. Immediately after raising the philosophical questions (Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical? Is there an absolute duty to God?) he makes it clear that the issues do not merely concern Abraham but have direct relevance to Christian faith. In Problem I Johannes cites Mary the mother of Jesus as an analogue to Abraham. Mary also receives and believes a message from God, one that makes no sense to her contemporaries, and which requires her to be “the single individual,” since “the angel appeared only to Mary, and no one could understand her” (p. 57). In reality, Johannes suggests that all of the followers of Jesus are essentially in Abraham’s situation:



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One is moved, one returns to those beautiful times when sweet, tender longings lead one to the goal of one's desire, to see Christ walking about in the promised land. One forgets the anxiety, the distress, the paradox. Was it so easy a matter not to make a mistake? Was it not appalling that this person who walked among others was God? Was it not terrifying to sit down to eat with him? (p. 58)

Nor are things any different for Christians in Johannes' day. To be a Christian is to believe God communicates through a particular historical individual, a message that always transcends *Sittlichkeit* and can come into conflict with it, forcing the person of faith to be "the single individual" who breaks with established ways of thinking. It is only "the outcome, the eighteen centuries" that fraudulently gives the illusion that faith is easier today than it was for Abraham.

That Johannes is using the figure of Abraham to send a message to Christendom is even clearer in Problem II, where he quickly moves from Abraham to a discussion of Luke 14:26, which represents Jesus as saying: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." No sharper challenge to the reduction of Christian faith to social and familial roles can be imagined, and we can clearly see Abraham's absolute devotion to God as an analogue to the Christian's devotion to God in Christ, a devotion that relativizes all finite, earthly values.

Johannes is well aware of the dangers of a faith that is not subject to society's rules. He knows that some are "apprehensive of letting people loose for fear that the worst will happen once the single individual deigns to behave as the single individual" (p. 65). He acknowledges the dangers of subjectivity, but he thinks there is a worse danger, namely that the established social order will deify itself, eliminating the possibility that a Socrates or a Jesus, a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, Jr., could, as the single individual, challenge that social order in response to an authentic message from God.

Johannes does acknowledge the need to establish criteria to help us distinguish the genuine knight of faith from the fanatic (p. 65). Commentators will disagree about the adequacy of the criteria he provides, but I believe at least one of them is valuable. The fanatic, according to Johannes, will be a "sectarian" who tries to form a party or faction to buttress his views. (Today we might go beyond "sectarian" and think of

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this fanatic as someone who might want to form a terrorist cell.) The genuine person of faith is, according to Johannes, “a witness, never a teacher” (p. 70). I think he means by this that a genuine person of faith will rely on the power of his or her moral example, and would never try to impose any views on others in a doctrinaire or manipulative way, much less employ violence to force others to conform to his or her way of thinking.<sup>8</sup>

**Why Abraham cannot explain his action**

Problem III poses the question: “Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, from Isaac?” Johannes’ answer to the question seems complex. Abraham, as Johannes tells the story, does not really explain what he is doing to anyone, including those such as Sarah and Isaac, who surely have a legitimate interest in the case. Is this silence justifiable or does it imply that there is something morally dubious about Abraham’s actions?

Johannes argues that Abraham’s actions are not *ethically* justifiable for reasons that are now clear. For Johannes language and reasoning are social activities. A person’s ability to explain and justify an action requires socially accepted standards of what counts as right and what counts as rational. Insofar as Abraham’s actions are rooted in a word from God that is not mediated through society, Abraham cannot possibly explain or justify his actions. He does not speak, not because he wishes to hide his actions; he would like nothing better than to explain himself, to gain relief by appealing to “the universal.” He does not speak because regardless of what he says he cannot make himself understood, for if he could his actions would be an expression of *Sittlichkeit* after all. Abraham may be justified if there is indeed such a thing as faith, but he is not justified as an ethical figure (in Johannes’ sense) and he cannot justify himself by appealing to existing social standards.

In Problem III Johannes gives numerous examples of mythical and literary figures who in some way shed light on Abraham, discussing such legends as Agnes and the merman, Faust, other literary examples such as

<sup>8</sup> For a powerful example of someone who uses the Abraham and Isaac story in the cause of peace, see Wilfred Owen’s poem, “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young.” Owen was a British poet who wrote during World War I, and the poem can be found in *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1985), p. 151. I thank Sylvia Walsh for calling my attention to this poem.

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Shakespeare's Gloucester (Richard III), and many others besides. Partly Johannes uses these figures once again to clarify what faith is by distinguishing it from look-alikes. However, he also uses them to open up a different issue altogether: why is the figure of Abraham important anyway? Why is it so vital to safeguard the possibility of faith as something distinct from the ethical? Earlier in the book he had already hinted at this theme. If Abraham had been an ethical figure, a tragic hero who killed himself rather than sacrifice Isaac, then "he would have been admired in the world, and his name would not be forgotten; but it is one thing to be admired, another to become a guiding star that rescues the anguished" (pp. 17–18). Who are the anguished ones, and how is it that Abraham's example can save them?

In his discussion of Problem III Johannes pictures several anguished souls. One is the merman taken from the legend of Agnes and the merman. Johannes varies the story by giving "the merman a human consciousness" and he asks us to "let his being a merman denote a human pre-existence in whose consequences his life was ensnared" (p. 84). The merman suffers because of his sin, which has consequences that cannot simply be undone and ignored, and which block the merman from simply "following the universal" and getting married. If the merman is to have Agnes, he must, like Abraham, "have recourse to the paradox. For when the single individual by his guilt has come outside the universal, he can only return to it by virtue of having come as the single individual into an absolute relation to the absolute" (p. 86).

Johannes underscores this observation by going on to "make an observation by which I say more than is said at any point previously" (p. 86). The sentences that follow have been regarded by more than one commentator as the key to understanding the whole book:

Sin is not the first immediacy; sin is a later immediacy. In sin the single individual is already higher, in the direction of the demonic paradox, than the universal, because it is a contradiction for the universal to want to require itself of one who lacks the necessary condition . . . An ethics that ignores sin is an altogether futile discipline, but if it asserts sin, then it is for that very reason beyond itself. (p. 86)

Johannes further emphasizes the point by attaching a footnote, in which he affirms that in his discussion of Abraham he has

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deliberately avoided any reference to the question of sin and its reality . . . As soon as sin is introduced, ethics runs aground precisely upon repentance, for repentance is the highest ethical expression but precisely as such the deepest ethical self-contradiction. (p. 86)

Johannes seems to suggest that for some people the path to authentic selfhood lies in achieving the universal, taking up the social roles, and fulfilling the social duties allotted to them. However, there are others, such as the merman, who are “demonic” figures for whom “normal life” is not an option. Shakespeare’s Gloucester is interpreted by Johannes as one of these people who simply are unable to tread the well-worn paths of “the ethical.” Gloucester is a demonic figure who burns with resentment at the pity extended to him for his physical deformity, and according to Johannes, “Natures like Gloucester’s cannot be saved by mediating them into an idea of society. Ethics really only makes a fool of them” (p. 93). Anguished people like this are doomed if there is no other path to authentic selfhood than to take up “my station and its duties,” to use F. H. Bradley’s apt summation of *Sittlichkeit*.

Who are these anguished people? Are they rare exceptions? People like Gloucester are undoubtedly exceptional. Johannes says explicitly that such people have been “placed outside the universal by nature or historical circumstance,” and that this factor, which is “the beginning of the demonic,” is one for which the individual “is not personally to blame” (p. 93). However, there is one important respect in which such people resemble us all, at least from the perspective of Christianity. From the perspective of orthodox Christian theology, sin is the universal human condition, not a status occupied by a few people who are excluded from society. Sin, according to Johannes, is also a condition that places us “outside the universal,” though it is not a condition in which there is no personal blame. Kierkegaard’s next book after *Fear and Trembling* is, significantly, *The Concept of Anxiety*, an exploration of the meaning of original sin and its psychological preconditions.

If original sin accurately describes the human condition, then no human being becomes an authentic self merely by conforming to *Sittlichkeit*. All of us may not be demonic figures, but all of us are in some ways among “the anguished ones” for whom Abraham may provide a guiding star. The highest good for every individual is a relation to God, a relation made possible by faith and which in turn makes possible a healing transformation of the person of faith. Johannes, we must remember, is

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not himself a person of faith and does not write from an explicitly Christian perspective, and so we get no more from him than these tantalizing observations. But it seems highly plausible that for Kierkegaard himself, all of us should see ourselves as like the merman and Gloucester in one important respect. All of us are in need of a healing of self that can only be made possible by faith, in which, like Abraham, an individual has “an absolute relation to the absolute” (p. 48). We are not all predisposed by natural or historical circumstances to become demonic, but we are, according to the doctrine of original sin, in some way predisposed to lose our way as human beings.

The general thrust of Protestant liberal thought from Kant to Hegel had been to understand genuine religious faith in ethical terms. Kant himself had closely linked true religious faith to the ethical life: “*Apart from a good life-conduct, anything which the human being supposes that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious delusion and counterfeit service of God.*”<sup>9</sup> When Kantian ethics is converted by Hegel to *Sittlichkeit* then the equation of faith with the ethical sets the stage for the triumph of Christendom and the identification of religious faith with social conformism.

Kierkegaard was convinced that the reduction of the life of faith to the ethical life was disastrous, because it eliminated any solution to the fundamental problem posed by the ethical life: the problem of guilt. Kant had himself posed the issue as sharply as anyone else in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, but it is by no means clear that he had solved it.<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard thinks that genuine faith requires an individual relation with God that is personally transformative. Each person can become “the single individual” who can become an authentic self by responding in faith to God’s call on that individual. Such a faith is not reducible to fulfilling one’s social roles but can be the basis of a renewal of the self and those social institutions. The person who has experienced this kind of transformative faith will feel no need to “go further” than faith.

A faith in a transcendent God of course raises many important philosophical questions. Faith that such a God has become incarnate as a

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. and trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, with an introduction by Robert Merrihew Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 166 (emphasis Kant’s).

<sup>10</sup> See John Hare, *The Moral Gap* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), for a strong argument that Kantian ethics itself demands a solution to the problem of guilt beyond that offered by Kant.

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particular human being raises even more questions. Most of these questions are not resolved in *Fear and Trembling*. But then Johannes does not want to make faith easy for us. However, if we do not accurately understand the nature of faith, those questions cannot even be posed. Difficulties that are not recognized cannot be dealt with.

Johannes de silentio is trying to clarify the nature of faith. In so doing, he doubtless contributes to what Kierkegaard himself tried to achieve in his pseudonymous literature, a goal that I think is reflected in this famous comment about the pseudonymous authors:

[T]heir importance . . . unconditionally does not consist in making any new proposal, some unheard-of discovery, or in founding a new party and wanting to go further, but precisely in the opposite, in wanting to have no importance, . . . in wanting, . . . once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers.<sup>11</sup>

C. Stephen Evans

<sup>11</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 629–30.