

The Relation between Faith and Ethics in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*¹

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Abstract

In *Fear and Trembling*, through the pseudonym Johannes De Silentio and based on the biblical story of the "binding of Isaac," Kierkegaard discusses the relation between faith and ethics. According to my reading of De Silentio, we are confronted by different ethical demands that cannot be harmonized and that exceed our capabilities to respond. We don't fulfill ourselves by means of complying with our ethical responsibilities, but coming to faith. Faith does not abolish such ethical demands. Faith involves what De Silentio calls a teleological suspension of the ethical and requires an immediate reinstatement of the ethical not as subordinate to faith, but in its full and independent validity. I will argue that De Silentio's understanding of faith cannot be confused with fanaticism nor justify terrorism and that it implies a double movement: first, the movement of infinite resignation, accessible to all, by which we distance ourselves from the world and give up the claim to possess the things and persons we love, and second, the movement initiated by God by which we receive those things and persons back as gifts of God and become capable of living in this world with joy.

Key words: faith, ethics, love, Abraham

Resumen

En *Temor y Temblor*, a través del seudónimo de Johannes De Silentio y basándose en la historia bíblica del "sacrificio de Isaac," Kierkegaard analiza la relación entre fe y ética. Según mi lectura de De Silentio, nos enfrentamos a diferentes demandas éticas que no pueden ser armonizadas y que exceden nuestra capacidad para responder. No nos realizamos por medio del cumplimiento de nuestras responsabilidades éticas, sino accediendo a la fe. La fe no elimina las demandas éticas. Implica lo que De Silentio llama una suspensión teleológica de lo ético y requiere un restablecimiento inmediato de la ética en su plena validez no subordinada a la fe. Aduciré que la comprensión de De Silentio de la fe no se puede confundir con fanatismo ni puede justificar el terrorismo y que implica un doble movimiento: en primer lugar, el movimiento de la resignación infinita, accesible a todos y todas, por el cual nos distanciamos del mundo y renunciamos a todo reclamo de propiedad sobre las cosas y las personas que amamos, y en segundo lugar, el movimiento iniciado por Dios por el cual las recibimos de vuelta como dones de Dios y nos volvemos capaces de vivir en este mundo con alegría.

Palabras clave: fe, ética, amor, Abraham

In the year of the 200th anniversary of Søren Kierkegaard's birth, I will in this paper analyze the relation between faith and ethics through a detailed study of his pseudonymous work *Fear and Trembling*.

¹ I thank professor Gary M. Simpson from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, for his appreciated guidance and advising in this paper.

This research is a constituent part of my overall aim of explaining and clarifying how religion, ethics and society are related and should be related. To what extent does religion encourage or distract the believers from the task of being active participants in the struggles, conflicts and dreams of the societies of which we are part? How should we relate to those in whose lives we can make a real difference and in particular how should we relate to those who are most dear to us? Which are the criteria that guide us when we make ethical decisions? Should we aspire to perfection? Can we fulfill ourselves through our engagement in society?

This is only a short sample of the questions that motivate me, and I imagine myself writing to an audience composed not only of Christians, but also of many others, all united in a common desire to live in a better world, and not biased against religion, but very critical of religion when used to obstruct a broad and fair dialogue, to exclude the different and to justify terrorism.

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, based on the well known biblical story of the "binding of Isaac" from Genesis 22:1-19 shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, fits perfectly into my purpose. Although *Fear and Trembling* was published for the first time in 1843, I will not study it as a historical document, but as a work that deals with issues that concern us today.

Kierkegaard doesn't want to make a purely theoretical contribution from a distance. He understands that it is mainly in his work as a religious writer that he participates in the struggles and dreams of his society, and that it is in his work as a religious writer that he can make a difference in the lives of others. One of his main concerns is therefore how to communicate, how to ensure the audience's attention, and how to avoid misunderstandings. This concern led him to write *Fear and Trembling* under the pseudonym Johannes De Silentio and I will in the first part of this paper explain the use of the pseudonym.

As I can not presuppose that my audience knows *Fear and Trembling*, I will devote the second part of the paper to give a full summary of the work. In passing, I will at this moment encourage my readers to read on their own not only Genesis 22:1-19, but also Romans 4:16 and Hebrews 11:17-19, texts that Kierkegaard permanently had in sight. It should also be born in mind that it is no coincidence that the name of the book *Fear and Trembling* was taken from Philippians 2:12 where Paul calls his beloved to work out their own salvation "with fear and trembling," at the same time that he in the following verse adds "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). Kierkegaard learned from Paul the art to express himself in paradox.

After the summary, in the third part of the paper, "The Different Approaches toward the Ethical that Appear in Fear and Trembling," I will argue that not only one but at least three approaches to ethics are present in Fear and Trembling: Kant's, Hegel's and the double commandment of love, and that they can not be harmonized. On the contrary, the ethical demands exceed the human capabilities to respond. That will bring me to the subsequent fourth section of the paper, "The Limitations of the Ethical," where I will deal with the limitations of the ethical. Definitely, Kierkegaard in the voice of the pseudonym De Silentio has given up perfection. And the ground has been paved for a path to selfhood different from the fulfillment of the ethical responsibilities, namely what De Silentio calls the double-movement of faith.

Some authors understand that according to De Silentio faith is synonymous with obedience to God's commands, and that ethical demands don't have "objectivity" other than the fact of being commanded by God. This is, in my view, a wrong reading of *Fear and Trembling* and I will prove it in the fifth section of the paper, "The 'Strong Divine

Command' Ethics," before I can get into De Silentio's right understanding of the movement of faith in the sixth section, "The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical." De Silentio argues that the movement of faith requires "a teleological suspension of the ethical," that is, a kind of putting ethical temporarily into brackets. Some commentators argue that the ethical can subsequently be reinstated as subordinate to the religious and others argue that the ethical shall be reinstated in its full and independent validity. I will endorse the latter position. Faith can not guide action.

The last two sections of the paper, "The Distinction between Faith and Fanaticism" and "The Specificity of Faith," will be devoted to distinguish between faith and fanaticism and to define the specificity of faith. I will maintain that Abraham has been misunderstood when used as inspiration to commit terrorist attacks and I will appreciate and welcome with enthusiasm that De Silentio stresses that faith brings us back again and again to finitude and to the tasks of this world.

I am aware of the fact that having restricted myself to one single work of an author as prolific and complex as Søren Kierkegaard, the account here given of the relation between faith and ethics is partial and can neither be labeled as Kierkegaard's nor as Christian.

I will consistently quote from Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong's translation of *Fear and Trembling*² and with these quotes I will use the parenthetical citation including into brackets the sigla FT and the page number after a comma. Only occasionally, I will refer to the translation of Sylvia Walsh³ or to the original Danish.

The pseudonym

Kierkegaard is without doubt the producer of *Fear and Trembling*. He doesn't tell us the story of Abraham in a direct way, but the story of a man who had heard the story of Abraham as a child, and who "the older he became, the more often his thoughts turned to that story" (FT, 9). Moreover, "his enthusiasm for it became greater and greater, and yet he could understand the story less and less" (FT, 9). At the end, "his soul had but one wish, to see Abraham, but one longing, to have witnessed that event" (FT, 9), "his craving was to go along on the three-day journey when Abraham rode with sorrow before him and Isaac beside him. His wish was to be present in that hour when Abraham raised his eyes and saw Mount Moriah in the distance, the hour when he left the asses behind and went up the mountain alone with Isaac" (FT, 9). But neither is it directly Kierkegaard who narrates the story of that man obsessed with Abraham. Kierkegaard creates a character, Johannes de Silentio, in order to make him write a book, *Fear and Trembling*, that tells the story of that man who could not get out of his head the story of Abraham which is told in the Old Testament.⁴

Kierkegaard published *Fear and Trembling* under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, and we must separate the meanings and standpoints of De Silentio from the meanings and standpoints of Kierkegaard himself. As Evans rightly says, "all we can know about this Johannes must be derived from his book, and thus an understanding of

² Søren Kierkegaard, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong, *Fear and Trembling ; Repetition*, Kierkegaard's Writings ; 6, edited by Søren Kierkegaard (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

³ Søren Kierkegaard, C. Stephen Evans, and Sylvia Walsh, *Fear and Trembling*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴ Oscar Alberto Cuervo, *Kierkegaard: Una Introducción*, Pensamientos Locales, edited by Ariel and Cangí Pennisi, Adrián (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial Quadrata, 2010), 17-18.

his standpoint as an author must go hand in hand with an understanding of the work itself.”⁵ De Silentio “does not claim to be a person of faith himself; to the contrary he repeatedly affirms his inability to believe as Abraham did, and expresses amazement and admiration for Abraham, but also a lack of understanding of the Biblical patriarch.”⁶ He says: “Abraham I cannot understand; in a certain sense I can learn nothing from him except to be amazed” (FT, 37), and also: “I presumably can describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them” (FT, 37).

A first key to understand the figure of Johannes de Silentio is his own name: John of silence, or silent John, which means that we must pay attention not only to what he says, but also to what he leaves unsaid. Another key is the “Motto” from Johann Georg Hamann which opens the book: “What Tarquinius said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not.” Tarquin was the King of Rome and his son, who had gained power in the rival city of Gabii, had sent him a messenger asking for advice about what he should do, but for some reason Tarquin didn’t trust the messenger, so saying nothing, he merely walked around the garden and cut off the heads of the tallest flowers. When the messenger related this behavior to the son, the son understood that he should kill the leading leaders of the city. Evans says that

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.⁷

De Silentio doesn’t claim to be either a poet (FT, 90) or a philosopher (FT, 7), but he, notwithstanding, writes in a lyrical and dialectical way, in agreement with the subtitle of the work, which is “Dialectical Lyric.” He says about himself that “he is *poetice et eleganter* [in a poetic and refined way] a supplementary clerk⁸ who neither writes the system⁹ nor gives *promises* of the system, who neither exhausts himself on the system nor binds himself to the system” (FT, 7). He describes the age in which he is living as “an age that has crossed out passion in order to serve science” (FT, 7) and an age

When an author who desires readers must be careful to write in such a way that his book can be conveniently skimmed during the after-dinner nap, [and] must be careful to look and act like that polite gardener’s handyman in *Adresseavisen* [The Advertiser] who with hat in hand and good references from his most recent employer recommends himself to the esteemed public (FT, 7-8).

But De Silentio does something completely different: “He writes because to him it is a luxury that is all the more pleasant and apparent the fewer there are who buy and read what he writes” (FT, 7).

⁵ Kierkegaard, Evans, and Walsh, *Fear and Trembling*, ix-x.

⁶ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard : An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 101.

⁷ Kierkegaard, Evans, and Walsh, *Fear and Trembling*, x.

⁸ Sylvia Walsh translates the Danish *Extra-Skriver* better with “free-lancer.” See *ibid.*, 5.

⁹ “The system” will in *Fear and Trembling* as in other Kierkegaard writings always be a reference to the Hegelian philosophical system.

With this complex mechanism of writing which he later would call “indirect communication,” Kierkegaard is urging the reader to make his or her own decision. He is convinced that communication on moral and religious matters will not be effective without the “active involvement and appropriation by the person receiving the communication,”¹⁰ and his purpose becomes evident when De Silentio, in the middle of a section called “Eulogy on Abraham,” abruptly addresses the reader:

We read in the sacred scripture: “And God tempted [*fristede*] Abraham and said: Abraham, Abraham, where are you? But Abraham answered: Here am I.” You to whom these words are addressed, was this the case with you? When in the far distance you saw overwhelming vicissitudes approaching, did you not say to the mountains, “Hide me,” and to the hills, “Fall on me”? Or, if you were stronger, did your feet nevertheless not drag along the way, did they not long, so to speak, for the old trails? And when your name was called, did you answer, perhaps answer softly, in a whisper? Not so with Abraham. Cheerfully, freely, confidently, loudly he answered: Here am I (FT, 21).

Nobody but each particular reader can answer De Silentio’s questions.

Summary of Fear and Trembling

In the “Preface,” De Silentio focuses on the concepts of doubt and faith. He is ironically amazed by the fact of living in a time when people already have “doubted everything” (FT, 5) and it must be assumed that “everyone has faith” (FT, 7). He calls that into question, remembering “those ancient Greeks, who after all did know a little about philosophy,” (FT, 6) for whom “proficiency in doubting [could not be] acquired in days and weeks, but was a “task for a whole lifetime” (FT, 6) and “those ancient days” when faith was “a task for a whole lifetime, because it was assumed that proficiency in believing is not acquired either in days or in weeks” (FT, 7).

After the preface, De Silentio offers an “Exordium” where he in four different vignettes recreates some of the ways in which the man obsessed with Abraham pondered on this event. All the vignettes portray an “Abraham” lacking faith, and therefore different from the biblical Abraham. In the first vignette, Abraham tries to explain to Isaac what would happen, and since “Isaac could not understand him” (FT, 10), he pretends to be a monster in order to make sure that Isaac at least doesn’t lose his faith in God: “He seized Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and said, “Stupid boy, do you think I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you think it is God’s command? No, it is my desire” (FT, 10). In the second vignette everything happens as in the biblical story, except that “Abraham’s eyes were darkened” due to the experience, “and he saw joy no more” (FT, 12). In the third vignette, Abraham rides back again and again to Mount Moriah alone and prays to God to forgive him the sin of having been willing to sacrifice his son: “He could not comprehend that it was a sin that he had been willing to sacrifice to God the best that he had, the possession for which he himself would have gladly died many times; and if it was a sin, if he had not loved Isaac in this manner, he could not understand that it could be forgiven, for what more terrible sin was there?” (FT, 13). In the last vignette, Isaac realizes that his father’s “left hand was clenched in despair, that a shudder went through his whole body” in the moment in which he drew the knife, and as a result, Isaac “lost the faith” (FT, 14). Evans is right: “The alternative ‘Abrahams’ are in some way, unlike the actual Abraham,

¹⁰ Evans, *Kierkegaard : An Introduction*, 31.

understandable; in looking at them we understand Abraham better in the sense that we know better what faith is not.”¹¹

The “Exordium” is followed by a “Eulogy on Abraham.” Now it is the story of the biblical Abraham we are told. Already when he “emigrated from the land of his fathers,” Abraham “left behind his worldly understanding, and he took along his faith” (FT, 17). It was also “by faith [that] Abraham received the promise that in his seed all generations of the earth would be blessed” (FT, 17). A long time passed, “but Abraham had faith, and therefore he was young, for he who always hopes for the best grows old and is deceived by life, and he who is always prepared for the worst grows old prematurely, but he who has faith—he preserves an eternal youth” (FT, 18). Isaac was born and “there was joy in Abraham’s house” (FT, 19), but shortly after God tempted Abraham and asked him to offer his son as a burnt offering.

Yet Abraham had faith, and had faith for this life. In fact, if his faith had been only for a life to come, he certainly would have more readily discarded everything in order to rush out of a world to which he did not belong. But Abraham’s faith was not of this sort... Abraham had faith specifically for this life—faith that he would grow old in this country, be honored among the people, blessed by posterity, and unforgettable in Isaac, the most precious thing in his life, whom he embraced with a love that is inadequately described by saying he faithfully fulfilled the father’s duty to love the son (FT, 20).

At the time of drawing the knife, “he did not doubt, he did not look in anguish to the left and to the right, [and] he did not challenge heaven with his prayers” (FT, 22). And Abraham “gained everything and kept Isaac” (FT, 22).

We have now arrived to the main part of the book called “Problemata,” devoted to the discussion of three philosophical problems, and which opens with what is called a “Preliminary Expectoration.” In this Preliminary Expectoration, De Silentio makes the distinction between “infinite resignation” and “faith,” embodied by the ideal figures of the “knight of infinite resignation” and the “knight of faith.” He admits that if he had been ordered “to take such an extraordinary royal journey as the one to Mount Moriah,” he would not have stayed at home, but the moment he mounted the horse, he would have said to himself: “Now all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all my joy” (FT, 34-35). That would have been the movement of infinite resignation, a movement in order to find himself and again rest in himself, only “a substitute for faith” (FT, 35). And he would not “have loved Isaac as Abraham loved him” (FT, 35), and had he gotten Isaac again, he “would have been in an awkward position,” for “what was the easiest for Abraham would have been difficult” for him (FT, 35). “He who with all the infinity of his soul, *proprio motu et propriis auspiciis* [of his own accord and on his own responsibility], has made the infinite movement and cannot do more, he keeps Isaac only with pain” (FT, 35). Abraham, on the contrary,

He had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind the requirement. He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac. No doubt he was surprised at the outcome, but through a double-movement he had attained his first condition, and therefore he received Isaac more joyfully than the first time (FT, 35-36).

¹¹ Kierkegaard, Evans, and Walsh, *Fear and Trembling*, xii.

Although “infinite resignation” should not be mistaken for faith, it is also “the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith, for only in infinite resignation do I become conscious of my eternal validity, and only then can one speak of grasping existence by virtue of faith” (FT, 46). Abraham is not the only “knight of faith.” In De Silentio words, “a slave in Abraham’s house,” “a professor of philosophy,” or “a poor servant girl” (FT, 38) can also make the movements of faith, but De Silentio draws attention to a big difference. The “knights of the infinite resignation are easily recognizable—their walk is light and bold” (FT, 38), because of the “eternal consciousness” they have been able to gain (FT, 48), while on the contrary “they who carry the treasure of faith are likely to disappoint, for externally they have a striking resemblance to bourgeois philistinism, which infinite resignation, like faith, deeply disdains” (FT, 38), precisely because faith, “after having made the movements of infinity... makes the movements of finitude” (FT, 38). De Silentio confesses that he has never met somebody whom he for sure would define as a “knight of faith,” but he tries to imagine one, and he is struck by his similarity with a tax collector. Even watching “his slightest movement to see if it reveals a bit of heterogeneous optical telegraphy from the infinite,¹² a glance, a facial expression, a gesture, a sadness, a smile that would betray the infinite in its heterogeneity with the finite” (FT, 39), De Silentio doesn’t find anything that can single this imaginary person out as a “knight of faith.” The knight of faith “finds pleasure in everything, takes part in everything, and every time one sees him participating in something particular, he does it with an assiduousness that marks the worldly man who is attached to such things” (FT, 39). After “a walk to the woods,” when he is going home toward evening,

He thinks that his wife surely will have a special hot meal for him when he comes home... (...) It so happens that he does not have four shillings to his name, and yet he firmly believes that his wife has this delectable meal waiting for him. If she has, to see him eat would be the envy of the elite and an inspiration to the common man... His wife does not have it—curiously enough, he is just the same (FT, 39-40).

De Silentio’s description of this imaginary knight of faith is still worth quoting *in extenso*:

He drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher, because his remaining in finitude would have no trace of a timorous, anxious routine, and yet he has this security that makes him delight in it as if finitude were the surest thing of all. And yet, yet the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd (FT, 40).

The first and the second of the three philosophical problems De Silentio discusses after the Preliminary Expectoration, if there is “a teleological suspension of the ethical” (FT, 54) and if there is “an absolute duty to God” (FT, 68), are closely related. Evans makes a good summary: De Silentio “argues that if Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is justifiable or admirable, then one must affirm that there

¹² Sylvia Walsh translates, more freely but also more understandable: “to see whether a little heterogeneous fraction of a signal from the infinite manifests itself.” See *ibid.*, 32.

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."¹³ Abraham's case is different from that of the tragic hero: "The tragic hero is still within the ethical" (FT, 59). De Silentio gives three examples: 1) Agamemnon who had to consent to the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia in order to meet the demand of an angry deity that otherwise would not put an end to the "dead calm" that prevented them from sailing to Troy (FT, 57); 2) the judge Jephthah (Judges 11:29-40) who vowed that if the Lord would give the Ammonites into his hand, then he would offer up as a burnt offering to the Lord whoever came out of the doors of his house to meet him when he returned victorious from the Ammonites, and it happened to be his only daughter (FT, 58); and 3) the consul of Rome, Brutus, who "had his sons executed for treason when they participated in a conspiracy to restore the former king,"¹⁴ becoming in that way the most magnificent interpreter of the Roman laws (FT, 58). While Abraham with his act "transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher *telos*"¹⁵ outside it, in relation to which he suspended it" (FT, 59), the tragic heroes allowed one expression of the ethical (the familiar duties) "to have its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical" (the duties as social leaders) (FT, 59).

De Silentio doesn't doubt that there is an absolute duty to God and he illustrates it with Jesus' words in Luke 14:26, which can only be interpreted paradoxically: "Anyone who in demanding a person's love believes that this love is demonstrated by his becoming indifferent to what he otherwise cherished is not merely an egotist but is also stupid, and anyone demanding that kind of love simultaneously signs his own death sentence insofar as his life is centered in this desired love" (FT, 73). Therefore he adds that "the absolute duty can lead one to do what ethics would forbid, but it can never lead the knight of faith to stop loving" (FT, 74). Abraham never stopped loving Isaac and "since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him, for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God" (FT, 74). This paradoxical task is also accompanied by the incapability of making yourself understandable. To answer the call to become knights of faith relinquishing the universal is also to become single individuals. It is usually considered that "existing as the single individual" is "the easiest thing in the world," and that "people must be coerced into becoming the universal" (FT, 75), but it is the other way round. "To exist as the single individual is the most terrible of all" and also "the greatest of all" (FT, 75). "Up higher there winds a lonesome trail, steep and narrow; ... it is dreadful to be born solitary outside of the universal, to walk without meeting one single traveler" (FT, 76). De Silentio insists that the knight of faith "feels the pain of being unable to make himself understandable to others, but he has no vain desire to instruct others" (FT, 80), and certainly "the true knight of faith is a witness, never the teacher" (FT, 80).

The third problem discussed by De Silentio is if it was ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eleizer, and from Isaac. Although he does not say it explicitly, the answer is negative: "Abraham remains silent—but he *cannot* speak" and "therein lies the distress and anxiety" (FT, 113). The sole fact of speaking would have translated him into the universal, for, as Evans argues, "to

¹³ Ibid., xx.

¹⁴ Ibid., xxi.

¹⁵ For the word *telos*, the Danish original and the Hongs use the Greek letters. I will in the quotes from *Fear and Trembling* transliterate it into the Roman alphabet and write it in italics.

justify an action to others one must appeal to accepted standards of right and wrong, and those standards are themselves embodied in a language.”¹⁶ The only word preserved from him is what he answered Isaac when the boy asked him where the lamb for a burnt offering was. De Silentio understands that Abraham’s answer to Isaac, that God himself would provide the lamb, is “in the form of irony” (FT, 118). From his answer we can see

The double-movement in Abraham’s soul. If Abraham in resignation had merely relinquished Isaac and done no more, he would have spoken an untruth, for he does indeed know that God demands Isaac as a sacrifice, and he knows that he himself in this very moment is willing to sacrifice him. After having made this movement, he has at every moment made the next movement, has made the movement of faith by virtue of the absurd. Thus he is not speaking an untruth, because by virtue of the absurd it is indeed possible that God could do something entirely different (FT, 119).

In the “Epilogue,” De Silentio compares the “the highest passion in a person,” which is faith, with the passion to love: “No generation has learned to love from another, no generation is able to begin at any other point than at the beginning, no later generation has a more abridged task than the previous one, and if someone desires to go further and not stop with loving as the previous generation did, this is foolish and idle talk” (FT, 121). In the same way, regarding faith, “no generation begins at any other point than where the previous one did. Each generation begins all over again; the next generation advances no further than the previous one, that is, if that one was faithful to the task and did not leave it high and dry” (FT, 121-122). “There perhaps are many in every generation who do not come to faith,” says De Silentio, “but no one goes further” unless faith stopped being “the highest passion” (FT, 122). And De Silentio continues: “Whether there also are many in our day who do not find it, I do not decide. I dare to refer only to myself, without concealing that he has a long way to go, without therefore wishing to deceive himself or what is great by making a trifle of it” (FT, 122). After all, “life has tasks enough also for the person who does not come to faith, and if he loves these honestly, his life will not be wasted” (FT, 122).

The Different Approaches toward the Ethical that Appear in *Fear and Trembling*

“The ethical as such is the universal” (FT, 55), says De Silentio. In this merger of the ethical with the universal, he is referring, first of all, to “Kant’s notion of the ethical, with its conception of universal and society-transcending laws.”¹⁷ The reference to Kant becomes clear when he says that “as the universal it [the ethical] applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *telos* [end, purpose] but is itself the *telos* for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further” (FT, 54). De Silentio seems here to offer his own version of the principle of the categorical imperative, whose three formulations in Kant’s words, according to Jean Porter, are: 1) “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”; 2) “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature”; and 3) Never treat yourself nor

¹⁶ Evans, *Kierkegaard : An Introduction*, 106.

¹⁷ Ronald Green, “Enough Is Enough! *Fear and Trembling* Is Not About Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 2 (1993): 194.

others “merely as a means, but always at the same time an end in himself.”¹⁸ When De Silentio insists that Abraham is “either a murderer or a man of faith” without any “middle term” (FT, 57) and when he stresses that Abraham “is and remains a murderer” in the universal (FT, 74), he is more than likely subscribing to Kant’s insistence that Abraham is guilty of murder according to the principle of the categorical imperative.¹⁹

With the ethical as the universal De Silentio also refers to Hegel’s ethical conception. In fact, the same words from De Silentio I quoted in the paragraph above as referring to Kant could also be a formulation of Hegel’s approach to ethics. Hegel appropriated Kant’s language for his own purposes and considered that Kant’s categorical imperative was too formal and left human beings without moral guidance in particular situations. As Evans summarizes, “for Hegel the demands of reason must become embodied in the laws and customs of a people” and therefore “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.”²⁰ De Silentio alludes explicitly to Hegel’s approach to ethics when he identifies the ethical with “social morality.”²¹

Evans thinks that “the conception of the ethical operative in the book is mainly Hegelian in character,”²² but Rudd considers that “Abraham is as much a scandal to Kantian *Moralität* as to Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*.”²³ Davenport agrees “that the ethical view

¹⁸ Jean Porter, *Nature as Reason : A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 236.

¹⁹ John J. Davenport, “Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*,” in *Ethics, Love and Faith in Kierkegaard*, ed. Edward F. Mooney (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 211. Kant said, as quoted by Rudd from *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*: “Even though something is represented as commanded by God... yet, if it flatly contradicts morality, it cannot, despite all appearances be of God (for example, were a father ordered to kill his son, who is, so far as he knows, perfectly innocent).” See Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 145. And Kant’s strong reaction to God’s command to Abraham should be recalled in his own words in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, as quoted by Mulder: “Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: ‘That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.’” See Jack Mulder, *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition : Conflict and Dialogue*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 47. Besides it should be noted, as stated by Porter, that “the most influential contemporary theories of the natural law fall within the parameters of a Kantian account” (Porter, *Nature as Reason : A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*, 236.), and furthermore Kant himself should be considered as representative of one natural law tradition, so “natural law” is also one of the approaches to ethics we find in *Fear and Trembling*. If we understand “natural law” in the very broad sense of a “theory about ethics that simply maintains that there is a law to which everyone in principle has some amount of access and that prescribes certain basic moral norms, according to the most basic principle of human practical reason, namely, that one should seek after the good” (Mulder, *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition : Conflict and Dialogue*, 56.), then there can not be any doubt that “natural law” is present in *Fear and Trembling*.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, Evans, and Walsh, *Fear and Trembling*, xxi.

²¹ The Danish words are *det Sædelige* and correspond to the German *Sittlichkeit*, which is Hegel’s expression for the ethical life in family, civil society and the state.

²² C. Stephen Evans, “Faith as the Telos of Morality,” in *Fear an Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga., USA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 16.

²³ Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, 145.

presented in *Fear and Trembling*... is not simply Hegelian but rather ‘seems to combine themes from the entire rationalist tradition begun by Kant.’”²⁴

Moreover, the universal as identical to the ethical also refers to the two biblical love-commandments. Davenport has an ally in Earl McLane when he says that “obligations to love God and neighbor are invoked and interpreted in *Fear and Trembling*.”²⁵ When De Silentio insists that Abraham did not and couldn’t stop loving Isaac, “the duty he mentions would be supported by biblical love-commandments even more clearly than by Hegel’s analysis of the family in the *Philosophy of Right*.”²⁶ De Silentio considers that “God is the one who demands absolute love” (FT, 73) without expecting us to limit the scope of our love for the neighbor, as already mentioned in the Summary of the book above.²⁷ De Silentio “never doubts that fathers should love their sons or that Abraham should love his God.”²⁸

With these three approaches to ethics, De Silentio is acknowledging what Mooney calls the “objectivity of moral value.”²⁹ “We cannot dictate or determine at will the meaning of those evaluative concepts whose web provides senses for our lives, individually and collectively.”³⁰ Moral objectivity doesn’t eliminate the possibility of “risk, uncertainty, and the possibility of error,”³¹ because it doesn’t exempt us either from considering the uniqueness of each particular situation.³² But the independence of moral value is what enables us to eventually reach the conclusion that we made an “error in evaluative judgment,” or misplaced “our cares,” or mistook “our values.”³³

The Limitations of the Ethical

De Silentio subscribes to what Martin Luther and the Formula of Concord calls *the first use of the law*: “The bulk of civic morality provides threshold requirements of decency, and in that sense is more or less indispensable.”³⁴ But in the short or the long run, we will probably face conflicts, dilemmas and aporias where “ethics cannot guide”

²⁴ Davenport, “Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*,” 211. Davenport is quoting Ronald Green.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ De Silentio also talks about a “love of God” disconnected from faith, that is, the general idea that “God is love” of which he himself is convinced, but it is a thought that “has a primal lyrical validity” (FT, 34). De Silentio adds: “To me God’s love, in both the direct and the converse sense, is incommensurable with the whole of actuality. (...) I do not trouble God with my little troubles” (FT, 34).

²⁸ Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation : Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, Suny Series in Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 92.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 93.

³¹ Ibid.

³² De Silentio would be more in agreement with Cicero’s view that “human nature underdetermines the social conventions and practices stemming from it” than with Aristotle’s view “that social conventions stem immediately from natural inclinations.” See Porter, *Nature as Reason : A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law*, 19.

³³ Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation : Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, 93.

³⁴ Ibid., 98.

or “deliver us from wrong.”³⁵ True to De Silentio’s intentions, Mooney says that in dilemmas and moral problems incapable of a satisfactory solution,

Attention shifts... from *acts* or principles to *agents* or character.... The outward justifying support of social context or Reason fades out, its salience diminished. We confront the wonder and terror of *persons in ordeal*. The familiar moral question asks What *role* or *rule* applies? It takes the universal as superior. Rules or roles take precedence over the desires, eccentricities, or projects of the individual. But in moral crisis the individual is partially alienated from the public sphere. The question then becomes *What can he possibly do?* A sense of the vulnerability of the actor supplants an easy referral to what is generally done.³⁶

The ethical is suspended and both the person facing the crisis and the person who in other circumstances would be quick to judge, are deprived of speech.

To be seized by a radical moral crisis as described is not necessarily something bad. “Being shielded from moral struggle, [and] exempt from ordeals of spirit, we would lack depth, dignity, the subtle if flawed beauty and strength of individual character.”³⁷ This radical moral crisis enables the individual “to *become* superior to the universal”³⁸ and to attempt the movements of infinite resignation and faith.

From the perspective of Christianity, “the life of moral striving is bankrupt” because of “sin.”³⁹ De Silentio avoids almost any reference to sin until the discussion of the third problem, but when he finally there decides to make a comment to the question of sin, he does it with a couple of sentences that “have been regarded by more than one commentator as the key to understanding the whole book.”⁴⁰

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 on the part of the universal to want to demand itself from a person who lacks the *condition sine qua non* [indispensable condition]... An ethics that ignores sin is a completely futile discipline, but if it affirms sin, then it has *eo ipso* exceeded itself (FT, 98-99).

It is to the person who sees him or herself “as outside the ethical, alienated from the ideal not merely in the sense that he [or she] fulfills it imperfectly, but in the radical sense that he cannot even begin to approximate that ideal”⁴¹ that Abraham becomes “a guiding star that saves the anguished” (FT, 21).

³⁵ Ibid., 81.

³⁶ Ibid., 84.

³⁷ Ibid., 85.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ C. Stephen Evans, “Is the Concept of an Absolute Duty toward God Morally Unintelligible,” in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (University, Ala.: Univ. of Alabama P., 1981), 150.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, Evans, and Walsh, *Fear and Trembling*, xxvii.

⁴¹ Evans, “Is the Concept of an Absolute Duty toward God Morally Unintelligible,” 150.

The “Strong Divine Command” Ethics

It is common to interpret that *Fear and Trembling* equates faith with obedience to God’s commands. According to this reading, “God’s power or status as creator is the sole ontological source of right and moral obligation,” so that “God’s commanding X is necessary and sufficient for X to be obligatory, and God can command anything (even murder).”⁴² The teleological suspension of the ethical is explained as “a religious justification for unethical action.”⁴³ In some way, the ethical is abolished rather than suspended.⁴⁴

But this reading is not De Silentio’s. The reasons are many. A first is that De Silentio admits that he would have been able to sacrifice Isaac, but he would have sacrificed all his joy along with him and he would not have loved Isaac as Abraham loved him (FT, 34-35).

A second reason is that the four alternative Abrahams of the vignettes of the Exordium are willing to obey God and sacrifice Isaac, but “they either lose Isaac or God at Moriah,”⁴⁵

A third reason is that the ethical is for De Silentio “a precondition for faith.”⁴⁶ “There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham’s life than that the father shall love the son” (FT, 59), and “since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more” (FT, 74).

A fourth reason is that Abraham “did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world” (FT, 36) and that is the reason why he showed “really fervent joy” on getting Isaac back without any need of preparation or “time to rally to finitude and its joy” (FT, 37). In the same way also the knight of faith, De Silentio imagines as an ordinary tax collector “has inwardly renounced that which is most important to him—his attachment to his family, his job, his community, etc; but he grasps it again ‘by virtue of the absurd.’”⁴⁷

Oddly enough, “some postmodern fans of *Fear and Trembling*,” Davenport maintains, “embrace this misreading and celebrate the alleged irrationalism of Kierkegaardian faith as an early forerunner of anti-universalist positions in contemporary alterity ethics.”⁴⁸ Davenport gives the example of John Caputo, for whom “‘Abraham is the father of all those who dare to raise their voice against ethics,’ meaning: against any *theory* of moral norms involving rational grounds and universalizability tests.”⁴⁹ Davenport continues: “So understood, Abraham is not really rejecting the kind of infinite responsibility for singular others that Levinas proposes.”⁵⁰

⁴² Davenport, “Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*,” 207. Karl Barth also supports a “Strong Divine Commands” ethics, except that he centers it in Christology and not in creation.

⁴³ J. Michael Tilley, “Rereading the Teleological Suspension: Resignation, Faith, and Teleology,” in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2012*, ed. Heiko Schulz (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 147. I thank J. Michael Tilley for the courtesy of having answered an email in which I asked some clarifying questions about his article.

⁴⁴ Troels Nørager, *Taking Leave of Abraham : An Essay on Religion and Democracy* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 2008), 58.

⁴⁵ Tilley, “Rereading the Teleological Suspension: Resignation, Faith, and Teleology,” 148.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 151-52.

⁴⁸ Davenport, “Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*,” 197.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 198.

What he does, in Caputo's words, is to suspend "the fine name of universality in the name of heterogeneity and incommensurability"⁵¹ In this manner, the erroneous reading whereby all moral objectivity has been suspended, says Davenport, "is used to support a radically antitheoretical version of agapic ethics."⁵²

The Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

The ethical can not have an "absolute claim over all."⁵³ There is a teleological suspension of the ethical because there is a *telos* that is higher than the ethical which is faith. According to De Silentio, Abraham transgressed by his act "the ethical altogether and had a higher *telos* outside it, in relation to which he suspended it" (FT, 59).

The interpreters differ on how to understand the relation between faith and the ethical in view of what De Silentio calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical." C. Stephen Evans,⁵⁴ Edward Mooney⁵⁵ and Merold Westphal,⁵⁶ are the main representatives of a reading for which the ethical life "purged of its absoluteness and finality, reappears as an essential component of the religious life."⁵⁷ According to the strong divine command ethics any action commanded by God is religiously and ethically justified, but for Evans, Mooney and Westphal, only acts that pass the test of a higher religious ethics can be justified. Evans, for instance, claims that "it is indeed the case that a person ought to perform any action God commanded, and this implies that *if* God commanded someone to take the life of a child, that action would be right,"⁵⁸ but this is not enough for him. There are two more conditions that should be met in order to make it possible to justify a command from God to take the life of a child: 1) "It is not possible for God to command an act that is unloving; if a being whom we thought to be God made such a command, that being would no longer warrant being thought of as divine, and its commands would not be moral obligations;"⁵⁹ and 2) "In our current epistemological situation, a person could not rationally believe that God has commanded an act of child sacrifice unless God supernaturally took control of the person's beliefs."⁶⁰

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Tilley, "Rereading the Teleological Suspension: Resignation, Faith, and Teleology," 154.

⁵⁴ See the works already quoted.

⁵⁵ See the work already quoted.

⁵⁶ See Merold Westphal, "Abraham and Hegel," in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (University, Ala.: Univ. of Alabama P., 1981).

⁵⁷ Evans, "Faith as the Telos of Morality," 15.

⁵⁸ Nørager, *Taking Leave of Abraham: An Essay on Religion and Democracy*, 76. Nørager is quoting from C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid. Regarding the first of these two additional conditions, Nørager makes a comment that is worth quoting at length: "We find ourselves in a different 'cultural context' from that of Abraham, and I would emphatically agree that it makes little sense to condemn Abraham for not having had Kantian doubts as to whether he had actually heard the voice of 'a demon or a god' – to put it in the words of Leonard Cohen. But what about God, has he changed, too? I doubt that Evans would agree to this, and nonetheless it seems to be implied in his '*if*' [of the first condition]...: God might have commanded it *then*, but there is no realistic chance that he would do it *today*." See *ibid.*, 77.

Jack Mulder also believes that the ethical is retained and transformed within faith. He makes a distinction between ordinary obligations “generated by a world without appeal to God,” which are relativized, and the ethical “that is not relativized” and “is ultimately the expression of the divine wisdom and/or will,”⁶¹ and argues that Aquinas’s “natural law provides a particularly appropriate context for approaching the case of Abraham and for preserving the very things that Silentio wants to preserve about his act.”⁶² Mulder says that he doesn’t define “the right or the good as whatever God commands,” though he does hold “that whatever God commands will necessarily be good.”⁶³ More specifically, he holds “that what the natural law will find to be right will have everything to do with human nature, and the right context in which it will flourish,” and “that context,” Mulder maintains, “has itself everything to do with the order with which it was set up by its wise Creator.”⁶⁴ Certainly, “God can override the ‘wonted mode’ of virtue, which is to say that God can ‘shift’ the context for human flourishing to what remains ‘natural’ (though perhaps unusual), but God cannot violate that context entirely without destroying the very order God has instituted.”⁶⁵ In support of what he is saying, Mulder quotes Anthony J. Lisska as stating:

What makes an act right or wrong is that it is either in accord or not in accord with the fundamental developmental properties central to the concept of human nature... That God may have created the structure of human nature differently is not the issue. Of course that could have taken place. But once human nature had been established, certain moral rules follow from the divine archetype of human nature.⁶⁶

According to Aquinas’s interpretation of natural law, Abraham’s deed would neither “be a violation of the natural law” or “count as a murder,”⁶⁷ given that “since Aquinas takes one punishment for sin (including original sin) to be death, God is just in meting out this punishment, and the only question is when it will be exacted.”⁶⁸

Ronald M. Green,⁶⁹ John J. Davenport⁷⁰ and J. Michael Tilley⁷¹ are the main representatives of another reading of the teleological suspension of the ethical for which “Abraham’s action cannot be explained in terms of some higher structure into which the general validity of the ethical and his violation of it can be reconciled.”⁷² According to

⁶¹ Mulder, *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition : Conflict and Dialogue*, 59.

⁶² Ibid., 56.

⁶³ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 62. Mulder is quoting from Anthony J. Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law : An Analytic Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 114-15.

⁶⁷ Mulder, *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition : Conflict and Dialogue*, 57.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ See the work of this author already quoted.

⁷⁰ See the work of this author already quoted.

⁷¹ See the work of this author already quoted.

⁷² Tilley, “Rereading the Teleological Suspension: Resignation, Faith, and Teleology,” 162.

this reading, “the *status* of the ethical as *the highest telos* is suspended but not the validity or significance of the ethical.”⁷³

These two different readings of the teleological suspension of the ethical disagree on how the “teleological” should be understood. The reading that subordinates the ethical to the higher religious telos understands the “teleological” in the classic Aristotelian sense that turns the religious telos into “an end toward which we are motivated and for which we strive in action.”⁷⁴ In contrast, the reading that “accepts fully the validity of the ethical”⁷⁵ without subordinating the ethical to the religious telos, denies that the religious telos is a telos in the Aristotelian sense. Therefore, J. Michael Tilley can say that “the suspension is teleological in the sense that the movement of faith is the means of enacting the suspension, but faith still relates non-teleologically to the ethical since faith does not become a higher normative standard that sublates the ethical.”⁷⁶ Any action, thus, can only be judged according to purely ethical criteria and it is impossible to invoke religious reasons to justify an action or to make it “immune to scrutiny.”⁷⁷ In other words, faith can not be “an excuse to avoid the universal.”⁷⁸

The Distinction between Faith and Fanaticism

The story about Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is 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,” says Evans.⁷⁹ In fact, one of the terrorists of the 9/11 attack, Mohammad Atta, made a reference to Abraham/Ibrahim in his written “testament” with the aim of putting his parents “in the idealized role of Abraham who willingly sacrificed his son.”⁸⁰ De Silentio pokes fun at the glorification of Abraham which sometimes is recited in the form of the cliché that “he loved God in such a way that he was willing to offer him the best” (FT, 28), but as De Silentio rightly adds, “‘the best’ is a vague term” (FT, 28) and if “we homologize Isaac and the best” (FT, 28), we are leaving “the anxiety” out of the story (FT, 28). Anyway, De Silentio doesn’t want anybody “to do just as Abraham did” (FT, 28) and he wonders if it is “possible to speak unreservedly about Abraham without running the risk that some individual will become unbalanced and do the same thing” (FT, 31). He emphatically says that “it is only by faith that one achieves any resemblance to Abraham, not by murder” (FT, 31).

As I have already mentioned, according to De Silentio, Abraham “must love Isaac with his whole soul,” and “since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him” (FT, 74). On the contrary, as Mooney rightly says, “the murderous fanatic typically harbors hate indifference, or contempt for his victim.”⁸¹

⁷³ Ibid., 166.

⁷⁴ Davenport, “Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*,” 214.

⁷⁵ Tilley, “Rereading the Teleological Suspension: Resignation, Faith, and Teleology,” 169.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Kierkegaard, Evans, and Walsh, *Fear and Trembling*, vii.

⁸⁰ Nørager, *Taking Leave of Abraham : An Essay on Religion and Democracy*, 9.

⁸¹ Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation : Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, 82.

The knight of faith, on the view of De Silentio, “feels the pain of being unable to make himself understandable to others, but he has no vain desire to instruct others” (FT, 80). On the contrary, “the zealot or fanatic typically sees himself as partisan of a cause, pledged to bring ‘truth’ directly to the benighted.”⁸²

Always as interpreted by De Silentio, Abraham “had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it certainly was absurd that God, who required it of him, should in the next moment rescind requirement” (FT, 35-35). Anyway, “he climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac. No doubt he was surprised at the outcome, but through a double-movement he had attained this first condition, and therefore he received Isaac more joyfully than the first time” (FT, 36). And De Silentio goes on to say that even if Isaac was sacrificed, “Abraham had faith” and “he did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world” because “God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed” (FT, 36). On the contrary, a fanatic is typically not “one who happily and expectantly welcomes his victim’s return.”⁸³

The Specificity of Faith

Faith is a double-movement. The first part “is the ‘infinite resignation’ where you realize that you must give up or relinquish your love object,”⁸⁴ and De Silentio says that “only the single individual can ever give himself a more explicit explanation of what is to be understood by Isaac” (FT, 71). “Anyone can train himself to exercise the infinite resignation” which distances us from the world,⁸⁵ and we have to make this movement “‘continually’ and in ‘each and every moment.’”⁸⁶ The second part of the movement, that gives us “hope and courage to believe ‘by virtue of the absurd’” and which reintegrates us into society and human fellowship, “must be done by God, or at least he must initiate it.”⁸⁷ De Silentio repeatedly confesses that he can not make the movement of faith:

I can perceive that it takes strength and energy and spiritual freedom to make the infinite movement of resignation; I can also perceive that it can be done. The next [movement] amazes me, my brain reels, for, after having made the movement of resignation, then by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get one’s desire totally and completely—that is over and beyond human powers, that is a marvel (FT, 47-48).

Faith must be gained again and again; it is not “a secure possession once and for all.”⁸⁸ Faith rewards us, says De Silentio, with “the wondrous glory” of becoming “God’s

⁸² Ibid., 83.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Nørager, *Taking Leave of Abraham : An Essay on Religion and Democracy*, 66.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 61.

confidant” and “the Lord’s friend”⁸⁹ and being able to say “‘You’⁹⁰ to God in heaven” (FT, 77).

The confidence and friendship with God doesn’t exclude the possibility of struggle and temptation, and De Silentio makes it clear that human beings can confront God,⁹¹ can argue with God, and can even tempt God.⁹² De Silentio admits: “Every time I want to make this movement [the movement of faith], I almost faint; the very same moment I admire absolutely, I am seized with great anxiety” (FT, 48). And immediately, thereafter, De Silentio asks an intriguing question that he leaves unanswered: “For what is it to tempt [*friste*] God?” (FT, 48). Because of that question the *experimentum crucis* approach of Ingolf U. Dalferth appears to be consistent with the Biblical Abraham as depicted by De Silentio. Dalferth argues that it is not only God who orders Abraham to sacrifice his son, turning himself “into someone utterly ambiguous and self-contradictory, someone whose will is not only inscrutable and enigmatic, but totally incomprehensible,” but also Abraham, who “by acting out the *aporia*... forces God to either identify with his promise or prove to be no God after all.”⁹³

Not everybody will be called to draw the knife in the literal sense in which it happened to Abraham (FT, 27), but those who recognize themselves as called and enabled by God to make the double-movement of faith must actively give up the claim to possess the things and persons, they love, and then, through faith, get them back in a “receptive mode, as gifts from God.”⁹⁴ Edward F. Mooney has developed a polemic against the capitalistic spirit of acquisitiveness that has affected even our relationship to the things and persons we love in the framework of his version of an ethics subordinated to religion.

But we don’t need faith to know that we never can have property rights over persons and not even over most of the things we are dependent on, and we neither need faith to guide our care for the things and persons we in faith receive back as gifts from God. What faith will and should make possible is “to live happily every moment... by virtue of the absurd, every moment to see the sword hanging over the beloved’s head, and yet not to find rest in the pain of resignation but to find joy by virtue of the absurd” (FT, 50).

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⁸⁹ Reference to James 2:23.

⁹⁰ *Du*, second person familiar address in Danish.

⁹¹ “He who struggled with God became the greatest of all,” says De Silentio (FT, 16).

⁹² I use “tempt” in the old sense of try or test.

⁹³ Nørager, *Taking Leave of Abraham : An Essay on Religion and Democracy*, 84. Nørager is quoting from a unpublished MS presented by Dalferth at Aarhus University in October 2006 with the title: “Problems of Evil. Theodicy, Theology, and Hermeneutics.”

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

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