Introduction

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Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–55) was both a central figure of Golden Age Denmark and a severe critic of its prevailing *ethos*. Although influential today for his diverse contributions to the fields of philosophy, theology, rhetoric, literary theory, and depth psychology, Kierkegaard was widely known in his own day as a provocative social critic. Decrying the deviation of contemporary Christendom from the seminal teachings of the Gospels, he famously resolved to "introduce Christianity into Christendom." Especially in the final years of his life, Kierkegaard was unrelenting in his criticism of the Danish National Church, which, he believed, had fallen captive to the dispirited secularism that had come to pervade late modern European culture. By the time of his death in 1855, his attack on "the People's Church" had made him a controversial and widely misunderstood figure.

Of course, Kierkegaard was also well known to his fellow Danes as a prolific author. Over the span of a relatively short writing career, he produced an impressive corpus, including a series of "upbuilding" Christian discourses published under his own signature and a parallel series of pseudonymous works. This latter series includes the books for which Kierkegaard is currently best known among students and scholars of philosophy, including *Either/Or*, (edited/compiled) by Victor Eremita (1843); *Fear and Trembling*, by Johannes *de silentio* (1843), *Repetition*, by Constantin Constantius (1843); *The Concept of Anxiety*, by Vigilius Haufniensis (1844); *Philosophical Crumbs*, by Johannes Climacus (1844); *Stages On Life's Way*, (edited/compiled) by Hilarius Bolgbinder (1845); *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, by Johannes Climacus (1846); *The Sickness unto Death*, by Anti-Climacus (1849); and *Training in Christianity*, also by Anti-Climacus (1850).

Fear and Trembling (*Frygt og Bæven*) was written and published in 1843 under the pseudonym "Johannes *de silentio*." (Overly fond of *faux* Latinate pseudonyms, Kierkegaard in this case chose a pen name meaning

silent John, *John of silence*, or *John of the realm or order of silence*.[1] Not coincidentally, the theme of *silence* is central to the pseudonym's deliberations in *Fear and Trembling*.) *Fear and Trembling* comprises a sustained meditation on the Hebrew patriarch Abraham, whom Johannes recommends to his readers for urgent reconsideration. His avowed aim in doing so is to mobilize Abraham in the service of his campaign to address the spiritual crisis that afflicts European (or at least Danish) modernity.

Fear and Trembling is advertised in its subtitle as "A Dialectical Lyric." An ominous tone is set by the epigraph from Hamann, wherein the themes of violence, indirect communication, and paternal intrigue are introduced against a disturbingly dark background. Following a witty, polemical "Preface," Johannes launches his "Attunement," in which he surveys four alternative conclusions to the story of the *Akedah*, to which he adds four companion sketches of a mother weaning her infant child. He next delivers a "Eulogy on Abraham," in which he rhapsodizes on the difficulties involved in delivering an encomium worthy of the great Patriarch. Next comes the lengthy section devoted to the three *Problemata*, wherein Johannes endeavors to isolate Abraham in the particularity of his faith.

He begins this section with a "Preliminary Expectoration," and it is here that we meet the famous knights of *infinite resignation* and *faith*, respectively. Johannes' plan in the *Problemata* centers, apparently, on his attempt to understand Abraham as a knight of faith, which requires him in turn to construct a model of heroism that will support this understanding. Rejecting the standard models of heroism available to him, including those of the *aesthetic hero* and the *tragic hero*, Johannes eventually lingers over the model of the *intellectual tragic hero*, of whom he presents Socrates (qua ironist) as exemplary. Might this model be tweaked or developed to accommodate the faith of Abraham? Might we understand Abraham to have been a purveyor of irony?

Before we receive definitive answers to these questions, however, Johannes steers this section of *Fear and Trembling* toward an artless, unsatisfying conclusion. Neglecting to answer the titular question of *Problema* III, he appears to abandon his campaign to isolate the faith of Abraham. When he reappears in the brief "Epilogue" to *Fear and Trembling*, he is once again the voluble social critic whom we recall from the "Preface." Whether or not he has been changed by his meditation on Abraham remains an open question.

[1] Mackey (1986), p. 41.

While Johannes' favored forms of expression can be both daunting and obscure, his main point, most scholars agree, appears to be fairly straightforward: He wishes to unsettle his readers and persuade them to reconsider their understanding of, and relationship to, faith. The proximate target of his polemic is the easy faith that contemporary Christians readily and uncritically claim for themselves. Johannes is particularly concerned to lampoon the breezy sense of entitlement that prompts his contemporaries to regard faith as a routine achievement, preliminary to their pursuit of supposedly loftier aims and ends. Indeed, a recurring theme of *Fear and Trembling* is the alleged aspiration of Johannes' contemporaries, and his ridicule of said aspiration, to "go further" than faith. For them, Johannes disdainfully observes, the attainment of faith is hardly a task at all, much less the task of a lifetime.

So as to disrupt the easy faith of his contemporaries, Johannes endeavors to re-acquaint them with the prodigious and terrifying faith of Abraham, who willingly obeyed his God's command to bind his son Isaac for ritual sacrifice on Mount Moriah. The faith of Abraham is possible, Johannes proposes, only on the basis of a "teleological suspension of the ethical," and only within the compass of a religious sphere of existence that is judged to be *superior* to the more familiar ethical sphere. According to Johannes, Abraham most likely stood in an "absolute relation to the Absolute," on the strength of which he both received and resolved to execute the command to sacrifice Isaac. In fact, Johannes maintains, the acknowledged greatness of Abraham can be located *only* in his decision to honor his religious obligations above, and potentially at the expense of, his ethical obligations. Any other account of Abraham would run the risk of demeaning his faith and reducing him to a status incommensurate with the greatness that is routinely accorded him.

Johannes elaborates his challenge to contemporary Christendom along the following lines: If we admire and revere Abraham, we do so largely on the basis of his willing departure from the established norms and practices that defined the ambit of his ethical life. This departure in turn is traced by Christians to his *faith*, which, Johannes wagers, would have no place in the ethical sphere of contemporary Christendom. We, his readers, thus find ourselves in the difficult position of admiring a patriarchal figure whose signature deeds we would promptly denounce, if called to do so, as those of a scofflaw and murderer. Hence the origin of the dilemma that Johannes repeatedly poses to his readers: Either they affirm the paradox of faith, wherein Abraham elevated himself in his particularity above the ethical universal, or they must renounce him once and for all.

As *Fear and Trembling* is usually interpreted, the transmission of this particular insight is meant to be sufficiently disturbing as to rouse Kierkegaard's readers from the dreary routines of their dispassionate existence.[2] There is much to admire in this general line of interpretation. For example, it goes a long way toward explaining the activity of Johannes within the larger economy of *Fear and Trembling*, and especially his expressions of contempt for his contemporaries. This interpretation boasts the further virtue of assigning to Johannes something like the provocative, exhortatory social role that Kierkegaard claimed for himself in Copenhagen. As a gadfly in his own right, Johannes fits neatly into the office reserved for him by most readers of *Fear and Trembling* – namely, that of Kierkegaard's mouthpiece or proxy. Finally, this interpretation permits us, if we wish, to excuse Kierkegaard for appearing to suborn the extra-ethical violence that is implied by a "teleological suspension of the ethical."[3] As in the case of Johannes, that is, we are invited to think of Kierkegaard as not really intending for us to follow in the extra-ethical footsteps of Abraham. While it may be the case that Kierkegaard and Johannes conspired to "shock" us, they have done so only for our own good.[4] In this respect, they may put us in mind of Socrates, whom they both admired for employing disruptive measures in the service of his efforts to improve his interlocutors.

At the same time, however, this general line of interpretation raises a number of questions. For example, to what *end* do Kierkegaard and Johannes employ their provocative strategy? Are their readers meant to contemplate the faith of the Hebrew patriarch as a model for the faith that might refresh their moribund practice of Christianity? If so, does Kierkegaard mean to suggest that the extra-ethical faith of Abraham and the faith claimed by devout Christians are (or should be) one and the same?

In raising the possibility of a "teleological suspension of the ethical," moreover, does Kierkegaard mean to assert the desirability of a distinctly religious sphere of existence? If so, does he mean thereby to promote, however indirectly, the extra-ethical transgressions that his meditation on Abraham appears to recommend? Or does he mean thereby to confirm the undesirability of this, and perhaps any other, extra-ethical sphere of existence? Indeed, are his readers meant to seek their spiritual renewal in a rejuvenated ethical sphere or beyond the periphery of the ethical sphere?

In short, what *pathos* is the book intended to produce in its readers as they revisit the trial of Abraham? Are Kierkegaard's readers meant to follow

[2] See, for example, Mooney (1991), pp. 87–89; and Green (2011), pp. 151–55, 163–67.
[3] Levinas (1996), pp. 76–77. [4] Green (2011), pp. 153–55.

in Abraham's footsteps and heed the extra-ethical commands they (or others) attribute to unseen deities and supernatural forces? Or are they meant to understand, once and for all, that the tangible, material benefits of the ethical sphere of existence outweigh the spiritual intensity that might be associated with an "absolute relation to the absolute"?

Responding to these and similar questions, scholars have endeavored of late to discern in *Fear and Trembling* the gentler, quieter teachings that its concussive provocations are apparently meant to herald. According to these scholars, the initial "shock" of our confrontation with Abraham soon gives way, or may do so, to nuanced philosophical treatments of a variety of themes.[5] As it turns out, in fact, Kierkegaard and Johannes have a great deal to say on a wide range of topics, including the limits of philosophy, the narrative constitution of selfhood and personal identity, the relationships between and among faith, hope, and love, the competing demands of ethics and religion, the spiritual and social relevance of grace, the nature of sin, the role of religion in contemporary society, and the future of religion in an increasingly secular and cosmopolitan world.

The chapters in this volume are representative of the recent renascence of philosophical interest in *Fear and Trembling*. The collective achievement of the contributors to this volume is the presentation of *Fear and Trembling* as a complex, multi-faceted work, fully befitting the audacity of Kierkegaard's philosophical, psychological, and literary aspirations.

[5] See, for example, Mackey (1986) pp. 63–67; Mooney (1991), pp. 91–100; Mulhall (2001), pp. 380–86; and Green (2011), pp. 167–79.

CHAPTER 1

Homing in on Fear and Trembling

Alastair Hannay

Introduction

Questions posed by the stark cameo of parental sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* penetrate to the heart of Kierkegaard's writings. Yet to serve as an introduction to these, the work itself must be read through a suitably adjusted lens. To those meeting Kierkegaard here for the first time, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and the attached notion of "suspending the ethical" may simply confirm those once widespread rumors of the Danish writer's irrationalism. Even sympathetic commentators seeking a place for it within a consistent picture of Kierkegaard's thought and works can feel its challenge.

A useful first adjustment is to read *Fear and Trembling* in the context of Kierkegaard's lifelong project of relieving the traditional disciplines of philosophy and theology of their hold on questions of value and morals. If only as a start, it helps to see *Fear and Trembling* as a literary stunt aimed at startling its readers into considering a situation where, in the absence of such traditional backing, we, the readers, are left to answer such questions on our own.

However, that angle needs considerable modification and refinement. This chapter attempts to provide both: first, in the light of the theological and philosophical context that gave Kierkegaard's radical thinking its conceptual form and vocabulary; and second, through consideration of the place of *Fear and Trembling* in the biographical origins of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship. Out of context, discussions of this work tend to puncture the philosophical air with irrelevant and sometimes unanswerable questions. Kierkegaard might agree that genuinely philosophical questions have no definitive answers, but far from implying that they should not trouble us, he would almost certainly insist that this places them all the more squarely on our own doorsteps.

That makes it all the more relevant that the "homing in" undertaken here should bring the reader closer to home in a more literal sense by

linking *Fear and Trembling*'s themes to Kierkegaard's traumatic decision to break off his engagement. Before that, however, a glimpse must be caught of the wider intellectual context within and against which Kierkegaard wrote. Conceptions of the extent of Kierkegaard's opposition to Hegel have been helpfully corrected in recent years, along with a refocusing on Kierkegaard's Danish contemporaries as being the main target of his polemic. Yet they and Kierkegaard shared a background in the latest trends in post-Kantian philosophy from Fichte, through Schleiermacher to Schelling and Hegel, all thinkers in whom Kierkegaard himself was well versed. Thus Hegel, far from being a passing reference in *Fear and Trembling*, appears there as representative of a prevailing view of ethics that takes us to the very core of Kierkegaard's polemic.

Schelling and Hegel

Near the beginning of the first puzzle ("problema") of three discussed in *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes *de silentio* says that the "paradox" of faith is that the individual is "higher" than the universal.[1] But there is no hint of paradox in the morally quite innocent pursuit of our own everyday interests. Nor, when it comes to faith, need any such scruple come to mind with the suggestion that the individual's beliefs take priority over what people generally or currently believe. Traditionally, the terms "particular" and "universal" are used in theoretical rather than practical contexts. In these, universals are simply general concepts under which their particular instances fall. In terms of practice, it is in the special context of moral judgment that the universal traditionally takes precedence. The supremacy of the universal here may have originated in the notion of what was good for the tribe or nation. But in questions of ethics and morality, the universal has been elevated to a position where it is associated with the good of mankind in general. From this are derived notions of equality and reciprocity of the kind traditionally expressed in the Golden Rule, a notion that philosophers influenced by Rousseau and following Kant have reconstructed formally in terms of tests of "universalizability." To find out the

[1] *Fear and Trembling* (hereinafter FT), trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Classics, 1985; hardback edn. 2014), p. 84, Penguin Great Ideas edn., p. 63, page references to the latter hereinafter unprefixed in parentheses. Cf. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh, ed. C. Stephen Evans. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 47, page references hereinafter prefixed in parentheses. *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (hereinafter SKS), ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, and Johnny Kondrup (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997–2013), 4, 149.

moral worth of your action, you must subject it to the rule that similar cases be treated similarly. Here the universal most definitely takes precedence over the particular or individual.

Yet philosophers today, partly under the influence of Nietzsche, have freely criticized moral theories of this kind for ignoring what Kant called one's duty to oneself, and which he claimed was a precondition of being able effectively to subject oneself to the Moral Law. Moral philosophers now talk unabashedly of "personal projects" and "agent-centered options," actions that are either unencumbered by that law or else considered to be valid exceptions to it. So far there is no paradox generated. All we have is a widening of the notion of morality to include the moral right of personal development.

To reach paradox we must grasp another notion appealed to by Johannes *de silentio*. In conclusion of his discussion of the third puzzle, the paradox is said to be that the individual be made to stand in an "absolute" relation to the absolute.[2] Unless this is the case, he says, *Fear and Trembling*'s central figure, Abraham, must be considered either a criminal or a lunatic.

The individual's relation to "the absolute" is a central topic of post-Kantian Idealism. To gain a wider perspective on the background against which Kierkegaard directs his criticism of that tradition we must focus on one of its principal assumptions. In its most elemental form it is the axiom that the self-conscious soul is, in each individual, in some way creatively integral to the nature of things. In this tradition, the self-conscious soul is a complex notion that philosophy nowadays in its various manifestations is much inclined to reject. Yet, without it, we can hardly make sense of a great and by no means defunct tradition of thought.

Paradoxically in a weaker sense, or ironically, it was Kant's critical approach to the ambitious assumptions of rationalist philosophy before him that set the scene for German Idealism and more. As against Descartes' idea of the soul as a substance (simple, self-identical, and immediately aware of itself), Kant's four "paralogisms" of pure reason aimed to show that such claims not only exceed what reason can decide, but also misrepresent the limits of what can be said about "selves" on the basis of experience – once the limitations of experience are made clear. Kant's "transcendental idealism," so called by Kant himself, asserts that objects of experience have their spatial, temporal and causal properties

[2] FT, p. 144 (148) (p. 106), SKS 4, 207.

because our minds are so structured that it is with these that our minds themselves generate experience out of an unstructured "manifold."

Absolute Idealism found the confinement of human knowledge to what the mind could make out of the manifold of experience wholly unsatisfactory. It implied that reality in itself lay beyond the scope of human knowledge, something Kierkegaard occasionally refers to as Kant's skepticism. It implied that such knowledge was available only to God. The ambition of Absolute Idealism was to show that once all experience is grasped as an intelligible and conceptually integrated whole, that whole is all the reality there is or could be. One implication is that the knowledge that would be God's is potentially ours. It was an implication that led to different views of the way and extent to which divinity is involved in the process of knowledge.

Absolute Idealism in name has its origin in Schelling's *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*[3] and in later of his works that engaged the attention of much of intellectual Europe in the early nineteenth century. Its home disciplines were "speculative philosophy" and "speculative theology," each referred to as a science. The former, in a combination of observation and conceptualizing, sought to bring all experience into a coherent whole, while the latter debated the role of divinity in this holistic scheme of things, addressing issues concerning divine attributes, the place of faith, and the role of Scripture. Both sciences were "metaphysical" in the sense that they went beyond the study of spatio-temporal and causal relations in nature, seeking the unity of these through a process of abstract reasoning about the relationship of the conscious subject to the surrounding world. Such reasoning was assumed to have a central role in the actual achievement of what is finally real; in other words, in the creation itself. The questions brought to bear on the reflections of speculative philosophy by speculative *theology*, for its part, would include for instance how much should be left to revelation.

History for Schelling was a series of stages emerging from a Fall which, much like a metaphysical version of the Big Bang, accounts for the presence of sheer diversity. Diversity then seeks unity in its difference, unification being the goal of the continuing development. Humankind is part of the diversity but also party to the unifying process at least in principle. Actual participation requires will or understanding or both. For this a model is found in the ideal of a personal God, a God that is no human invention, but rather, if an invention at all, one that the ground

[3] Schelling (1997).

of all things has itself contrived. Briefly, this ground takes on the shape of personality in order that, through the example thus set, humankind can contribute to a continuing creation that is also its own fulfillment.

Taking a critical approach to his earlier student friend and younger colleague Schelling, and echoing in some ways Kant's earlier critical dissolution of rational metaphysics, Hegel developed a radically different version of spiritual emergence in which the personal God dissolves into the developing world as we find it. It is in the creation itself as it presently stands, which is the way in which humankind has shaped it, that we see the divine will at work.

Kierkegaard, with a personal God integral to his inherited faith, clearly had an antecedent sympathy for Schelling's version. It was while attending Schelling's Berlin lectures in the winter of 1841–42 that he began his pseudonymous authorship by writing a large part of (the second part of) *Either/Or*. The assiduous transcription of the notes taken on that occasion[4] indicate the seriousness of the hopes that Kierkegaard attached to what Schelling had promised would be his "positive" philosophy. According to Schelling, Hegel's philosophy was in its entirety negative, since it failed to place reason in the context of the contingencies of life. It had, in other words, no existential relevance. Hegel had been led to confuse a mere representation of the intellectual form in which God *would* reveal himself were he to do so with the fact of his actually having done so.

We can well imagine Kierkegaard expecting something from a philosopher who could say that "everything remains incomprehensible for man before it has become inward for him, that is, has been led back to just that innermost part of his nature which is for him, as it were, the living witness of all truth."[5] But while Schelling sought in his lectures to show that God does indeed reveal himself, to Kierkegaard's intense disappointment this revelation still failed to connect with the existing individual facing life's contingencies. It was through the history of religious experience, beginning with mythology, and culminating in mysticism and theosophy, that Schelling claimed that the fact and content of revelation were established. Where Hegel had reduced God to the "concept," all that his colleague could offer was yet another departure from selfhood and existence. Toward the end of his Berlin stay, in a letter to his friend Emil Boesen, Kierkegaard

[4] *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks* (KJN), ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay, David Kangas, Bruce H. Kirmmse, George Pattison, Joel D. S. Rasmussen, Vanessa Rumble, and K. Brian Söderquist (Princeton University Press, 2010), Vol. 3, Notebook 11. Cf. SKS 28, Brev (letter) 85.

[5] Schelling (1967), p. 88.