

## 15. Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*

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### Introduction: The Problem

It is well known that Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*,<sup>1</sup> which he attributed to the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio,<sup>2</sup> is about the complex relation between the 'stages' of existence that he calls "the ethical" (characterized by moral duties and virtues) and *the religious* (or 'faith'). Despite much scholarly attention, deep disagreement remains about how these life-views or existential stages are distinguished and related, and in particular about how Kierkegaard understands the transition from the ethical to the religious. In *Fear and Trembling*, this is the movement from the "Knight of Infinite Resignation," who exemplifies a kind of limiting point within the ethical, to the "Knight of Faith" instantiated by Abraham in the story of the "Binding of Isaac" (which Rabbinic literature calls the *Akedah*).<sup>3</sup>

One reading of this transition from ethical resignation to religious faith situates it within a broader irrationalist interpretation of Kierkegaard's stages. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that Kierkegaard's portrayal of ethical choice in *Either/Or* replaces the objective authority of moral virtues and duties with the arbitrary fiat of the individual will that simply chooses to acknowledge moral obligation.<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre also argues that in *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard invokes radical and ultimate choice to explain how one becomes a Christian;<sup>5</sup> similarly, he says that in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard uses Abraham to show that faith requires a criterionless leap.<sup>6</sup> Thus, according to MacIntyre, Kierkegaard holds that faith is total submission to "the arbitrary fiats of a cosmic despot" who can make anything right by commanding it, even murder—a God who resembles Blake's "Nobodaddy."<sup>7</sup>

In response to MacIntyre, I have argued that the process of "choice" by which one moves from aesthetic to ethical orientations or ways of life consists in personal appropriation of ethical standards through identity-defining commitments that depend on already-recognized ethical ideals; the individual who "chooses" the ethical does not posit or create the authority of ethical norms. Since *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, few scholars still hold that *Either/Or* portrays the movement from the aesthetic to the ethical stage as an arbitrary radical choice; but proto-Sartrean readings of Kierkegaardian faith remain popular. In this essay I extend my anti-irrationalist interpretation of the ethical to Kierkegaardian faith. I hold that understanding "the religious" in all of Kierkegaard's thought depends on grasping the central idea in *Fear and Trembling*, without which the *Fragments* and the *Postscript* cannot be properly interpreted (though some think we can work *backward* from these later texts to a reading of *Fear and Trembling*).<sup>8</sup> However, as we will see, there are two quite different approaches to showing that the "teleological suspension of the ethical" in Silentio's *Akedah* is not simply irrational, and I will develop the alternative already outlined in Alastair Hannay's book *Kierkegaard* and Edward Mooney's classic commentary on *Fear and Trembling*,<sup>9</sup> as well as in his reading of *Repetition*.

In his critique of *Fear and Trembling*, MacIntyre has hardly been alone. For at least half a century since Kierkegaard got into English (as Walter Lowrie put it), undergraduates have been taught that *Fear and Trembling* presents *faith* as rejecting all natural knowledge and reason in favor of divine commands that can have any content or abrogate any ethical principle with purported universal application. The Danish existentialist, they were told, recommends total obedience to a God who demands our allegiance to his own inscrutable authority. This venerable tradition of portraying Kierkegaard as an absolute theological voluntarist is well represented by Brand Blanshard, who complains that in *Fear and Trembling*, religious obligation transcends Kantian universal judgment: it may be our duty "to trample down the affections of natural man and all his nicely calculated goods and evils."<sup>10</sup> In acting to sacrifice Isaac, Blanshard says, the only motive Abraham could have is "the command from on high to kill," since "every human consideration" could only provide motives not to commit such a heinous crime.<sup>11</sup> So Abraham "was called upon to renounce the moral for the religious."<sup>12</sup>

It is hard to overstate the violence done by this popular portrayal, which reduces Kierkegaardian faith to blind fanaticism.<sup>13</sup> The situation is not helped by some postmodern fans of *Fear and Trembling* who embrace this misreading and celebrate the alleged irrationalism of Kierkegaardian faith as an early forerunner of anti-universalist positions in contemporary alterity ethics. John Caputo, for instance, tells us that "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. So understood, Abraham

is not really rejecting the kind of infinite responsibility for singular others that Levinas proposes; he is only “suspending the fine name of universality in the name of heterogeneity and incommensurability.”<sup>14</sup> Thus Kierkegaard, or at least Silentio, is used to support a radically antitheoretical version of agapic ethics.

But the teleological suspension of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* is not primarily about substituting an ethics of alterity, or any other ethics, for a rationalist ethics of universal norms or natural law. Both Kierkegaard’s traditional knockers and his postmodern boosters misconstrue the function of divine commands in Kierkegaard’s conception of religion and in Silentio’s version of the *Akedah* in particular. They entirely obscure the main point of *Fear and Trembling*, which is to present the essence of “faith” as *eschatological* trust. As will become clear, I use “eschatology” here in a broad sense that abstracts from the differences among religious creeds concerning salvation, “last things,” or the hereafter. Drawing on a comparative analysis of eschatological hope as the distinguishing feature of revealed religion in general,<sup>15</sup> my inclusive sense of eschatological hope does not ‘Christianize’ Abraham, nor take his significance in *Fear and Trembling* to be only an anagogical anticipation of Christian religiousness.

This is important, because contemporary Jewish commentators on the *Akedah* narrative often assume that Kierkegaard is defending the strongest kind of theological voluntarism, which they react against.<sup>16</sup> For example, Louis Jacobs notes Milton Steinberg’s “lethal attack on the Danish thinker’s interpretation of the *Akedah*,” in which “Steinberg roundly declares that there is nothing in Judaism to correspond to Kierkegaard’s teleological suspension of the ethical.”<sup>17</sup> Jacobs himself argues that there are “three different attitudes” to the *Akedah* in Jewish thought: the first emphasizing the “happy ending,” the second emphasizing the “original command,” and the third dwelling on both these aspects.<sup>18</sup> He aligns the teaching of *Fear and Trembling* with the second of these three approaches:

This view, very close to Kierkegaard’s attitude, can imagine God commanding Abraham to slay his son. True, the order is revoked at the last moment, but the point has been made, nonetheless, that, in Kierkegaard’s terminology, there can be, so far as the “knight of faith” is concerned, a “teleological suspension of the ethical.”<sup>19</sup>

In this passage Jacobs clearly follows the prevailing view that the “teleological suspension” in the first *Problema* refers to *overriding* objective ethical norms for the sake of obedience to singular divine commands as the absolute telos. On this reading, obedience to God as the highest end is totally independent of the surprising reversal when God stops Abraham just as he raises the knife; this reprieve is reduced to a pleasant afterthought that plays no essential role in the structure of faith for Kierkegaard.<sup>20</sup>

On the contrary, I argue that Kierkegaard meant to present the *Akedah* according to the first of Jacobs’s three attitudes, emphasizing that Abraham’s salvation depends on Isaac being spared. In my view, Silentio’s understanding of “faith” does *not* include the belief that God’s commanding X makes X right, no matter what X is—a belief that is incompatible with most Jewish readings of Genesis and probably with Kierkegaard’s own teaching in *Works of Love* that love must have outward expressions.<sup>21</sup> Rather, the telos toward which the ethical is suspended in Kierkegaardian faith is the *promised eschatological outcome* in which the highest ethical norms will be fulfilled by an Absolute power that transcends human capacities and promises to *actualize* goods otherwise accessible to human beings only as ideal forms in Platonic eternity. At the beginning of *Problema* I, Silentio clearly identifies a person’s highest telos with his “eternal salvation” (54), which is an eschatological concept, and his goal is to argue that such an eschatological telos cannot be reduced to “the ethical,” as Hegel’s system implies.

As we will see, this eschatological reading retains an important role for divine commands. But if absolute reliance on God’s eschatological promise is the essence of faith, then faith is possible only in relation to ethical ideals that are *not rejected* in favor of some other standard, but rather *preserved* within and complemented by religious hope. The argument for this interpretation begins with the eschatological element in the *Akedah* narrative. In section III, it is followed by a detailed critique of “higher-ethical” interpretations of Kierkegaardian faith, which are currently the most well-known and respected ways of answering the irrationalist charge. In section IV, the problems found in these readings are avoided by the eschatological explanation of the “teleological suspension” and the “absolute relation to the absolute.” This alternative account depends on a clear understanding of “infinite resignation,” on which there is even more serious confusion in recent scholarship, as explained in section V. The essay concludes with abbreviated remarks on the motivational and epistemic role of divine commands in existential faith.

## The Absurd, Eschatological Possibility, and Eucatastrophe

### *Expectancy*

In his first edifying discourse on “The Expectancy of Faith,” Kierkegaard argues (in his own name) that faith as the highest good is a kind of “expectancy” employing our innate capacity to find meaning in the *future*. In particular, faith requires that we “conquer” the future.<sup>22</sup> But this seems impossible because “the future is everything,” and in its manifoldness of open possibilities, “the future is not a particular, but the whole.” Moreover, since the future borrows its

meanings in part from the being who would conquer it, it cannot be conquered by her predictions, since “fear accompanies guessing, anxiety conjecture, and uneasiness [accompanies] inference.”<sup>23</sup> Yet despite the apparent impossibility of calculating the future, “by the eternal, one can conquer the future, because the eternal is the ground of the future.” It is in relation to the eternal, therefore, that faith is defined:

What, then, is the eternal power in a human being? It is faith. What is the expectancy of faith? Victory—or, as Scripture so earnestly and so movingly teaches us, that all things must serve for good those who love God. But an expectancy of the future that expects victory—this has indeed conquered the future.<sup>24</sup>

Expectancy, then, is hopeful trust in a kind of “victory.” In a later edifying discourse on “Patience in Expectancy,” Kierkegaard clarifies that religious expectancy is not hope for this or that contingent particular fortune, but rather a lifelong trust in “the eternal, which is waiting every moment and at the end of time.”<sup>25</sup> In short, the expectancy of faith is *eschatological*, in the broad sense of believing in the final vindication of ethical goodness by divine power and intervention. Different historical religions teach hope for different types of ultimate salvation: for example, individual escape from time via death without reincarnation (Nirvana), or a cosmic conclusion of time as a whole (returning us to a timeless/eternal state), or a final renewal and perfection of the physical cosmos itself, beginning a new temporal series.<sup>26</sup> In the latter forms, eschatological faith looks forward to a time when ethical ideals will be realized in the concrete reality of the created universe. In Kierkegaardian terms, we might call this a kind of synthesis of the ethical and the aesthetic, since it is imagined either as occurring in time or at the beginning of a *new time*.<sup>27</sup>

“Trusting expectancy” is also how Abraham’s faith in God’s promise is described (19). Yet in Christian, Islamic, or Norse contexts, “eschatology” is associated with last battles and final judgment, whereas God’s promise to Abraham (before Isaac is born) is not that he will be judged and will enter heaven or that the world will be renewed in a cosmic apocalypse. Thus, to recognize the eschatological significance of the *Akedah*, we have to consider the diverse forms of eschatological victory taught in world religions and the general structure of eschatological hope underlying all these forms: namely, trust in the ultimate accomplishment of the Good by divine power. Kierkegaard sees that the story in Genesis fits this general pattern: God’s promise to Abraham is “that in his seed all the generations of the earth would be blessed” (17). Through his son, Abraham will become the father of a great nation, which will bring knowledge of the true God to all peoples. The fulfillment of this promise begins in the miracle of Isaac’s birth, and it waits in the background when God *seems* to contradict himself by commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This divine promise is the reason why

During all this time he had faith, he had faith that God would not demand Isaac of him, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question. . . . 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. (35–36)

This is the most important passage in *Fear and Trembling*: it shows that Abraham’s “faith” *consists in* his firm conviction that God’s revealed promise will be fulfilled: even if Isaac is sacrificed, somehow he will still live and have children leading to a great nation chosen for God’s plan.<sup>28</sup> As Silentio says, Abraham’s faith does not depend on any calculation of *how* this could be; he is hardly expecting a ram to be substituted for Isaac at the last moment. Rather, even if he had killed Isaac on Mount Moriah, Abraham would still have trusted that what God promised would somehow *come true in time*: “He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life, but that he would be blessed here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago” (36). Because of his faith in God’s original promise to him, Abraham does not believe that sacrificing Isaac on Mount Moriah will permanently end Isaac’s life in this world. This clearly entails that Abraham believes he can sacrifice Isaac *without murdering him*.<sup>29</sup> This paradox depends on trust that God’s promise is true, *even* when God’s own later command mysteriously tempts him to doubt it. Silentio’s efforts to distinguish Abraham from various inferior substitutes in other possible versions of the story are designed precisely to clarify this point (10–14).

### *The Structure of Eschatological Possibility*

Kierkegaard recognizes that even though the content of Abraham’s faith (the promise in which he believes) does not refer to a new life in a world to come, it performs the same eschatological function that faith in salvation beyond death does for Christians. These faiths share a compound intentional content, which has two main parts:

- (a) The future state, ultimate outcome, or final end is *a victory of the good*, an actualization in finite/temporal existence of the infinite/eternal ideal; the created order of existence converges with what ethically ought to be.

Silentio calls this upshot-point “the fullness of time” (18), and the “fulfillment of faith” in the divine promise (19).<sup>30</sup>

- (b) (1) Given various kinds of obstacles in their way, the relevant human agents can see no way of bringing about this victory by their own powers.

(2) Nevertheless, it is possible in an incalculable way by divine power, by 'miracle' transcending any rational prediction.<sup>31</sup>

Hannay grasps the negative half (b1) of this second condition in his explanation of "the absurd," which "means not 'logically impossible' but something like 'humanly impossible.'"<sup>32</sup> The other half (b2) is the positive content of being 'divinely possible.' This idea is emphasized throughout all Kierkegaard's later works, as in the discourses on expectancy. For example, in *Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus argues that "authentic hope" is not based on human powers, but rather on the idea "that with God, everything is possible."<sup>33</sup> Thus the element of radical surprise, even for the faithful agent who believes that in the fullness of time, ethical victory will come true. As Anti-Climacus puts it, "unexpectedly, miraculously, divinely, help does come."<sup>34</sup>

Both conditions (a) and (b) are clarified in the long and justly famous analogy between Abraham and the "young lad who falls in love with a princess" (41). Although the lad's passion could be read as simply aesthetic, I read it in light of Judge William's treatment of marriage in *Either/Or II* as a social role exhibiting both proto-virtues of resolution and virtues of love. In *Fear and Trembling*, the young man's love is more than merely erotic: it becomes "the entire substance of his life" (41), a passion that he wholeheartedly endorses with all his will, his central self-defining commitment. This makes it a good analog for Abraham's parental love for Isaac, which is both a resolute volitional commitment and a fulfillment of the universal moral norm that "the father shall love the son more than himself" (57). Similarly, while God's perilous test makes it "humanly" impossible (in Hannay's sense) for Abraham to keep Isaac, society and circumstance make it "humanly" impossible for the young lad to marry his princess: "the relation is such that it cannot possibly be realized [by the agent's power], cannot possibly be translated from ideality to reality" (41). In my definition above, this translation of the ethical ideal into reality is first feature (a) of eschatological outcomes; the second feature (b) is that this ethical victory in the "fullness of time" is possible only by divine intervention. We see this in the knight of faith's response to the apparent hopelessness (by any human standard) of his romantic quest:

[H]e says: Nevertheless I have faith that I will get her—that is, by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God, all things are possible. The absurd does not belong to the differences that lie within the proper domain of the understanding. It is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen. The moment the knight executed the act of resignation, he was convinced of the impossibility, humanly speaking (46).

These qualifiers make clear that a special kind of possibility is at issue, a type of modality that makes direct reference to God as its sole source: thus trust in such a possibility necessarily involves a *r elationship to the Absolute* that

is its ground. For the knight of resignation by himself, marrying the princess remains accessible only in the "infinite" or atemporal senses of being logically possible and ethically necessary or ideal. Resignation stops with this *ersatz* state of affairs in the eternal realm, whereas the knight of faith embraces an *additional* kind of possibility, namely, that marrying the princess could *actually be accomplished* in future time through the unconjurable creative power of God. Thus possibility "by virtue of the absurd" refers precisely to (a) ethical victory in the fullness of time, (b) achievable only by divine action in fulfillment of a covenant or promise. These are the characteristics of eschatological possibility, as I defined it above. Thus "absurd" means 'possible only in the eschatological sense.' Given its direct reference to a divine truth-maker, the only basis for reliance on such an eschatological possibility is an experience accepted as *revelation*. I will call this kind of revelation, which by definition transcends any conclusion derivable from natural reason, an *eschatological promise*.

Again, I recognize that getting Isaac back may not sound like salvation, beatific visions, final judgment, or related concepts that Christians associate with "eschatology." Moreover, Kierkegaard's little fairy tale about the young lad and his princess may seem to have even less to do with the promise that *in the end*, the Kingdom will come, the world will be renewed (and for Christians, souls redeemed from sin will live again in resurrected bodies). Yet Silentio clearly states that in this tale, marrying the princess is an "absurd" possibility—the very term chosen to indicate how eschatological possibility must appear to those without faith. To understand why the young lad's hope is like eschatological trust, we have to *extend* the motif referred to by the phrase, "in the end," to any narrative turning point with the qualities (a) and (b) above. In other words, when a story ends with an ethical victory made possible only by grace, that story has an eschatological quality: it repeats the pattern that distinguishes all eschatological narratives. In this broad sense, then, mythological stories and fairy tales often have eschatological overtones.

### Tolkien on Eucatastrophe

We can illuminate this point by turning briefly to J. R. R. Tolkien, the twentieth-century author of the *Lord of the Rings*, in whom Kierkegaard would have found a kindred spirit. In his highly significant essay "On Fairy-Stories,"<sup>35</sup> which philosophers of religion have unfortunately ignored, Tolkien argues that among many requirements for a good fairy tale, the most important is a distinctive sort of "happy ending" that (even for adult readers who know the genre) provokes genuine surprise, unexpected joy, and a poignant sense of gratitude. The special kind of happy ending that marks genuine fairy stories is not *ressentiment*-filled revenge nor spiteful triumph, but rather a miraculous reprieve, beyond all hope, in the midst of apparent disaster. Tolkien describes this kind of happy ending as a "eucatastrophe":

Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-stories. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite, I will call it *Eucatastrophe*. The *eucatastrophic* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function.

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending; or more correctly, of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn' (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist' or 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale or otherworld setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace, never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will), universal final defeat, and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of joy, joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.<sup>36</sup>

The sudden 'turning' or unexpected deliverance in a eucatastrophic happy ending suggests the working of a hidden power that makes possible an indispensable good that no human agency could bring about. Thus the eucatastrophic 'turn' in a good fairy story gets its poignance from its indirect *eschatological significance*. In a narrative like *Gawain and the Green Knight* or the *Lord of the Rings*, when Gawain is spared or Gollum falls in the fire with the One Ring, we sense the hand of the divine, although no angel appears to announce the divine will.

It is easy to see that Kierkegaard's tale of the young lad in love would count as a fairy story in Tolkien's sense if, for example, the lad were suddenly discovered to be a prince and brought to court to marry his princess. A knight of faith trusts precisely in such a catastrophe, by virtue of the absurd: "Nevertheless . . . I will get her" (46). Tolkien suggests that the 'turning' moment of grace in a good fairy tale is experienced as poignant because it includes a double-movement: tragic recognition of the evil and imperfection of our world is consoled in a joy that transcends the sorrow of vice and finitude. In this sense Tolkien says, "The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces the essence of all fairy-stories." For Tolkien regards the Resurrection as the paradigm of all eucatastrophes.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Kierkegaard regards the Incarnation of the God-Man as the eucatastrophic fulfillment of prophecy: "Then came the fullness of time: the expected one, whom the kings from the east came to worship, was born, even though he was born in an inn and laid in a manger."<sup>38</sup> This birth is the fulfillment of faith for Anna, the expectant witness in whom the faith of the patriarchs is represented at the Temple.<sup>39</sup>

But there are two important differences between fairy tales in Tolkien's sense and religious narratives: in the latter, (1) the catastrophe occurs or will occur in *primary reality*—in our world—rather than in the 'subcreated' fantasy world, and (2) the catastrophe fulfills a promise that comes directly from God or His holy agents.<sup>40</sup> Thus a religious narrative has *direct* eschatological significance: the good to come in "the fullness of time" is *promised* in revelation and

embraced by the faithful servant as ultimate assurance of life's meaning, the foundation of the trust that makes continued ethical striving possible without despair. In a fairy tale, the possibility of eschatological hope is only hinted indirectly in the eucatastrophe.

Just as Tolkien's definition of a fairy story applies to Silentio's tale of the young lad, my definition of an eschatological narrative (the religious analogue of a fairy story) applies to the *Akedah* as portrayed in *Fear and Trembling*. In this story of Abraham, the minor eucatastrophe of Isaac's conception and birth is followed in time by the major eucatastrophe: God sends His angel to stay Abraham's hand as he raises the knife, and then He sends the ram to replace Isaac (and along with this ram, implicitly, the message that human sacrifice is now forever forbidden). This emancipation is both a stunning vindication of ethical ideals and an astonishing reprieve—a miraculous "turn" that is completely unanticipatable by any human calculation. Isaac is spared, passed over, much as the nation he fathers is later preserved in the great Passover and the eucatastrophe at the Red Sea in Exodus. In such moments of extraordinary gratitude, we have the feeling of being touched directly by divine love, of having our deepest hopes requited by grace.<sup>41</sup>

### Existential Faith

Thus the emancipation of Isaac, rather than the binding of Isaac, is the key to the story in Silentio's account. "Faith" in Kierkegaard's special sense can be defined as trust in an eschatological promise whose fulfillment will be an *ethical* eucatastrophe. This fits well with Kierkegaard's discourses on the expectancy of faith: the faithful agent depends on a possibility of a *new kind*, entirely different from the types of possibilities pursued in unsuccessful attempts to master the future. Likewise, in his "Eulogy on Abraham," Silentio tells us that Abraham's greatness can be measured by his "expectancy": "One became great by expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal; but he who expected the impossible became the greatest of all" (16). As we saw earlier, the "impossible" here does not mean the logically or nomically impossible, but rather that which cannot be brought about by the protagonist's agency, which is also the meaning of "the absurd." Silentio ends his eulogy by suggesting that "If Abraham had doubted as he stood there on Mount Moriah" and had been given the ram *before* he drew the knife, then his "deliverance" would have been an accident (22). He would have failed to conquer the future with the only thing that can conquer it: that is, faith in "the absurd"<sup>42</sup>—which in his case means that Isaac would endure to father a great nation even though he has to be sacrificed.

Thus Edward Mooney was exactly right that "Unlike the knight of resignation, the faithful knight embraces the hopeful trusting expectation that Isaac will be restored."<sup>43</sup> The faith of Abraham does not consist in rejecting ethics but in receiving "Isaac and the universal back."<sup>44</sup> In terms remarkably similar to Tolkien's, Mooney's describes this as a complex "redeeming joy" that retains

within it the earlier grief of resignation.<sup>45</sup> The faithful agent goes through the painful loss of reliance on his own powers or “propriety claims” over the object of his devotion, yet maintains his care for the object in readiness to receive it back from God.<sup>46</sup> This also implies, as Hannay says, that “faith” in Kierkegaard’s sense is much more than mere belief in the existence of God, of which knights of infinite resignation are also capable: faith is trust that the ethically ideal outcome “is possible even if humanly it is not possible.”<sup>47</sup> As a kind of trust, faith is a practical rather than merely doxastic attitude; the agent does not simply assert the ideas expressed in (a) and (b) as propositions, but stakes the meaning of his life on them.

## A Critique of Three Higher-Ethics Interpretations of the Teleological Suspension

As these comparisons suggest, my eschatological reading of *Fear and Trembling* clarifies and supports ideas concerning Kierkegaardian faith already proposed by others, including not only Mooney and Hannay, but also C. Stephen Evans, Ronald Green, John Lippitt, and John Whittaker, who have all critiqued irrationalist readings of *Fear and Trembling*. Hannay argues that the telos of Abraham’s faith is a resolution that will restore ethically right relationships within the world of finitude: “the faith he is to prove is that, *in the end*, he will not be deprived of Isaac even if he carries out God’s command to kill him.”<sup>48</sup> Abraham’s motive depends on his reliance on such a miraculous reprieve beyond mortal hope (based on human powers), a reprieve that is impossible by our agency, yet *eschatologically possible*. This is an anticipated apocalyptic turning *within history*, not merely in the next life or the cosmic end of time: for, as Hannay says, “‘in the end’ does not include ‘in the hereafter’” for Abraham.<sup>49</sup> Whittaker agrees: “Kierkegaard makes it clear that Abraham’s faith does not consist in the willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but in the belief that he will *somehow* get Isaac back.”<sup>50</sup>

What distinguishes the *Akedah* from other eschatological stories is the unusual nature of the element that makes fulfillment of the divine promise absurd, or inaccessible to human power and reason. All eschatological and eucatastrophic narratives have at least one such element, which we may call *the obstacle* that the relevant human agents lack the power to overcome. This element is part of condition (a) above, and it is the reason for resignation. In fairy tales, the obstacle usually consists in some set of natural or social circumstances that place the goal out of reach. In Hindu stories, the obstacle may be the temporal world understood as *samsara* or the world of appearances. In Christianity, the primary obstacle may be *sin* or the will’s inability to free itself from sin. But in the *Akedah*, the obstacle that makes it humanly impossible to keep Isaac and to save Isaac’s posterity is none other than *God’s own command* to sacrifice Isaac. This is why in his journals, Kierkegaard points out that the terrifying element

of Abraham’s predicament is “that it is not a collision between God’s command and man’s command, but between God’s command and God’s command.”<sup>51</sup> For God also commands Abraham to love Isaac and to trust in His original promise; so demanding Isaac’s life appears as an obstacle both to his human duty and to his reliance on God’s promise that a holy nation of descendants will come from Isaac.

### Three Versions of Higher Ethics

This special complication in Abraham’s case is the root of irrationalist misreadings of *Fear and Trembling*: they focus primarily on *the obstacle* and assume that accepting or bowing to this obstacle is what Kierkegaard means by faith. Thus they take “faith” in *Problema I* to mean that Abraham puts aside his *lower* duty to Isaac (or to human laws) in order to fulfill his *higher* duty to obey God’s command, which they usually assume is identical with the “Absolute Duty to God” discussed in *Problema II* (70). According to standard irrationalist readings like MacIntyre’s or Blanshard’s, the revealed ethical calling that trumps secular or humanistic ethics in the “teleological suspension” is what I will call “Strong Divine Command” ethics (SDC): God’s *power* or status as creator is the sole ontological source of right or moral obligation. According to this kind of absolute theological voluntarism, God’s commanding X is necessary and sufficient for X to be obligatory, and God can command anything (even murder).

SDC must be distinguished from two other ways of construing the “teleological suspension” as a movement from a cultural code or immanent ethics to a higher kind of obligation that transcends all custom and natural law in authority and/or metaphysical priority. These alternatives to SDC include a more nuanced agapic command ethics (ACE), which regards our highest obligations as deriving from the commands of a *loving* God,<sup>52</sup> and what I will call aretaic love ethics (ALE), which rejects any universal rules and allows only singular *phronetic* responses to unique situations. Like the eschatological interpretation, ACE and ALE readings try to avoid the irrationalism of SDC; but unlike the eschatological interpretation, they agree with SDC that for Kierkegaard, religious faith is primarily distinguished by a higher ethical attitude. Table 15.1 summarizes the relationship between the four main alternatives.

Readings of <i>Fear and Trembling</i>	Irrationalist	Anti-Irrationalist
Higher-ethical readings	SDC reading	ACE and ALE readings
Faith irreducible to higher ethics		Eschatological interpretation

The ACE approach has been rigorously developed in Steven Evans’s argument that Kierkegaard “combines a divine command theory” of obligations with “a teleological view of human nature.” On this view, Abraham has reason to obey God’s commands because he trusts in “God’s love and goodness.”<sup>53</sup> “To view moral obligations as divine commands is to believe that those commands

are directed towards good and loving ends, and not bad ends"; so an obedient Abraham would think that "God has a plan that will lead to a good end" even if we cannot understand it.<sup>54</sup> A similar ACE reading is given by Merold Westphal, who argues the teleological suspension of the ethical is only completed in the agapic ethics of "Religiousness C."<sup>55</sup>

The ALE approach comes in several versions, found mostly in recent continental thought. One variety is the radically anti-theoretical alterity ethics reading attributed to Caputo above. A slightly older version is found in Jerome Gellman's reading of the teleological suspension as defending a kind of proto-Sartrean individualistic ethic.<sup>56</sup> The mildest version, which is more plausibly attributed to Kierkegaard, is inspired by themes in the revival of virtue ethics, such as Bernard Williams's argument that moral theories focusing on impartial principles abstract from individual character and identities and give insufficient ethical weight to personal life-projects. This is Edward Mooney's aretaic conception of ethical responsiveness as including awareness of dilemmas, sensitivity to the uniqueness of individuals, and wholistic evaluation of concrete circumstances.<sup>57</sup> Although Mooney emphasizes the subjective dimension of personal appropriation, *phronesis*, and character, his higher ethic is hardly "subjectivist," since he follows Charles Taylor in holding that the significance of choice requires discoverable values.<sup>58</sup> But Mooney's aretaic ethic is also not "universalist" in *one* sense of that polyvalent term; it is not formalist or algorithmic, since it does not expect moral ideals to give us decision procedures. Mooney's existential virtue ethic is similar in many respects to the divine command versions of agapic ethics developed by Evans and Westphal.

### Is Only Hegelian Ethics "Suspended"?

I emphatically agree with Mooney, Westphal, and Evans that such an agapic ethic is central to Christian religiousness as Kierkegaard understands it: it is the heart of his "second ethics." But I still hold that Kierkegaardian faith is distinguished by an element that is not found in such an agapic or aretaic ethics in itself: thus faith does not *consist* in transgressing lower or less enlightened normative systems, trumping communal mores, or challenging established human orders, for the sake of higher agapic ideals.<sup>59</sup> ACE and ALE higher-ethics readings of the teleological suspension are motivated by a worthy desire to distinguish Kierkegaardian religiousness from immoralism; they are also occasioned by clear references to Hegel in *Fear and Trembling*, from which they conclude that it is *only* ethics in Hegel's sense that is "suspended" or trumped in faith. The best textual basis for this reading is a passage in *Problema I*: "For if the ethical—that is social morality—is the highest, and if there is in a person no residual incommensurability in some way such that this incommensurability is not evil . . . then no categories are needed other than what Greek philosophy had" (55).

On this basis, Hannay explains that "The pattern of argument in the *problemata*" is a *modus tollens*: "If A then B; not-B, therefore not-A," where "A is intended as a statement of the Hegelian conception of ethics prevailing in Kierkegaard's time," and B would be the implication that Abraham is a murderer.<sup>60</sup> Westphal concurs, noting that each *Problema* begins with "the same formula, which goes like this: If such and such is the case, then Hegel is right, but then Abraham is lost." Thus if Abraham's faith is higher, then Hegel must be wrong.<sup>61</sup> Pace critics like MacIntyre and Blanshard, the teleological suspension does *not* imply any conflict between "my duties to God" and "my duties to my neighbor and myself"; rather, its target is Hegel.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Mooney writes that the teleological suspension is a "gestalt-shift" from a lower "conventional" ethic to a transcendent ethic: "A *kind* of ethics gets dethroned while a superior, more complex sort gets installed."<sup>63</sup> More guardedly, Evans writes that "the conception of the ethical operative in the book is mainly Hegelian in character"; this social ethics is in tension with faith because it claims to exhaust ultimate meaning and morality.<sup>64</sup>

I agree that Kierkegaard is arguing that Hegel's ethics is incompatible with Abraham's faith, but that is not *only* because faith involves an agapic ethics that is higher than *Sittlichkeit* or "social morality." To show that the eschatological interpretation is more adequate, I will outline several objections to the higher-ethics readings. The objections show that the ACE and ALE readings share several problems with the SDC reading even though they deny that Kierkegaard means to recommend absolute obedience to arbitrary divine fiat.

(1) As Hannay says, Silentio's argument aims to show that "if you are a Hegelian, then you cannot talk glibly of faith as something you have fathomed and can proceed beyond."<sup>65</sup> But it does not follow that the ethical codes embodied in social life-forms (*Sittlichkeit*) are the only kind of "ethics" that is teleologically suspended in faith. Certainly Kierkegaard means to show that faith cannot be a *higher* stage than ethical consciousness for Hegel, since he regards rational comprehension of the universal in concrete ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) as part of the absolute or highest stage of consciousness. But the defense of faith as a higher stage involves *more* than just the rejection of this Hegelian theory. In particular, it involves an account of how ethical motivation is *preserved* within faith, pace Hegel's view that ethics cannot be *aufgehoben* in faith. While there is an important difference between *Sittlichkeit* in Hegel's system and the agapic ideals of *Works of Love*, the difference that Kierkegaard meant to emphasize in *Fear and Trembling* is that such agapic devotion can be *combined* in faith with an eschatological trust that goes beyond agapic responsibility, while Hegelian ethical conscience cannot.

This crucial point deserves elaboration. For Kierkegaard, a "higher" stage of human existence (or way of being) always *includes* transformed versions of the lower stages that developmentally precede it: their valuable contribution remains a necessary component of the higher stage. In Kierkegaard's existential

dialectic, each transition to a higher stage is *cumulative*, as in Hegel, rather than *exclusive*, as in Nietzsche.<sup>66</sup> For example, in *Either/Or*, the ethical includes the aesthetic in a transformed sense: forms of beauty, interest, and passion are re-figured in an ethical frame. As Evans puts it, in all Kierkegaard's later writings, "Although the distinction between the ethical and the aesthetic is consistently maintained, and the latter is never reduced to the former, the former seems to be included within the latter as an essential element."<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the ethical remains within faith, although faith transcends ethical knowledge and moral motivation.<sup>68</sup> Thus if Abraham simply fetishized God's power, then his loyalty would be an aesthetic passion not informed by any ethical ideal. As Hannay suggests,

That would be the case if, for instance, Abraham acted as he did in order to show God that he was able to obey *any* command of God's, because, as one might say, he fancied himself as someone obedient to God, much as a would-be Mafia "family" member must prove through some horrific deed that he is prepared to do anything for the Godfather.<sup>69</sup>

Silentio emphasizes that "faith is no esthetic emotion but something far higher; it is not the spontaneous inclination of the heart but the paradox of existence" (47). What distinguishes the attitude of faith from the aesthetic is precisely the ethical pathos within it: so-called faith that does not dialectically retain ethical devotion within it is *aesthetic childishness* (47). Thus Abraham must still be morally motivated. As Mooney lays out in forceful detail, the knight of faith's reasons for action only leave a narrow circle of options that might responsibly be chosen; these reasons rule out many acts that are inconsistent with the precondition of "exemplary moral character."<sup>70</sup>

(2) Thus any higher-ethics interpretation of the telos toward which the ethical is suspended in faith arrives at a dilemma. Ethical attitudes of *some* kind clearly must persist and be refigured within faith: Kierkegaard's conception of the existential stages requires this. But these ethical attitudes retained in faith cannot be those of *Sittlichkeit*, because conventional or communal ethics is superseded in Kierkegaardian faith. Nor can the ethical element retained and transformed within faith be the higher agapic or aretaic attitudes that ACE and ALE readings *equate* with post-suspension faith. For the higher ethical ideals are not *aufgehoben* on this view: rather, they *are* the telos for the sake of which lower ethics is trumped in faith. But then, what elements of the "ethical" stage of existence persist yet are also transfigured within faith, as the logic of the stages requires? One possible answer is "infinite resignation," but why would resignation need to remain within faith, if faith is simply personal appropriation of a higher ethical life-view?

(3) Despite the admitted emphasis on establishing a dilemma for Hegelians, *Sittlichkeit* is not the only sense of "ethics" that Silentio addresses. As

Ronald Green has argued, there is evidence that he includes "Kant's notion of the ethical."<sup>71</sup> And while Anthony Rudd argues that Kierkegaard is focused on Hegelian role-based obligations or "the sphere of positional ethics," he also recognizes that "Abraham is as much a scandal to Kantian *Moralität* as to Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*."<sup>72</sup> I agree that the ethical view presented in *Fear and Trembling*, as in *Either/Or*, is not simply Hegelian but rather "seems to combine themes from the entire rationalist tradition begun by Kant."<sup>73</sup> The term "universal" is also not restricted to "the concrete universal of the social order";<sup>74</sup> it is often used in reference to natural law and deontological norms. As Ulrich Knappe argues in detail, the portrayal of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* is closely related to Kant's categorical imperative, and Kant's insistence that Abraham should be condemned as a murderer is imported as central to the purely ethical perspective.<sup>75</sup>

The "ethical" is also used for the *universality* of the love commands. For example, Silentio tells us that although individuals differ physically and psychologically, since they are "sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy," from the perspective of ethics each "has his *telos* in the universal" (54). This has much in common with the admonition in *Works of Love* that agapic love transcends all favoritism, not by formalistic indifference or "proudly turning back into itself," but by "turning itself outwards, embracing all, yet loving everyone in particular but no one in partiality."<sup>76</sup> Thus I endorse Earl McLane's insight that "There is implicit in . . . *Fear and Trembling* an ethic of 'agapism,' an ethic based on the Royal Law, an ethic that points forward to the *Works of Love*."<sup>77</sup> The obligations to love God and neighbor are invoked and interpreted in *Fear and Trembling*. When Silentio says that "In ethical terms, Abraham's relation to Isaac is quite simply this: that the father shall love the son more than himself" (57), 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*.<sup>78</sup> In an effort to show that the knight of faith retains the same ethical will as the knight of infinite resignation, the "Preliminary Expectoration" dwells on "how Abraham loved Isaac" (31), reflecting in his own person the God who "is love" (34). *Problema II* also emphasizes that Abraham must continue to love Isaac "with his whole soul" even when he *apparently* acts against this fatherly love out of "his love for God" (74).

This suggests that agapic norms are integral to the ethics that is "suspended" in Abraham's faith, and not only to the faith that does the suspending. In raising the knife, or starting to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham appears to violate not only Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* but also the duties he would have under the religious ethic of neighbor-love. For, if our responsibility to love our neighbor has any deontic content *at all*, it must at least prohibit permanently taking innocent life.<sup>79</sup> This is why McLane, following Kierkegaard's journal statement that Abraham experiences a collision between *divine commands* (quoted above), concludes

with perplexity that his situation might better be described as “a ‘teleological suspension of the religious’ by the religious.”<sup>80</sup>

The eschatological interpretation resolves this problem by explaining how God’s universal love commandments or agapic norms are not revoked or overridden by the singular command to sacrifice Isaac. The latter command constitutes the obstacle rather than the telos toward which the ethical (in all its senses) is suspended: Abraham’s fulfillment of the universal obligation to love one’s child is apparently *blocked* by the singular command to Abraham. This command to give Isaac back forces him to rely on an eschatological telos toward which the universal is “suspended”—a telos whose possibility depends on God’s action. Thus God plays *three* formally distinct roles in the *Akedah* scenario as Kierkegaard understands it: as always, God is the ground of universal ethical norms; in faith, he is also the singular source of eschatological possibilities; and in this special case, he is even the origin of the mysterious obstacle.<sup>81</sup> This adds to Abraham’s greatness, for he maintains faith even in the face of a numinos rather than a merely earthly obstacle to the good outcome.

### *V-Suspension: Violating Sittlichkeit for the Sake of Obedience to God*

The three objections detailed above undermine the initial assumption of all higher-ethics views, namely, that it is only Hegelian or conventional ethics that gets “suspended.” There are three further objections to SDC and ACE readings in particular. Both SDC and ACE readings hold that

- (i) Abraham must *violate* the social obligation to love Isaac in order to give highest priority to his love of God, where
- (ii) loving God consists primarily in obeying God’s singular and general commandments as the highest source of moral obligation (either because of God’s cosmogonic power, or because of his agapic goodness).

(4) The most powerful objection to this conception of the absolute duty, as John Lippitt notes, is the counterexample found in “the four ‘sub-Abrahams’ of the ‘Attunement’” who are all “prepared to obey God’s command” but nevertheless do not count as knights of faith.<sup>82</sup> What distinguishes Abraham from these imaginary figures is his trust in the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise, not his willingness to bow to divine commands—either as arbitrary expressions of absolute power, or as agapic expressions of absolute love.

(5) Moreover, if the telos toward which the ethical is “suspended” were simply the duty to *obey divine commands*, it would in principle be willable and intelligible without any reference to the “absurd” possibility at the heart of Kierkegaard’s conception of religious faith. As Lippitt points out, all divine command readings ignore this key element in the story: they leave unclear “the significance of God’s substituting the ram” for Isaac.<sup>83</sup> For example, Blanshard

writes that “the fact that at the last moment he was relieved of the need to strike is irrelevant in appraising him.”<sup>84</sup> But why then is there so much emphasis on the eucatastrophe in *Fear and Trembling*?

This is ironically similar to the main problem with Hegelian accounts of religiousness: they give no decisive life-shaping role to eschatological possibilities. As Westphal notes, Hegel thought of the modern “social order” as the embodiment of reason: “Hegelian rationalism thus has a realized eschatology built into it.”<sup>85</sup> But this means that eschatology (and revealed religion in general) is reduced to rational religion: a realization of the good that is deduced or comprehended by human reason or achieved by human power is *not* eschatological, in the sense defined above. Divine command readings give this crucial part of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel no role in *Fear and Trembling*.

(6) A final reason to think that the divine command interpretations are looking in the wrong direction is that the duty to love God, as interpreted in clause (ii) above, is simply a universal duty to take His word as *law*. Hence, this explanation reduces “faith” to the willingness to put aside traditional inter-human duties for the sake of a higher but still universal obligation to follow divine commands. But Silentio spends much of *Problema I* arguing precisely that the “teleological suspension” involved in faith is *not* simply the abrogation of a lower universal norm for a higher universal principle, or the violation of lower cultural mores for the sake of ethical ideals with higher authority or significance. He runs through a list of heroes who performed actions that violated honor codes of family loyalty for the sake of higher purposes required for their nation: Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia, Jephthah giving up his daughter, and Brutus prosecuting his son (58). They are only heroes of resignation, not of faith, because their telos is still an *ethical* one: “the tragic hero is still within the ethical. He allows an expression of the ethical to have its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical” (59).

Of course, it is possible to insist that the “ethical” within which these heroes remain is still only *Sittlichkeit*: they suspend *individual* conscience for the ideals of civil law. Westphal reads the tragic heroes contrasted with Abraham in *Problema I* this way: they show that Abraham’s act cannot be justified by *Sittlichkeit*: “Abraham is lost (a murderer) unless the laws and customs of his people are only the penultimate norms for this life, ultimately subject to a higher law.”<sup>86</sup> But I see no reason to accept that the examples of Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus are meant solely as illustrations of *Sittlichkeit*, or that Silentio concludes from them that “the tragic hero is still within the ethical” only as Hegel understood it (59). Rather, I suggest that these figures are meant to illustrate *the general idea of infinite resignation* with a familiar kind of obstacle: tragic heroes cannot fulfill all the duties associated with their multiple roles because of an unfortunate conflict between them. Thus they resign themselves to the impossibility of fulfilling their ideal (success in all their roles) and subordinate the less

weighty duty to the more overriding ethical requirement.<sup>87</sup> This is something that can happen within *any* moral outlook or set of universal norms, including an agapic ethic. When Silentio writes that “There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham’s life than that the father shall love the son” (59), he is hardly trying to show that this love-duty is intelligible only as *Sittlichkeit*. Rather, he is arguing that the faith in which Abraham suspends this duty refers to something beyond *any* kind of universal norm, something entirely “outside the sphere of universal concepts and values to which ethics belongs,” as Ronald Green put it.<sup>88</sup> Abraham is unlike these other heroes in having faith, but his infinite resignation is like theirs in this respect: given the obstacle in his situation, he lacks the power to fulfill all his duties.

In sum, I agree with Green’s argument that “although *Fear and Trembling* has largely been read as a book dealing with ethics, its central problem lies elsewhere, in the realm of soteriology.”<sup>89</sup> Green rightly objects to the idea that teleological suspension can be explained by “the role of revealed divine commands in trumping rational norms in the governance of human life.”<sup>90</sup> For readings that make *Fear and Trembling* “an argument for some kind of divine command ethic . . . place Abraham definitionally back ‘within the ethical.’”<sup>91</sup> If it was simply Kierkegaard’s intention to defend a divine command ethic against a humanistic ethic, then it is at least rhetorically perverse of him to express this by repeatedly *denying* “that we can in any way fit Abraham’s behavior within the ethical.”<sup>92</sup>

Anthony Rudd notes the same dilemma in considering Donnelly’s and Bogen’s rival explanations of *Fear and Trembling*. Donnelly takes Kierkegaard to mean that we have a direct and unconditional duty to God that relativizes all other demands, and he concludes that since this is still a kind of absolute moral duty, there really is no full teleological suspension of morality. Bogen takes the other horn, saying that since all duty is suspended in faith, faith should not itself be described as including a sense of “duty” to God.<sup>93</sup> Both these readings radically revise the text. Rudd concludes, more sensibly, that Silentio just does not resolve this dilemma: “if the God-relationship is simply regarded as the highest of the various goals towards which I’m striving, then the relativization of other goals does not constitute a radical break with the ethical thinking.”<sup>94</sup> That is correct, but I suggest that Kierkegaard did not mean to enter this dilemma at all, because he did not intend the telos that is the object of faith to be understood as an intentional goal of human willing.

If the telos toward which the ethical suspended is eschatological—a victory of the good that is only possible through God’s power—then it is not a telos in Aristotle’s sense, that is, an end toward which we are motivated and for which we strive in action. In existential faith, the agent relates to the eschatological telos not by targeting it as the goal of action, but rather by embracing its possibility with his whole being as the condition for the ultimate significance of

all his cares and projects. In other words, the agent’s *volitions* remain the same: he may strive to fulfill his ethical ideal as well as particular life-projects under this ideal. Abraham, for example, continues to love Isaac and to will that Isaac live to adulthood, become a father, etc. But now the meaning of these devotions is transfigured in the new frame of faith: he accepts that successful pursuit of this good is conditional on the miraculous divine response in which he trusts absolutely.

## The Absolute Relation, the Dogmatic Schema, and Existential Suspension

We have seen that if “faith” were correctly described on the SDC reading as acceptance of a *moral duty* with no rational foundations—an unconditional duty to obey arbitrary divine commands—then Kierkegaard would be subject to MacIntyre’s objection (and to Plato’s objection in the *Euthyphro*). ACE readings avoid this problem, but they deny any suspension of morality *as a whole*: only duties based on custom and tradition (or perhaps also natural law) are suspended for the sake of the revealed universal and singular commands. But this result conflicts with the text. Westphal is doubtless correct that for Kierkegaard, “to be religious is to have a higher allegiance than to my people and their conception of the Good,” or to the “law of the land” in which I live.<sup>95</sup> But this “higher allegiance” cannot consist simply in a higher *ethical* attitude, as ACE interpretations imply. Thus we need a more nuanced way of understanding the crucial relationship between the following three concepts in *Fear and Trembling*:

- love of neighbor (including love of family and proper self-love),
- love of God,
- faith in God.

### *Faith as a Singularizing Relation to the Absolute*

The relationship between these three terms is the central issue in *Problema II*. This section begins with the point that, assuming theism, universal duties can always be understood *formally* as “duties to God” without requiring a dutiful agent to have any essentially particularistic devotion to God as a personal creator, redeemer, or maker of covenants:

The duty becomes a duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God. For example, it is a duty to love one’s neighbor. It is a duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty I enter into relation not to God but to the neighbor I love. If in this connection I then say that it is my duty to love God, I am actually only pronouncing a tautology, inasmuch as “god” in a totally abstract sense here is understood as the divine—that is,

the universal. . . . God comes to be an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought; his power is only in the ethical (68).

The eschatological interpretation explains why faith is more than such an abstract relation to ethical ideals: for faith involves direct reliance on a personal *promise* made by God-as-finisher, the content of which goes beyond ethical ideality to its actualization *in time* (a synthesis of the ethical and the aesthetic). In putting trust in such an eschatological promise, the human person is related “absolutely”—that is, directly, immediately—to God as an agent of infinite power whose promises, commands, and questions are always pervaded by numinos mystery. As Silentio puts it (in a phrasing that probably inspired Buber), the knight of faith becomes “God’s confidant, the Lord’s friend . . . in saying ‘You’ to God in heaven, whereas even the tragic hero addresses him only in the third person” (77). In other words, faith takes God as the *eschatological Thou*, as the personal source of prophecy and singular eschatological promises, whose miraculous fulfillment (as Tolkien put it) is never to be repeated. This contrasts with God as defined in natural theology by an Anselmian list of maximal properties (including perfect goodness). The Divine in the covenantal sense means more than the Divine conceived as the metaphysical and metaethical principle or foundation of being and goodness, and this revealed surplus requires an absolute response from the human agent.<sup>96</sup> Standing as a single individual in an absolute relation to the absolute means *loving* God as a personal maker and keeper of singular promises (120).

This duty to God is the duty to have faith in Him (51). When faith is defined *existentially* as absolute trust in God’s eschatological promise to us as unique individuals, then our duty to love God must in turn mean *more* than simply obeying God as the metaethical Alpha or source of moral norms; it also means trusting in God as Omega, the actualizer of revealed eschatological possibilities. This is what Silentio means in claiming that faith involves a singularizing relation above all universal ethical requirements: we trust in an ultimate *fulfillment* of moral ideals that transcends our powers and that ethical normativity cannot assure us in time, which is only possible by virtue of God as Omega. In this light, let us examine the key passage in *Problema II*:

The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual—to recall a distinction in dogmatics rather rare these days—determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox may also be expressed this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute. In this connection, to say that it is a duty to love God means something different from the above [i.e. God as universal principle], for if this duty is absolute, then the ethical is reduced to the relative. From this it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated; rather, the ethical receives a completely different expression . . . for

example, that love to [or of] God may bring the knight of faith to give love to the neighbor. (70)

Again, our task is to discern the right relation between our three critical terms, and my prior arguments suggest the following points. First, that “the individual relates himself *as the single individual* absolutely to the absolute” means that the individual is singularized in eschatological trust, which is an essentially particularistic attitude toward God as Thou. This singularizing relation is existential faith: the absolute duty to love God singles us out because it includes a “duty” to *have faith* in God as the ultimate person. Thus the eschatological reading does recognize a direct duty to God, which is paradoxical: it may apply universally to all human persons, but (as *Philosophical Fragments* explains) to hear the promise in which we are meant to have faith is already to have gone beyond naturally knowable universal principles (or immanent knowledge, “recollection”). The duty to “believe” this promise transcends the deliverances of natural reason; it is *revealed* in the eschatological promise itself. For *what* the promise reveals is distorted if it is just speculatively entertained, or merely “believed” in the doxastic sense of asserting a factual proposition; rather, it demands a wholehearted volitional response. Unless it is appropriated this way, the content of the promise will seem absurd. For promises are not purely factual statements: *how* we respond to a promise partly determines *what* it means to us.

Second, this also explains why proper love of God involves an attitude that is not required for agapic love of human beings: our agapic duty to God involves worshipping Him as creator and having faith in Him as the final actualizer of the promised ultimate good. Third, “the absolute” (used as a definite descriptor) *means* ‘the source of eschatological possibilities.’ But determining one’s relation to “the absolute” (as rigid designator for God) by way of one’s relation to the universal means taking God formally as the foundation of universal norms. This attitude does *not* regard God as “the absolute” in the descriptive sense of being the source and fulfiller of eschatological promises. In acting on the motive of duty, I relate *qua* the universally human to God *qua* universal ground of the Right. By contrast, in existential faith the individual “determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute”: this means that his relationship to duties of neighbor-love is in some sense (that we must explain) conditional upon his love of God.

### *The Dogmatic Schema: How the Universal Depends on the Absolute*

Silentio calls this the dogmatic schema of faith: it can be put in diagrammatic form as a relation of relations:

A human person *qua* instantiation of responsible agency ↔ God *qua* Universal  
 ↑  
 A human person *qua* unique individual ↔ God *qua* Absolute (personal).

The first universal relation (responsibility and free response to obligation) *depends* on the second absolute relation to God in some way. This second-order relation of dependence (↑) cannot be that which holds between a singular prescription or command and the single agent to whom it is addressed (as when I say to my daughter, “help clean up the table”). For if it were, then the faithful individual would love his fellow human beings *only* in obedience to a singular divine imperative that he do so, and loving God (the God-relation) would be reduced to obeying singular commands. As Ronald Green has said, this would be a “forbidding and frightening ethic,”<sup>97</sup> for it would imply that the human agent really has no duties that derive from his instantiating iterable conditions that figure in the antecedents of universal laws applying to all persons: all such universal imperatives would be converted into singular imperatives. But this would amount to saying that the absolute relation to God *revokes* the human agent’s first relation to universal ethical ideality rather than *supporting* it, as the dogmatic schema requires.

Understanding the first relation as the agent’s volitional response to moral ideals (such as loving those entrusted to her care), and the second relation as established by an eschatological promise reciprocated in trust helps explain how the first relation can be supported by the second, as the dogmatic schema asserts. If the second relation consists in existential faith—if loving God means trusting in Him as the ultimate fulfiller of His covenants and promises—then the second relation provides assurance that our striving for ethical ideals is not all for nothing, not destined to be meaningless in the final scheme of things. Our response to universal duty is upheld and refounded in existential faith because it denies “universal final defeat,” as Tolkien put it.

On this reading, the second relation cannot conflict with the first. Faith cannot consist in our being willing to *violate* our duties to love other persons in order to do something inspired by trust in an eschatological promise: for, as we have seen, the content of such a promise is precisely the ultimate fulfillment of *agapic ideals*. In fact, faith in such a fulfillment cannot require us to *do* anything beyond continuing to strive for ethical perfection; what it adds is a reason to trust, against all odds or apparent evidence, that our ethical wish can come true. When decoded, then, the dogmatic schema for faith in *Problema II* means that our volitional response to the ethical, in which we work to fulfill universal agapic ideals, is supported and sustained by the trust that our efforts will not *ultimately* be in vain, that these ideals are not finally limited to an ideal meaning outside of time, that they can be realized *in the end*. In other words, we reappropriate our moral obligations in the new light of eschatological hope. Thus the suspension-relation (↑) is one of context-dependence, as when a figure is dependent for its appearance on the background in which it sits. A gestalt-shift occurs in the meaning of universal ethical ideals when they are seen against the background of existential faith: although their formal content

is unchanged, their ultimate significance for human life has changed. The ethical will is *aufgehoben* in religious hope. Thus the eschatological interpretation, unlike its rivals, succeeds in explaining how the ethical is retained yet transformed in the religious stage, as the logic of the stages requires.

### *K-Suspension*

I have argued that the “suspension” of the ethical involved in existential faith does not mean suspension in the *V-sense*, that is, violating a valid ethical norm as a means to bringing about a higher ethical goal. Nor does it mean being released from a normally valid obligation because of the practical impossibility of fulfilling it in the circumstances. This Kantian reading of the “suspension” may seem appealing because Abraham’s two loves are described as being in tension (74): his love for God, who commands him to sacrifice Isaac, seems to make it impossible for Abraham to fulfill the requirements of his love for Isaac. Let us say that agent S’s moral duty is “suspended” in the *K-sense* when it is practically or morally impossible for S to fulfill this particular obligation by her own initiative.<sup>98</sup> K-suspension then amounts to a valid exception or limit on the scope of a norm’s application. But such exceptions are a normal part of any system of universal norms, *including* agapic systems. Moreover, on this proposal, “faith” would involve a K-suspension of Abraham’s duty to love Isaac only because God happens to have commanded him to do what seems tantamount to “hating” Isaac (72). But, as emphasized earlier, that God’s command plays the role of *obstacle* is a special feature of Abraham’s case (which gives it its special horror). The nature of the obstacle obviously differs in other cases, such as the “demonic” circumstances that may disable a person from participation in ordinary human concourse and dialogue, which “has its beginning in his originally being set outside the universal by nature or by a historical circumstance” (106). Such persons are not simply exempted from moral requirements, however.<sup>99</sup> Existential faith is not limited to the few people who experience an apparent divine or “demonic” obstacle to fulfilling their moral obligations. So Silentio gives us no reason to think that every case of existential faith must involve a K-suspension of some ethical obligation.<sup>100</sup>

Nor is the text consistent with the K-suspension reading. In commenting on the difficult passage from the Gospel of Luke on “hating” one’s family in order to cleave to God, Silentio insists that although the duty to God can lead one to do actions that “ethics would forbid,” or that appear outwardly wrong,<sup>101</sup> it can never require an evil motive such as hatred of other persons. Thus “Cain and Abraham are not identical. He must love Isaac with his whole soul. Since God claims Isaac, he must, if possible, love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him” (74). The point is clearly that Abraham *remains* under the requirement to love Isaac wholeheartedly, as a parent should. He is not excused from this obligation because it is impossible to love Isaac in these circumstances, as

K-suspension would imply. Rather, it is only because he must continue to love Isaac that he is faced with sacrifice and loss, and is unable on his own to pursue what he wills: namely, that Isaac live to father a holy nation. Mooney rightly emphasizes that Abraham fulfills this duty: Silentio “claims unequivocally that at no point does Abraham diminish his love,” and this is why he is so ready to “welcome Isaac back.”<sup>102</sup>

### *E-Suspension*

This brings us back to the crucial point in the passage on the dogmatic distinction in *Problema II*: Silentio clearly emphasizes that the “duty” to love God does not “invalidate” the ethical, but rather gives it a new expression (70). As we have seen, in this paradoxical duty, loving God primarily means having faith in Him as the Absolute Person. This duty to trust the divine eschatological promise does not violate, revoke, or K-suspend Abraham’s duty to love Isaac. Rather, it requires him to accept that he can save Isaac only by relying completely on God’s original promise. On this reading, Abraham never abrogates his duty to love Isaac or considers himself exempted from it, even when he moves to kill Isaac: for Abraham relies absolutely on the (absurd) eschatological possibility that this will not ultimately cause Isaac’s life to end, that he will turn out not to have murdered his son after all. He “suspends” his duty to Isaac only in this sense: he accepts that he can *fulfill* this duty only if the promised eschatological possibility is actualized by God. His intention toward Isaac remains loving, but he acts in a way that can be consistent with this love only if God’s promise is fulfilled by a eucatastrophe. Call this Eschatological Suspension: a duty is E-suspended if and only if our will to fulfill it must rely on an eschatological possibility in which we can only have faith. Our will makes sense as an intention to fulfill our duty *in the context* of this eschatological hope: thus our relation to our duty depends on our relation to an absolutely promised eschatological telos.

Thus the suspension in *Fear and Trembling* can also be understood as “suspense” in the *narrative* sense of anxious hope and dread. The E-suspension of X is not the overriding of X when justified by higher obligations, but rather letting X’s fate hang on objective uncertainty, accepting that its viability depends on something independent of our active pursuit of it, which we await in hope and awe. Thus Auerbach emphasizes that, unlike Homer’s characters, Abraham is a figure of ethical depth whose story is one fraught with “overwhelming suspense.”<sup>103</sup> But this suspense is different than the feeling leading up to the cliffhanger ending of a thriller movie, because of its ultimate significance: Abraham remembers “what God has promised him and what God has already accomplished for him—his soul is torn between desperate rebellion and hopeful expectation,” as Auerbach says.<sup>104</sup> In Silentio’s *Akedah*, existential faith operates as a gestalt-shift in which the ultimate meaning of Abraham’s love depends on something beyond his will. More generally, religious suspense concerns the

answer to the ultimate question: in the end, are ethical ideals just an eternal dream doomed to tragic failure, or will they be realized in new reality, in a world transformed by God?

### *Hannay Was Right*

This account of the E-suspension of ethics supports and deepens Hannay’s own interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*:

Abraham, so long as he remains firm in his faith, would not say that he was rendering himself incapable of accomplishing the universal but that he is *reaffirming* his capacity to accomplish it—for after all, his belief . . . is that he is going to get Isaac back even when he sacrifices him. In his faith, Abraham does not think he is putting himself outside the universal; his belief is that showing God his faith means putting the possibility of his continuing to exercise his fatherly love into God’s hands.<sup>105</sup>

This passage contains in summary form the thesis I’ve developed: Abraham’s fatherly love is suspended in the sense that it *depends* on God fulfilling his promise. His righteousness in relation to a universal moral ideal depends on the validity of his faith, not because faith is obedience to singular divine commands, but rather because faith is trust in an eschatological victory that will fulfill the infinite requirements of the ethical. This makes sense of Hannay’s claim that Abraham “reconstitute[s] the ability to serve the universal on the strength of the absurd.”<sup>106</sup> Rather than rejecting universal norms in favor of a higher law, Abraham is “retaining or reaffirming his capacity to realize the universal.”<sup>107</sup> Although Abraham’s circumstances are special, from a point of view higher than Silentio’s (e.g., Climacus’s), *every* singular individual faces the limits of his imperfect will as an obstacle: anyone who accepts the reality of sin must E-suspend “the ethical,” even in its highest agapic sense, in eschatological faith.

### *A Response to Green*

In making this point about the universal need for faith, however, I am not endorsing Green’s anagogical reading of the teleological suspension as primarily a figure for the overcoming of sin through grace.<sup>108</sup> *Fear and Trembling* certainly anticipates the treatment of these themes in the *Fragments*, *Postscript*, and other later pseudonymous works: the human agent who recognizes sin as an obstacle to righteousness that he cannot overcome, yet has faith that sin can be overcome by virtue of divine grace, instantiates the same *psychological structure* of existential faith for which Abraham is the paradigm illustration. Thus the “paradox of sin” and redemption contains an “analogy” to Abraham (112).<sup>109</sup> But unless God’s command to sacrifice Isaac is *only* read anagogically as a figure for human sinfulness, the specific nature of the obstacle and thus the specific content

of the eschatologically possible reprieve differ in these Jewish and Christian examples, which is precisely why Silentio repeatedly insists that sin is not the issue for Abraham (112). Thus I would also modify Whittaker's conclusion that Abraham's faith should be understood primarily as a metaphor for the faith of one "who dares to believe that he is forgiven by God."<sup>10</sup> The structure of existential faith is more general than Christianity or Religiousness B; it describes the subjective attitude of faithful persons in many religions, such as the Zoroastrian who trusted absolutely in perfect justice to be found in a hereafter, and Socrates' similar trust that a good man cannot really be harmed, in the end.

There are two other problems, in my view, with Green's claim that "Abraham stands for every person of faith who in believing in forgiveness accepts something which by moral standards of just desert is absurd."<sup>11</sup> First, as Lippitt points out, Green's analogy compares divine and human action: "just as Abraham teleologically suspends the ethical . . . God can teleologically suspend his justice (read: 'the ethical') in service of a higher *telos*: his love for humanity."<sup>12</sup> But this is an account of divine mercy to human beings, not of *human faith* in God, which is the target of Silentio's analysis. Second, it takes the strict retributivist Law of the Torah as suspended in the Love that Christ says is the whole of the Law. But *love* of Isaac, and not merely the law that the parent shall cherish the child, is what Abraham suspends in faith—however we understand "suspension." Reconciliation achieved through accepted forgiveness is not a violation of the ideal of agapic love, but rather figures among its highest expressions. Abraham's faith involves agapic love and more: it involves trust in the miraculous possibility of Isaac's restoration.

In sum, the eschatological reading explains how soteriology can be the central theme of *Fear and Trembling*, as Green rightly insists, without implausibly adding that Christian redemption is the only kind of soteriology that Kierkegaard intended to include within his conception of existential faith. Outka is right that Green tries "to assimilate *Fear and Trembling* too unqualifiedly into the classical Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of justification through faith alone."<sup>13</sup> Existential faith as eschatological trust can come in other forms too. Thus Abraham's faith is not merely a figure for the Atonement, nor for divine mercy that transcends the rigorism of universal law. Even Kierkegaard's own agapic ethics is E-suspended: existential faith is trust in a revealed promise that goes beyond the content of the love-commandments to the idea that *amor vincit omnia*: love will conquer all, in the end.

The relation between our three crucial terms is now clear. Success in the task of loving our neighbors as ourselves depends on the love and support promised to us by God, and trusting ourselves to this promise is the most important part of the love we owe to God. Our duty is not only to worship God as our creator, but to have faith in the final outcome of God's creation. Thus we cannot fully love our neighbor without this personal or singular (non-iterable)

relation to the divine as Absolute, as the mysterious source of eschatological promises and absurd possibilities.

## Infinite Resignation as an Essential Condition of Existential Faith

We have now seen how Abraham's trust in God's promise that Isaac will live, introduced in the long "Preliminary Expectoration," provides the key to understanding both the teleological suspension of the ethical in *Problema I* and the absolute duty to God in *Problema II*. The same is true in *Problema III* for the impossibility of communicating faith in a way that makes its content rationally comprehensible (though I only discuss *Problema III* briefly in section V below).<sup>14</sup> It should not be imagined that because the theme of eschatological hope is developed in a section titled "Preliminary," it is left behind in the later sections. Rather, the "preliminary" section provides the frame for all three *Problemata*; they all "draw out" the same paradox that seems to make murder acceptable by giving "Isaac back to Abraham again, which no thought can grasp" (53). The various themes of the *Problemata*, such as the refutation of Hegel, are all developed as subthemes *within* the central eucatastrophic theme. In particular, the contrasts between the tragic heroes of *Problema I* and Abraham are *instances* of the general distinction between the knights of faith and infinite resignation discussed in the "preliminary" section.

This implies that infinite resignation is not only a concern of the Preliminary section: its relation to faith remains crucial for understanding the aspects of faith discussed in the three *Problemata*. Yet the eschatological reading seems to be the only interpretation that adequately explains why, as Hannay writes, "There is no faith without prior resignation."<sup>15</sup> Rival accounts are usually unable to explain why infinite resignation remains an *ongoing* component of faith.

### Cross and Lippitt

Though a full defense of this decisive point would require discussing much of the voluminous scholarship on *Fear and Trembling*, a few examples will illustrate the difficulties that non-eschatological readings encounter with infinite resignation. Now, my reading seems to be a more developed version of a view that Andrew Cross describes as follows: Abraham "believes that Isaac will remain with him, believes this 'on faith alone'" and so does not understand his act as murdering Isaac.<sup>16</sup> Against this, Cross argues that if Abraham really believes that he will get Isaac back, then he makes no real sacrifice, and is only "calling God's bluff, so to speak."<sup>17</sup> For his resignation to be real, Cross thinks that "Abraham must be interpreted as being completely convinced that Isaac will die

by his hand," even though this action is wrong and the voice that commands it therefore cannot be God's!<sup>118</sup> Cross is forced to this counter-textual conclusion because he sets up a false dichotomy, holding that either Abraham must be certain the Isaac will die permanently, or he is merely manipulating God. Since the latter disjunct is unacceptable, he opts for the former and concludes that "Abraham's faith cannot manifest itself as a belief, say, that God will not demand Isaac of him after all."<sup>119</sup>

Against Cross, John Lippitt has ably defended the view that Abraham does not see his act as murder. Lippitt points out that there is "no problem with imagining an Abraham who would be prepared to go through with the sacrifice if need be, but whose trust in God is such that he continues to believe that Isaac will be spared."<sup>120</sup> This is exactly right, since Silentio emphasizes that Abraham is not engaging in any *calculation* about how the divine promise will be fulfilled (which is why the ram is eucatastrophic). Abraham believes that God's promise will be fulfilled in some incalculable way *even if* Isaac dies by his own hand on Mount Moriah; he is not trying to trigger any divine action, as a magician might try to conjure a spirit. That Isaac will not be permanently lost is the object of faith, not knowledge; the only thing he knows for certain is that he is carrying out the sacrifice as commanded (119).

Cross is certainly right that anyone who would play a game of 'chicken' with the Absolute, betting that God will blink before the knife hits, or that he will repair the wound after the knife hits, etc., is not what Kierkegaard means by a knight of faith. But that is because bluff-callers and chicken-gamers are *manipulators* of their opponent who believe these strategies are likely to be effective means of securing their desired ends. The eschatological reading makes clear that the knight of faith does not believe that he has any such way of forcing the divine hand. However he responds to the obstacle, he does not believe that his ethical goal will be realized as a *controlled consequence* of his action; but he nevertheless believes that it will be realized miraculously. Thus he does not *intend* or act to produce this miraculous outcome. Once we distinguish between intended and expected outcomes, Cross's false dichotomy is dissolved.

Lippitt still worries that his interpretation might conflict with a passage near the end of *Problema* III suggesting that "Abraham must know that Isaac is to be sacrificed."<sup>121</sup> This perfect future tense paraphrase is slightly misleading, though, since all that Abraham knows is that *he* cannot save Isaac if God demands him. Lippitt's solution is to say that Abraham has resigned Isaac in the sense that "he has steeled himself for the eventuality that *if* his faith is misplaced, then he will sacrifice Isaac."<sup>122</sup> I agree that Abraham expects to lose Isaac forever *if* his faith is wrong,<sup>123</sup> but this is not what Silentio means by the movement of infinite resignation. Abraham is *not* resigned to losing Isaac forever, but rather to the practical impossibility of saving Isaac by his own effort. In Kierkegaard's sense, my *resigning an end* about which I care deeply does not

entail my believing that it definitely *will not* occur (which would be inconsistent with faith that God can bring it about); rather, it means accepting that *I* cannot bring it about,<sup>124</sup> even with reasonably pursuable human aid or feasible enhancements to my own powers.

Cross argues that such explanations leave Abraham "with still too much to say in defense of what he is doing," and thus fail to account for the insistence in *Problema* III that the knight of faith cannot explain himself, even to other faithful believers.<sup>125</sup> Now this objection does have force against higher-ethics readings. The SDC approach, for example, amounts to making faith into a universal moral obligation,<sup>126</sup> which implies that the knight of faith should be able to explain herself (at least to anyone who thinks God's power gives Him absolute authority). But the eschatological reading says that Abraham cannot "speak" because he cannot betray God's confidence. The eschatological promise of Isaac's progeny is secret, given to him alone: "silence is also divinity's mutual understanding with the single individual" (88). Abraham's position in this respect is analogous to the heroine in Andersen's *The Wild Swans*: if she speaks, she cannot save her twelve brothers; so she cannot explain herself to her husband, and must even risk death to keep the prophecy secret. What the knight of faith believes might be intelligible to faithful persons, but then he would fail the test. Likewise, Silentio tells us that the bridegroom of Delphi could tell his bride what is happening—but not without reducing his trial to an unhappy love affair (91). The knight of faith's silence is a result of the divine promise coming to him or her "quite privately" and thus establishing "a purely private relation" (93). To share this revelation with others would be to fail to respond in the way that the promise itself demands.

### *Infinite Resignation and Faith: Cross, Lippitt, and Hall*

These points explain how eschatological trust is compatible with infinite resignation. Because Cross holds that they are not compatible—that Abraham is not resigned unless he believes that Isaac will die and never return—he is forced to the implausible conclusion that Abraham's faith is a non-cognitive "trust" that coexists with being certain that God will disappoint him.<sup>127</sup> To avoid this, Lippitt follows Ronald Hall's analysis of infinite resignation as "an ever-present temptation that must be continually annulled" by faith.<sup>128</sup> But Hall's approach seems to *agree* with Cross that resignation is an all-things-considered conviction that the object of the agent's care (e.g. Isaac) is totally lost. Hall differs from Cross only in holding that faith is a rejection of this kind of "resignation" (which Cross would combine with a trust that almost contradicts it). Abraham's faith thus involves continually annulling "the temptation to give in to 'infinite resignation': to take heed of the evidence, lose hope and trust in God, and resign himself to the loss of Isaac."<sup>129</sup>

Now, certainly this kind of doubt is an ever-present temptation for exis-

tential faith; but an all-things-considered judgment that Isaac is forever lost—a judgment that faith logically must annul—would constitute *despair*. Resignation *simpliciter* must be distinguished from the complex resignation that is identified as a form of despair in *Sickness unto Death*: namely, “to be unwilling to hope in the possibility that an earthly need, a temporal cross, can come to an end.”<sup>130</sup> This is resignation *plus* the refusal to “[h]ope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible.”<sup>131</sup> Clearly this compound attitude is incompatible with existential faith; but resignation *simpliciter* has to be compatible with faith. For Silentio says plainly and repeatedly that faith *includes* the tragic/heroic movement of resignation as its necessary but not sufficient condition; resignation in this sense is essential to the very fabric of faith. Indeed, Silentio argues that without resignation, faith collapses into the “first immediacy” or aestheticism because resignation is the ethical component that the aesthetic immediacy lacks. So the right reading must explain how faith builds *cumulatively* on continuing resignation, but the explanations offered by Cross, Hall, and Lippitt all fail on this score.

The model of existential faith as eschatological trust neatly solves this problem by defining resignation as the (b) component of existential faith (see p. 201 above): the resigned agent accepts that *he* cannot bring about the ethically required end, that no accessible human powers would be enough to enable him to realize the good that he wills. For example, if Agamemnon told Iphigenia that “by human reckoning” it was possible to save her, then she could understand him, but then he “would not have made the infinite movement of resignation and thus would not be a hero” in Silentio’s moral sense (115). To be resigned, Agamemnon only needs to believe wholeheartedly that Iphigenia’s salvation is humanly impossible, *not* that it is impossible in all modal senses, or that it certainly will not happen. The former belief (b) by itself is consistent with both (c), the despairing conclusion that Iphigenia will be forever lost, and with the opposite belief (a) that she can be saved by the gods nevertheless.<sup>132</sup> The confusion we found in Cross and Hall runs through the secondary literature because faith (as the conjunction of a and b) and religious despair (c and b) are certainly incompatible, but commentators fail to see that this is only because (a) and (c) are logically inconsistent, while (b) is necessary for *both* existential faith and religious despair. Faith annuls despair, but does not annul resignation in the (b) sense. The (a) condition is thus what faith *adds* to resignation, blending tragic recognition of human limits together with a joy that comes from ‘hope beyond hope.’ Now there is no difficulty in understanding how “Abraham makes two movements” at once (115), without the latter annulling or contradicting the former. He wills Isaac’s good with infinite resignation, yet despite the perilous obstacle, he also trusts in the absurd possibility of Isaac’s growing up to have children of his own. As Whittaker puts it, “Abraham believed himself to be participating in a drama directed by God, a drama whose ultimate outcome would not be tragic.”<sup>133</sup>

### Two Types of Infinite Resignation

We have seen that infinite resignation is in itself neutral between faith and religious despair, though it is a precondition for either. In explaining this, I have focused on the negative aspect of resignation as a recognition of finitude or limits, but resignation also has a positive aspect that distinguishes it from mere quietism: it is a state of volitional commitment to good ends or ethical striving, and so its presence within existential faith implies that a kind of ethical “work” must be ongoing in faith. One does not just leave it all up to God without first making an effort to bring about the ideal good. As Lippitt says, “belief in divine grace” cannot involve self-deception or spiritual laziness.<sup>134</sup> The negative experience of limitation can only follow upon authentic love or devotion to something worthwhile in this world. Louis Dupré explains this point in the specifically Christian terms of Kierkegaard’s later works:

Only a failure in the innermost depths of his own person can persuasively reveal to him his true condition and put him in the proper situation for experiencing God’s redemption. The failure of ethics must necessarily precede the coming of grace. In his later years, Kierkegaard became more and more convinced that Luther . . . did not attach sufficient importance to this preparation.<sup>135</sup>

I believe that Kierkegaard’s signed religious writings support Dupré’s point; his frequent emphasis on ethical works is anticipated by Silentio’s insistence that “Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith” (46). Because it is necessary for resignation, earnest moral willing is a *precondition* of faith, even though it cannot guarantee faith, earn salvation, or control any divine response.

“Infinite resignation,” then, should be understood as involving volitional dedication to a person, social role, vocation, or other valuable end that is underwritten by perfectionist ideals of exemplary virtue. This sort of spiritual ardor is the natural limit of moral heroism in the human will (and of autonomy in Kant’s sense). It is an *infinite* passion in the sense that it requires the strongest kind of resolve: the agent must identify *wholeheartedly* with her end for the sake of its ethical value:<sup>136</sup> “the knight will then have the power to concentrate the whole substance of his life and the meaning of actuality into one single desire [or motive]. If a person lacks this focus, his soul is dissipated in multiplicity from the beginning” (42–43). Silentio requires a passion “in which the individual has concentrated the whole reality of actuality” for himself (41 note \*). This is obviously related to Kierkegaard’s ideal of volitional unification in his famous discourse on *The Purity of Heart* and to the discussion of “infinite passion” in *Stages on Life’s Way*.<sup>137</sup>

This passion is resigned in the sense that the knight *retains* his commitment to his noble end as central to the meaning of his life, even though he

accepts the human impossibility of achieving it in the world of time (43–44). It is this qualification that constitutes tragic heroism, for it shows that the agent's passionate devotion to his goal is motivated entirely by the eternal validity of its intrinsic value rather than by any hope for his own happiness or satisfaction. Infinite resignation purifies the will, ensuring that it wills the noble goal solely for its own sake. In the extreme pathos of infinite resignation, the ethical thus becomes heterogeneous with all "aesthetic" interests and incentives. Tragic resignation requires "a purely human courage to renounce the whole temporal realm in order to gain eternity," to see the intrinsic value of one's ideals as entirely distinct from one's "earthly happiness" (49). I agree with Mooney's explanation that this also means giving up "proprietary claim" over the object, goal or person to which she has been committed.<sup>138</sup> Since the resigned agent must give up any pretension of ultimate ownership or control over this end, she is purified both of self-interested motives for its pursuit, and of any narcissistic insistence on being the one who achieves it. After such resignation, her care is "selfless" and entirely consistent with faith in the goal's realization.<sup>139</sup>

Yet it has frequently seemed to commentators that the knight of infinite resignation does give up on his goal, or cease caring about it in some sense that is incompatible with faith. This is part of the reason why resignation is often conflated with despair, as we saw earlier. Confusion on this point is partly due to an important ambiguity in the text between two species of infinite resignation simpliciter, each of which is *neutral* between faith and despair as explained above: they can exist on their own, or in combination with trust in victory through absurd possibility, or in combination with defiant refusal to be consoled in faith. For ease of reference, I give each of these species a representative label:

*Beowulfian Resignation*

- (i) I can no longer see any way for me to bring about (or secure a significant chance of bringing about) my good end E.
- (ii) Yet I continue to value E intrinsically, and love E as an eternal ideal; I remain devoted to E as what ought to be, in principle.
- (iii) I continue actively striving toward E by any just means that I can find, however futile, without hope that this will do anything to significantly increase the likelihood of E.

Thus in striving toward my goal, I still express my continuing devotion to it; I make clear what I stand for, to the end. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, King Théoden tells his warriors that even though they cannot defeat the armies of Mordor, "we will meet them in battle nonetheless!"<sup>140</sup> In this, Kierkegaard would have heard Tolkien's intended echo of the Norse Ragnarok, an eschatological narrative that emphasizes infinite resignation: the gods of Valhalla know that they will be defeated by the demons of chaos, but they "think that defeat no refutation."<sup>141</sup> Similarly, Socrates presses his argument to the Athenian jury,

already knowing what the outcome will be. In this kind of resignation, it is clear that the hero has not given up caring about his ethical ideal, even though he believes that his efforts cannot secure it.

But there is another kind of "resignation" covered by Silentio's concept that comes closer to the ordinary meaning of this English word, which applies to the young lad in *Fear and Trembling*, and possibly also to Kierkegaard in releasing Regina:

*Elegiac Resignation*

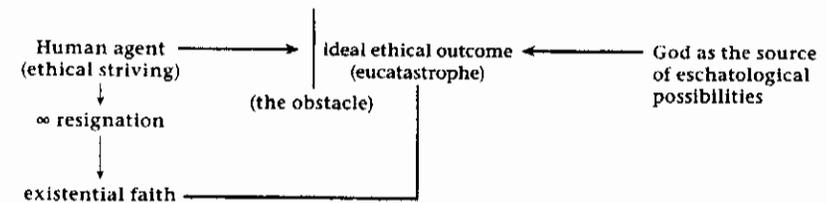
- (i) (same)
- (ii) (same)
- (iv) I disengage from actively pursuing my end E in time. I do nothing contrary to E's value, which I still prize, but I give up actively striving for E in this life.

Because this kind of resignation brackets active expression of one's continued commitment, it can sometimes lapse into sentimentalism, or what I call bad romanticism: Werther-like hand-wringing and enjoyment of one's sorrow. Kierkegaard's *Either/Or I* explores such perversions of spirit, and this is why some critics imagine that Kierkegaard's young lad has really ceased to care about his princess in giving up the pursuit of her. But this is a misinterpretation: we know from common experience that elegiac resignation can be enacted without the least diminishment of love. Think, for instance, of a person finally 'accepting' that her dearest friend has died, or that her Alzheimer-afflicted spouse's last memories are finally gone, and similar tragedies. The love for the friend or spouse remains an infinite passion to which the agent is wholeheartedly committed, but she is resigned to the reality that they lie beyond her reach. Such resignation is a state of will involving evaluative judgment: it accepts that no valuable statement is made by keeping a vigil forever at the friend's grave, or continuing to press the completely senile spouse for some neurologically impossible flicker of recollection. There is genuine heroism here also, a heroism that is *not* well symbolized by Beowulf going to duel his dragon. The will disengages from active pursuit, but the love remains. And just as it remains possible, by virtue of the absurd, for Théoden or Beowulf to win their battles,<sup>142</sup> it remains eschatologically possible for the friend and the spouse to be resurrected in their perfected nature. Both kinds of resignation are compatible with such existential faith, since neither in themselves entails despair. Disengaging from active pursuit of the humanly impossible end, when appropriate, is not the same as despairing *ultimately* of it (though it is compatible with that too). Resignation in either the Beowulfian or Elegiac sense presses the spirit toward a choice between despair or faith, but neither type of resignation forces or determines the agent's transition to a religious life-view.

Elegiac resignation is what I think Kierkegaard meant in describing a resigned Abraham as giving up his desire (18). Such a "tragic hero" (34) still cares

wholeheartedly about Isaac: Silentio says that if he had been in Abraham's position, then in "my immense resignation" I would "have loved him with my whole soul," yet failed to love him in the way that Abraham did (35), that is, *through* loving faith in God. The young lad infinitely resigns his princess in the elegiac sense when the object of his love is transformed from a living historical woman into "an eternal form that no actuality can take away" (43). His hope is reduced to an abstraction: "in an infinite sense it was possible, that is, by relinquishing it" (47). This means that he stops trying to win her hand in marriage, but not that he stops caring about her: "he does not give up his love" (42), nor change his deepest volitional devotion to her (43). He only accepts that this purpose, which continues to define his identity, is no longer to be pursued "within time" (32). Likewise, Silentio emphasizes that the lad's "renouncing" his princess only means disengaging from the worldly pursuit of her, not diminishing his devotion. His love is "turned inward, but it is not therefore lost, nor is it forgotten" (44). This renouncing or disengaging is an act of will (45), just like the other options of continuing to pursue the goal without hope as an expressive act (Beowulfian resignation), or radically rejecting one's love (in despair). As Hannay says, in "renouncing the possibility" of achieving her highest end, "the person does not give up the wish and try to forget it. Thus resignation is not abandoning one's heart's desire."<sup>143</sup>

This interpretation also supports Evans's argument that the portrayal of faith in *Fear and Trembling* is consistent with Kierkegaard's later religious writings, which stress agapic ideals. Evans concludes that Silentio "highlights the ways in which a transcendent religious faith cannot be captured by the categories of a rational morality."<sup>144</sup> But while we cannot bring about our own salvation, *Fear and Trembling* portrays the human self as able to will the good at least enough to discover its own limits and imperfection; without this, it cannot turn to God in hope that the good it willed (however deficiently) may be perfected and fulfilled by virtue of the absurd. Without our ethical striving, eucatastrophic grace would have nothing to *meet*.<sup>145</sup> The faithful human agent experiences her trust as direct dependence on God, and will experience the eucatastrophe that justifies her faith as a unique moment in time when she is touched by the transcendent, upheld by the hand that created her. Such a numinous encounter is impossible for an aesthetic agent who has willed nothing with ethical seriousness, just as it cannot be experienced in joy by a resigned agent who received an eschatological promise but failed to make the movement of faith. Ethical passion must come first, before the resigned will can look toward *an answer* from God, a fulfillment of God's will in time. We could diagram this complex relation as shown in chart 15.1:



## Conclusion: The Next Steps

Let me conclude by addressing two likely objections. One apparent problem with this argument that resignation as an ethical passion is a necessary yet not sufficient condition of existential faith is Silentio's admission that a sinful individual is already outside the universal, although a sinful individual can come to faith (98).<sup>146</sup> However, the individual is not entirely passive in the recognition of sinfulness; in fact, accepting the need for grace involves infinite resignation. Although we may give in to temptations, our higher-order will to rectitude can be pure, even though resigned to its own inadequacy without grace.<sup>147</sup> Thus Rumble is quite right that "sinlessness before the universal is not a prerequisite of faith,"<sup>148</sup> but resignation defined as a volitional state does not entail sinlessness. I have argued that we can think of sin as a different type of obstacle within the same basic structure of existential faith. But this obstacle does not imply that we are utterly incapable of any ethical effort, or we could not even come up against such an obstacle (as I argued in the previous section). As Silentio says, "sin is not the first immediacy; sin is a later immediacy," like faith, because it involves awareness of ethical responsibility that the agent cannot meet. Thus an entirely wanton aesthete could not receive the revelation of his sinfulness. Again, the cumulative relation of the existential categories implies that we cannot eliminate ethical consciousness from a religious state such as consciousness of sin. In Religiousness B, infinite resignation takes the form of the will to repentance, which becomes "the highest ethical expression" (98, note \*).

Another reasonable question is whether my account denies divine commands a central role in Kierkegaardian faith. For surely Kierkegaard's later religious works show that he rejected Kantian and Hegelian theories for some kind of a divine command ethics.<sup>149</sup> In response, it is important to emphasize that my eschatological reading is consistent with divine commands being indispensable for human understanding of agapic ideals, and with grace playing an essential role in our capacity for moral motivation. My reading is also consistent with the idea in ACE readings that the will of a loving God is metaphysically constitutive of moral rightness, though I do not believe that this is what the "teleological suspension of the ethical" means: it is a trusting response to a divine promise concerning *actual* realization of ethical possibilities in this world (or in its end

and remaking), rather than to a singular command concerning what *ought* to be. The distinctive positive thesis in the eschatological reading is that *Fear and Trembling* shows us what faith involves beyond the authority of divine commands; but as regards divine commands, its only negative thesis is that *divine power alone* is not the source of moral normativity for Kierkegaard.

Thus the eschatological reading is committed to denying that the highest ethical ideals to be actualized in eschatological victory are caused to have ethical authority by *arbitrary* divine fiat, as they are in absolute voluntarist accounts. For an eschatological outcome is defined as the miraculous realization of ethical ideals that already have authoritative content independent of the power that makes them eschatologically possible. Such turning points in time, which are the intensional objects of faith-consciousness, would be meaningless if the Good did not already have significance. Eschatological promises and their eucatastrophic fulfillment can issue from the free creative will of God only if the Good itself is not a free creation of this will, but remains ontologically prior to it, as a metaphysically necessary truth. The eschatological, properly understood, depends on the ethical for its sense or meaning, rather than the other way around.

To clarify these points, consider the distinctions between different versions of divine command ethics drawn by Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman. Moral obligation is metaphysically dependent on divine will according to the “strong dependence” thesis: “Advocates of strong dependence claim that morality cannot exist without religion, that God is both the source of morality and the exclusive basis of its validity. This means that had God commanded us to commit murder, for instance, murder would become a moral obligation.”<sup>150</sup> On these views, then, divine commands are necessary and sufficient for moral requirement or prohibition. But Sagi and Statman usefully distinguish between the “extreme” version of strong dependence, according to which obligation depends solely on God’s will as “completely free” (or arbitrary), and more moderate versions of strong dependence according to which “God’s commands reflect his moral nature but are, nevertheless, the sole basis of moral obligations.”<sup>151</sup> These are the types of divine command ethics endorsed by SDC and ACE readings respectively. Both contrast with what Sagi and Statman call the “weak dependence thesis,” which holds that

although the validity of morality is independent of God’s command, morality still depends on God for its implementation. This thesis assumes that human beings, because of their flaws, can neither attain moral knowledge nor behave in moral ways unless assisted by God. . . . Human beings depend on God for the understanding and realization of morality.<sup>152</sup>

Sagi and Statman argue convincingly that this weak dependence view is commonly found in Jewish literature on commanded duties (*mitsvot*), according

to which divine commands simply “reveal” what has “intrinsic moral value” independently of any divine free choice.<sup>153</sup>

In my view, Kierkegaard also accepts the weak dependence thesis, but not the strong dependence thesis, at least in its extreme voluntarist form. McLane is right that, for Kierkegaard, “God’s commands flow from his nature,” which is love, and this nature is the basis of his authority.<sup>154</sup> This obviously agrees with Evans and Adams (see section III above). In the signed writings of his later years, Kierkegaard accepts both that our moral duties cannot fully be known without revelation, and that we cannot fulfill them without grace.<sup>155</sup> Both of these claims are also central to Christianity in *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Postscript*. Yet neither of these kinds of dependence on God entail that divine fiat unlimited by prior goodness constitutes the rightness of obligations that are (partly) revealed, or whose pursuit is aided by grace. Hence, neither conflicts with my reading of *Fear and Trembling*.

In sum, my account of existential faith is fully compatible with the notion of a “second ethics” that requires revelation beyond the naturally knowable part of morality, and whose ideals are heterogeneous to wills fallen in sin. Although these topics are beyond the scope of *Fear and Trembling*, and perhaps beyond the ken of its pseudonymous author, the introduction of these themes in later works does not reject or fundamentally alter the basic structure of existential faith set forth by Silentio. For example, the distinction between religiousness A and B in the *Postscript* is primarily a difference in the kinds of eschatological possibilities envisioned in each type of faith.<sup>156</sup> In the future, I also hope to extend this reading to *Works of Love* and other signed works.

This will hardly be the last word. The literature on *Fear and Trembling* is as large and often as varied, rich, and creative as the literary products of Kierkegaard himself. But I hope at least to have laid finally to rest the old saw that *Fear and Trembling* teaches religious fundamentalism or absolute fideism without any place for human ethical striving. No responsible teacher can portray Kierkegaard’s masterpiece as recommending a form of religious faith that constitutes total irrationalism. Trust in the hereafter, or committed hope for eschatological redemption, certainly involves subjective appropriation of promises that cannot be proven by any form of rational demonstration starting from natural sources, but it does not require rejecting all naturally knowable ethical requirements or ideals. The transition from the ethical to the religious involves a “leap” that cannot be determined by rational argument, but it is not a leap into blind fanaticism.

22. The forensic psychiatrist James Gilligan, author of many books including *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (New York: Random House, 1996), is such a Kierkegaard lover, as is the poet James Mancinelli. I met the former at a dinner party and the latter in a writing group of which I am a member.

## 14. Abraham's Final Word

1. All references to, and citations from, the text of *Fear and Trembling* are drawn from the Hongs' edition and translation. On occasion, however, I alter the translation, often to follow the translation suggested by Hannay.

2. I am indebted here to the excellent discussion by Fenves, especially chapter 4.

3. Within an excursus devoted to the faith of Abraham on Mount Moriah, Johannes embeds a passing reference to Sodom and Gomorrah, saying that Abraham "did not pray for himself, trying to influence the Lord; it was only when righteous punishment fell upon Sodom and Gomorrah that Abraham came forward with his prayers" (21). Following this brief paragraph, Johannes turns immediately to the story of Abraham as it is told in Chapter 22 of the Book of *Genesis*.

4. All citations from, and references to, The Hebrew Bible are drawn from *TANAKH*. All references identify the book, chapter, and verse in which the cited passage appears.

5. With the exception of the imaginative sketches in his *Exordium*, wherein he rehearses Abraham's faithless attempts to maintain Isaac's relationship with their God, Johannes is mostly silent about Abraham's relationship to Isaac. For an excellent account of Abraham receiving Isaac back again, see Mooney, chapter 6.

6. That Abraham did not speak is dubious; that he cannot speak is even more dubious. See Lippitt, p. 130.

7. See Mulhall, p. 359.

8. SKS 4, 203.

9. See Lippitt, p. 131.

10. SKS 4, 206.

11. As Lippitt observes, Abraham's alleged recourse to irony "hardly amounts to putting Abraham way beyond the reach of language" (132). Mulhall similarly insists on the "determinate indeterminacy of Abraham's words" (361–362).

12. Mackey's explanation, though faithful to Johannes's interpretation of the biblical passage, thus strikes me as overstated: "*Jehovah-jirah* tells Isaac precisely nothing; for all practical and moral purposes Abraham is silent" (220).

13. I am indebted to Bregman for his attention to this seeming redundancy in the text.

14. In a similar attempt to chart the deterioration of Johannes's meditation, Mulhall notes that Johannes's account of Abraham's words obliges him (Johannes) to deviate significantly from what appears to be his "interpretative ideal"—namely, "fidelity to the literal meaning of the Genesis narrative" (368).

15. See Lippitt, p. 196; and Mulhall, p. 365.

16. Mulhall persuasively defends an "alternative interpretation" of God's initial command to Abraham, wherein "God commanded Abraham to bring his son to Mount Moriah for the purpose of making a burnt offering of him, but did not command him to carry out the sacrifice itself" (363).

17. See Mulhall, p. 363.

18. SKS 4, 206.

19. On the importance of measure, see Mackey, pp. 208–210.

20. While I certainly agree with Lippitt that Johannes places "under scrutiny" the notion that "the ethical is the universal" (203), I would also maintain that Johannes's allegiance to this notion, whether conscious or not, also informs his discussion and occasionally deforms his argumentation.

21. My suggestion that Johannes serves, even if unwittingly, as a "knight of morality" is consistent, I take it, with Mulhall's claim that "In depriving Abraham of speech, de Silentio . . . is distorting his account of faith in a way which precisely corresponds to Hegel's distorted characterization of the ethical realm as exhaustive, as the only intelligible form, of spiritually meaningful human existence" (382).

22. Derrida, pp. 80–81.

23. Derrida closes his discussion of *Fear and Trembling* by revealing what he takes to be Kierkegaard's abiding (and ultimately limiting) allegiance to the Christian Gospels. Derrida thus observes that "As a Christian thinker, Kierkegaard ends by reinscribing the secret of Abraham within a space that seems, in its literality at least, to be evangelical. That doesn't necessarily exclude a Judaic or Islamic reading, but it is a certain evangelical text that seems to orient or dominate Kierkegaard's interpretation (80–81)."

24. I am indebted here to Kjældgaard's discussion of this "pregnant moment" (317–318).

25. A notable exception here is Katz, p. 27.

26. Johannes muses, "Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed" (36).

27. See Lippitt, p. 171.

28. Levinas, p. 77, emphasis added. See Katz, pp. 25–27.

29. True to form, however, Johannes misidentifies Socrates' "final moment." It is not the deathbed invocation of Asclepius, as recorded in the *Phaedo*, but the post-judgment irony recorded at *Apology* 36a.

30. For related expressions of puzzlement, see Lippitt, p. 131; and Mulhall, p. 361.

31. In one of his infrequent footnotes, Johannes explains that Socrates "consummates himself in the celebrated response that he is surprised to have been condemned by a majority of three votes" (117).

32. That Johannes regards Abraham as some kind of hero, notwithstanding his recognition of the limits of this designation, is suggested throughout *Fear and Trembling*, most notably in the "Eulogy on Abraham."

33. While I agree with Mulhall that "[Johannes] wants his readers to work for their spiritual bread" (383), I would also add that Johannes does not want his readers to work *too* hard for their bread, especially if doing so might lead them to seek more nourishing sustenance elsewhere (e.g., in the Hebrew Bible) than in the Christian Gospels as they are conventionally interpreted. As a dispenser of bread, Johannes is most similar to Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, who freely granted real bread (along with the illusion of freedom), asking only that his flock desist from longing for spiritual bread. Johannes would like to see his contemporaries work harder for their spiritual nourishment, but he does not want them to outwork him or work themselves out of the tradition he reluctantly represents. He thus presents the faith of Abraham not as an actual item on the spiritual menu, but as an appetizer that will whet their dulled appetites for the Christian Gospels.

34. I explore the resemblance of Johannes to the unnamed pilgrim in my essay "Seeing is Believing: Narrative Visualization in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*."

35. See Mackey, p. 221.

## 15. Faith as Eschatological Trust in *Fear and Trembling*

This essay has a long history. A very early version, titled "The Absolute as Eschaton in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," was presented on the general program of the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association (New York, December 29, 1995). I am indebted to criticisms made by Vanessa Rumble at this session. I would also like to express my thanks to Alastair Hannay for comments on that early version, as well as for his more recent

comments on the August 2004 version delivered in Copenhagen at the Kierkegaard Research Center. My thanks go to Edward Mooney for organizing this conference in honor of Hannay, and to graduate students at Fordham who read a pseudonymous version of this essay in the spring of 2005. I'm also indebted to Merold Westphal for comments on the January 2006 version, which have helped shape this final result.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984). All my references to this edition will be given parenthetically by page number in the main text. I omit the usual sigla "FT" since there are so many references to this one text.

2. In this essay I do not address the issue of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, although I acknowledge that responsible critics cannot just speak as if Kierkegaard himself is the author in a straightforward sense. Kierkegaard is the *writer* of *Fear and Trembling*, just as Plato is the writer of the famous dialogues in which he himself never appears and leaves all the arguing to his cast of characters. In my view, the point of the pseudonyms for Kierkegaard is virtually identical to Plato's reasons for "indirect communication" through semi-fictitious interlocutors: it is to allow his readers to form their own views without coercion by the author, and to bring worldviews to life. Each of Plato's major characters *embodies* a certain ethical or theoretical outlook. In much the same way, Kierkegaard's pseudonyms represent *points of view* on human existence that *show* us more concretely than any abstract description could tell us what it is like to exist in the attitudes they occupy. The primary difference from Plato is that these stages are not only levels of cognitive enlightenment but also structures of the will: they involve different attitudes and motives that arise from the agent's fundamental commitment to different kinds of ends, on the basis of different kinds of grounds or criteria for choices. To live in a given stage is actively to engage in its defining projects and to embrace or appropriate its evaluative framework. But like Plato, Kierkegaard treats his pseudonyms as *persona*, characters in a drama. In an obvious allusion to Plato, his pseudonyms even hold a symposium on love in *Stages on Life's Way*.

3. See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, 1991), 347, note 69, where he presents a brief review of interpretations offered by James Bogen, John Donnelly, Bruce Russell, Louis Mackey, and Paul Dietrichson. Also see John Lippitt's very helpful summary and critique of rival interpretations in his new *Guidebook to Kierkegaard and "Fear and Trembling"* (Routledge, 2003).

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 39–44. MacIntyre has reasserted this critique in revised form in "Once More on Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, ed. Davenport and Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 339–355. I have responded in "Kierkegaard, Anxiety, and the Will," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, vol. 6, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser, and Jon Stewart (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001): 158–181, esp. 2, and in *Will as Commitment and Resolve* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), ch. 10. Although I have criticized MacIntyre, I should emphasize that I also find insight and enlightenment in many aspects of MacIntyre's conception of virtues, practices, traditions, the narrative structure of personhood, historical conditionalization of responsibility, and community.

5. *Ibid.*, 41.

6. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 217–218.

7. *Ibid.*, 123. Also see Bruce Ballard, "MacIntyre and the Limits of Kierkegaardian Rationality," *Faith and Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (1995): 126–132.

8. See my essay "Kierkegaard's Postscript in Light of *Fear and Trembling*: Eschatological Faith," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 63, no. 3 (2007).

9. Edward Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1991); I am especially indebted to chs. 3 and 6.

10. Brand Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," reprinted in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing, 1969), 115.

11. *Ibid.*, 115–116.

12. *Ibid.*, 116.

13. Some commentators accept this reading, but argue that the traditionalist view belongs only to Johannes *de Silentio* and is not sanctioned by Kierkegaard himself. For example, see Jerry H. Gill, "Faith Is as Faith Does," in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1981).

14. John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). I have tried to address these alterity readings of "faith" in my essay "What Kierkegaardian Faith Adds to Alterity Ethics: How Levinas and Derrida Miss the Eschatological Dimension," forthcoming in *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion*, ed. J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). Interestingly, radical critics of ethical theory in analytic philosophy such as Bernard Williams have felt no attraction to *Fear and Trembling*, perhaps because they offer no alterity conception of transcendent responsibility to which they could relate Kierkegaardian faith.

15. See my articles "The Essence of Eschatology: A Modal Interpretation," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 19, no. 3 (September 1996): 206–239, and "Eschatological Ultimacy and the Best Possible Hereafter," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 25 (March 2002): 36–67. In these articles I explain in detail why eschatological visions of salvation in revealed religions develop only after, and in relation to, moral ideals that are distinct from the divine or sacred in its original form as cosmogonic principle or pure creative power.

16. See, for instance, Lippmann Bodoff, "The Real Test of the *Akedah*: Blind Obedience Versus Moral Choice," in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal* 42, no. 1 (1993): 71–92. Bodoff notes that the "traditional understanding of the story" in Jewish hermeneutics did affirm that "Abraham . . . , out of fear of God, was willing to violate God's moral law against murder, to which Abraham was committed" (71). But Bodoff goes on to argue for a "midrashic view of the *Akedah*," according to which Abraham *never intended* to kill Isaac: "It is a morality tale of Abraham's staunch defense of God's moral law against any temptation—even God's command to violate it" (73). Indeed, he adds that "A Jew is generally not required to obey what appear to be Divine commands to violate the law" (75).

17. Louis Jacobs, "The *Akedah* in Jewish Thought," in *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals*, 3. The passage that Jacobs quotes from Steinberg shows how passionate his reaction to *Fear and Trembling* is: "From the Jewish viewpoint—and this is one of its highest dignities—the ethical is never suspended, not under any circumstances and not for anyone. Especially not for God. . . . What Kierkegaard asserts to be the glory of God is Jewishly regarded as unmitigated sacrilege. Which is indeed the true point of the *Akedah*, missed so perversely by Kierkegaard" (quoted in Jacobs, 3). Levinas would certainly agree with this sentiment.

18. Jacobs, 2–3.

19. *Ibid.*

20. In two new essays Merold Westphal now speaks of 'hope and obedience' as integral to Kierkegaardian religiousness (see "The Many Faces of Levinas as a Reader of Kierkegaard" in *Kierkegaard and Levinas*, and in *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 63, no. 3 (2007)). But this conjunction seems ad hoc; it leaves Abraham with two distinct attitudes whose essential relation is not explained. Moreover, it cannot explain cases of existential faith in which divine command plays no apparent role but eschatological hope is clearly present, such as Socrates' faith in perfect justice in an afterlife. *Silentio* speaks of a single telos toward which the ethical is "suspended," not two independent teloi.

21. On this point, see C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript* (Amherst, Mass.: Humanity Books/Prometheus, 1999, reprint; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1983), 284–290. Also see Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 314–316. Since the preset essay was largely composed before December 2004 when I got hold of Evans's book, I have not been able to discuss Evans's fine analysis in anything like the detail it deserves here. I try to address it further in "What Kierkegaardian Faith Adds to Moral Alterity," op. cit.

22. Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Gill (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 17.

23. *Ibid.*, 18–19. It is not hard to see that these ideas about the temporality of human ex-

istence in its concern for the future were a very important influence on Martin's Heidegger's analysis of the past, present, and future, anxiety, and being-toward-death in his *Being and Time*.

24. *Ibid.*, 19. Kierkegaard goes on to distinguish this expectancy of faith from the aesthetic optimism of "the young person" who "expects to be victorious without a struggle" (20). Such optimism is not faith; but without optimistic ethical striving, a person cannot reach the point of realizing his inability to secure total victory, and then possibly accepting his need for divine assistance.

25. *Ibid.*, 206.

26. In "The Essence of Eschatology: A Modal Interpretation," I distinguish four main kinds of eschatological doctrines in increasing order of complexity. The highest of them is the type of eschatological conception that looks forward to a divinely caused realization of the Good within time itself—both individually via bodily resurrection and cosmically as a transformation of the world in a new time. This is the form that corresponds to prophetic Judaism and Christianity.

27. See my discussion of this idea in relation to the Absolute Paradox in "Kierkegaard's *Postscript* in Light of *Fear and Trembling*."

28. Interestingly, my reading brings Kierkegaard's view of the *Akedah* close to Bodoff's argument that "Abraham never intended to kill Isaac" ("The Real Test of the *Akedah*," 81) and that Abraham's faith consists in believing that God will never allow his actions to constitute murder (84).

29. Thus I disagree with Jack Mulder's analysis in "Re-Radicalizing Kierkegaard: An Alternative to Religiousness C in Light of an Investigation into the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," *Continental Philosophy Review* 35 (2002): 303–324. Mulder argues that since Abraham is willing to go through with the sacrifice, he is willing to attempt murder; and since Silentio's God demands this, he demands the "unethical" (307). By contrast, I think Silentio sees Abraham's faith as altering the content of his intention so that his intended act is not murder (since the concept of murder entails *permanently* ending a life within this world).

30. Kierkegaard also uses the phrase "fullness of time" for Christ's birth as the fulfillment of the promise in which messianic faith trusted for so many generations: see "Patience in Expectancy" in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 207. The familiar parallel with Isaac's birth as the gift that is later apparently taken back yet finally restored obviously informs *Fear and Trembling*.

31. The relevant sense of 'miracle' here is not the strong sense of 'an event contradicting physical laws,' but the weaker one of 'an event that human agents can see no way of bringing about, or an event beyond their powers to secure,' which is therefore necessarily unpredictable and a *surprise* if it occurs.

32. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 74.

33. Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), Part One, §C(A)b ("Necessity's Despair is to Lack Possibility"), 38.

34. *Ibid.*, 39.

35. Tolkien's lecture "On Fairy-Stories" first appeared in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C. S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1947) and was reprinted in Tolkien's collection *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967). I cite the final version found in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983): 109–161.

36. *Ibid.*, 153.

37. *Ibid.*, 154.

38. Kierkegaard, "Patience in Expectancy," in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, 207.

39. *Ibid.*, 208. Much of the rest of this discourse is taken up with a discussion of Anna's expectancy.

40. There remains one other crucial difference between an explicitly religious narrative and a fairy tale. Tolkien notes that "fairy-stories as a whole have three faces: the Mystical towards the Supernatural; the Magical towards Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards

Man. The essential face of Faërie is the middle one, the Magical" ("On Fairy-Stories," 125). By contrast, religious stories since the dawn of monotheism put less emphasis on the magical view of nature. Still, the three 'faces' of fairy-stories reflect a kind of eschatological perspective: the magical, for example, is nature seen as it will be in the new creation, when matter and spirit are fully joined. The double-attitude of scorn and pity toward men reflects existential anxiety before the *double-possibility* of damnation or salvation. And finally, in fairy stories, the divine enters only indirectly as the mystical, rather than directly as the ultimate Person, the creator, covenantal redeemer, or source of eschatological revelations.

41. Of course, Tolkien's own fantasy masterpiece is, in addition to being an epic, an attempt to evoke this eucatastrophic experience. See my essay "Happy Endings and Religious Hope: *The Lord of the Rings* as an Epic Fairy Tale," in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*, ed. Greg Bassham and Eric Bronson (Chicago: Open Court, 2003): 204–218. Doubtless, Kierkegaard would have appreciated the echoes of Mount Moriah in Tolkien's story of Frodo and Sam approaching Mount Doom (though they chose to sacrifice themselves). I have often wondered whether Charles Williams, who served as philosophy editor at Oxford Press and helped Walter Lowrie and others get the first English translations of Kierkegaard published, might have talked with his good friends, Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, about *Fear and Trembling* or other works of the Danish sage. One certainly finds eucatastrophes at the end of Williams's major works of religious fantasy, such as *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows Eve*.

42. Notice that Silentio also constantly emphasizes the *anxiety* that results from the paradoxical tension between the ethical and religious perspectives on Abraham's act (e.g., 28, 30). At this point, we might say that the anxiety that naturally attends all conjecture about the future has become absolute: unless the future is conquered by a faith that supports this paradox, then the contradiction destroys the single individual.

43. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, 91.

44. *Ibid.*, 102.

45. *Ibid.*, 57.

46. *Ibid.*, 58–59.

47. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 74.

48. *Ibid.*, 75 (my italics).

49. *Ibid.* However, as we have seen, the Christian "hereafter" is only one kind of eschatological end-point.

50. John Whittaker, "The Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*," *Kierkegaardiana* 4 (1988): 101–113, 103.

51. See Kierkegaard, *JP*, 1, #908; reprinted in the Supplement to *Fear and Trembling*, 248.

52. Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 281; Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 315. Adams adds that God must be good in the non-deontic sense and reasonable (not contradictory) for his commands to bind (283). But note that Adams does not think Kierkegaard understood divine command ethics in this way (290).

53. Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 21.

54. *Ibid.*, 316.

55. See Merold Westphal, *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1996), 197–199; and Westphal, "Kierkegaard's Religiousness C: A Defense," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Dec. 2004): 535–548.

56. Jerome Gellman, "Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," *Man and World* 23, no. 3 (1990): 295–304.

57. See Edward Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, chs. 4–8 and Mooney, *Selves in Discord and Resolve* (New York: Routledge, 1996), chs. 4–6.

58. See the discussion of objectivity and subjectivity in Mooney's *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, 47, and in Mooney, "The Perils of Polarity: MacIntyre and Kierkegaard in Search of Moral Truth," in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*: 233–263, 252.

59. Lippitt seems to agree with me here, for he asks whether God and the absurd have dropped out of Mooney's picture in favor of a kind of virtue that makes no essential reference

to the divine (*Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling*, 153). Yet, against Green, Lippitt agrees with Mooney that "one point of *Fear and Trembling* is to question the idea that 'the ethical is the universal'" (145).

60. Alastair Hannay, Introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 28–29.

61. Merold Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," in the *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 101–124, 108.

62. *Ibid.*, 109.

63. Mooney, *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, 47.

64. C. Stephen Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in the *International Kierkegaard Commentary* volume on *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993), 16.

65. Hannay, Introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, 31.

66. For example, when Nietzsche talks about going "beyond good and evil," he means a set of attitudes that reject Judeo-Christian ethics as having a mean-spirited ulterior motive about which its adherents deceive themselves. Although we have to move *through* this set of ethical attitudes to awaken to their implicit nihilism and in rejecting this nihilism to reach the higher consciousness of the *Übermensch*, the good-evil distinction is like a ladder that we can eventually throw away. It is the opposite for Kierkegaard: if faith is 'beyond' morality in any sense, it is only as a (nonmereological) *addition* to morality that forms a higher *combination* or mental *gestalt*. This is what I mean by a cumulative surpassing.

67. Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality," 12. Such a cumulative relation is what Evans means when he argues that "the spheres or stages should be viewed . . . as having a ranking or hierarchy" (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 51). I prefer the term "cumulative" because it more clearly connotes inclusion, as in nested concentric circles.

68. The cumulative relation of the aesthetic and the ethical is particularly evident in Kierkegaard's essay "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage" in *Either/Or*, Vol. II. In my view, *Fear and Trembling* serves a parallel purpose: it can be regarded as a demonstration of the 'Ethical Validity of Faith.'

69. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 78.

70. Mooney, *Knights of Fear and Trembling*, 82–84.

71. Ronald M. Green, "Enough is Enough! *Fear and Trembling* Is Not about Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 2 (1993): 191–209, 194. In addition to Kant's discussion of sin in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, I think Kierkegaard frequently has in mind Kant's account of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where Kant implies that eschatological perfect justice is something that we have a duty to pursue. This draws ultimate meaning within the scope of rational ethics, and leads to Hegel's vision of a philosophical realization of the Absolute. Part of Kierkegaard's aim is to return the eschatological end to its medieval place as the *purely revelational* element in theology, which is *beyond* our power or duty to pursue, although it confirms and requites the striving required by natural law *and* by the revealed love-commandments.

72. Anthony Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 145.

73. Ronald Green, *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1992), 89.

74. Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," 110.

75. Ulrich Knappe, *Theory and Practice in Kant and Kierkegaard*, *Kierkegaard Studies Monograph Series* vol. 9, ed. Niels Cappelørn (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 80–84.

76. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 78.

77. Earl McLane, "Rereading *Fear and Trembling*," *Faith and Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (1993): 198–219, 205.

78. I was glad to discover McLane's agreement with this point (*ibid.*, 199).

79. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194, 198.

80. McLane, "Rereading *Fear and Trembling*," 205.

81. Kierkegaard really should have started with a simpler case before addressing this one; then he might not have been so badly misunderstood by so many readers. But Kant and Hegel's difficulties with the *Akedah* proved too tempting for him: doubtless it seemed that Abraham's case would provide the leverage to show that the System could not really accommodate religiousness. In addition, Kierkegaard may have believed that God also played all three roles in his own life, since he apparently thought of God as the source of the mysterious curse or melancholy that served as the obstacle to his marrying Regine. However, the atypical nature of this kind of obstacle has occasioned much confusion.

82. Lippitt, 145.

83. Lippitt, 147.

84. Blanshard, 116. Blanshard was even more confused when he said, "'Teleological' means 'for an end,'" but "what Kierkegaard is praising here is the abandonment of all thought of ends" (116). On the contrary, Kierkegaard's knight of faith has a religious *telos*, although the latter is not something he believes that he can act to bring about.

85. Westphal, *Becoming a Self*, 29.

86. Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," 109.

87. This is only *one* way in which misfortune can make an agent's ethical ideal humanly impossible and force him to give up hope of fulfilling it. Thus one can be a knight of infinite resignation without being a tragic hero. But every tragic hero is also a knight of infinite resignation: the former category is a *subset* of the latter. This explains why, as Evans observes, the tragic hero and knight of resignation "appear to be different figures but de Silentio identifies them" in a couple places (*Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 74 and n. 22). Note that Kierkegaard's conception of a tragic hero is also different than Hegel's, since Hegel blames the tragic hero's dilemma at least partly on his own stubborn or unyielding way or ethical one-sidedness. I am indebted to Stephen Houlgate for this point.

88. Green, "Enough is Enough!" 193.

89. *Ibid.*, 191.

90. *Ibid.*, 192.

91. *Ibid.*, 198. Green also makes this argument in his insightful essay, "'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," in the *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, 257–281, 263–267.

92. Green, "Enough Is Enough!" 193.

93. Rudd, *Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical*, 148–149.

94. *Ibid.*, 150.

95. Westphal, "Kierkegaard and Hegel," 110.

96. See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press/Bollingen Foundation, 1954, 1974 paperback). With Kierkegaard in mind, Eliade writes: "Abraham's religious act inaugurates a new religious dimension: God reveals himself as personal, as a 'totally distinct' existence that ordains, bestows, demands, without any rational (i.e. general, foreseeable) justification, and for which all is possible. This new dimension renders 'faith' possible in the Judaeo-Christian sense" (110).

97. Green, "Enough Is Enough!" 198.

98. I call this the K-sense because it corresponds closely to Kant's principle that "ought implies can." Since for Kant the relevant sense of "can" in this principle includes not only that it is physically and psychologically possible to perform the required act (or omission), but also that it is *morally* possible (or can be attempted without employing evil means), Kant understands the principle to imply that we have no duty to do anything that we could perform only by violating other strict duties. (This principle is operative, for example, in limiting the scope of imperfect duties.)

99. It is obviously this kind of obstacle that Kierkegaard felt disabled him from partici-

pating in the universal ethical paradigm of marriage. Although the "universal" does seem to be used in the sense of Hegelian ethical life here, I note that relations of interhuman *love* and *discourse* in general seem to be interrupted by this kind of obstacle.

100. One could perhaps argue for a universal K-suspension on the basis of original sin, but that would be to import a specifically Christian category that plays no literal role in the account of faith given in *Fear and Trembling*.

101. Note that Kierkegaard admits that Abraham's *action* is unjust: "he is and remains a murderer" (74, and see also 53). But although outwardly it thus appears that "he hates Isaac," inwardly "He must love Isaac with his whole soul," or he lacks the goodness of will that is the *sine qua non* for faith (74). This gives Kierkegaard a way to interpret the meaning of the difficult saying at Luke 14:26, where Jesus characterizes the absolute duty to God as requiring that one "hate his own father and mother and wife and children" to be a disciple (72). This saying means that faith may require the apostle to act that way, while nevertheless still inwardly loving their family members.

102. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, 59.

103. Erich Auerbach, "The Sacrifice of Isaac," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Genesis*, ed. Harold Bloom (Chelsea House Publishers, 1986): 11–35, 14.

104. *Ibid.*, 15.

105. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 80.

106. *Ibid.*

107. Hannay, Introduction to *Fear and Trembling*, 26. Hannay's discussion in this Introduction was used as a basis for Chapter III in the second edition of *Kierkegaard*. Thus similar or identical passages occur in both.

108. See Green, "Enough is Enough!" 199–202, and "'Developing' *Fear and Trembling*," 269–274. In the latter, Green writes that "Abraham and the merman are counterparts, positive and negative expressions of the same problem. Both have suspended the ethical, one by obedience and one by sin" (273). This confuses the *obstacle* with the *suspension*, according to my account: Abraham and the merman have different obstacles but both find the fulfillment of their moral purposes in suspense awaiting divine assistance.

109. It is also beyond doubt that Kierkegaard saw the eucatastrophe of Isaac's return to Abraham as prefiguring the greatest eucatastrophe of all—Christ's return from the grave—which is the beginning of the new kingdom to come, the beginning of the general resurrection in the cosmic eschaton.

110. Whittaker, "The Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*," 109. Evans also comes close to endorsing the purely anagogical reading in *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*, 81–83.

111. Green, "Enough is Enough!" 109.

112. Lippitt, 163.

113. Gene Outka, "God as the Subject of Unique Veneration," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 2 (1993): 211–215, 212–213. However, I will not go so far as to say that existential faith is open to everyone (see note 132 below).

114. See my discussion of Problema III in "Kierkegaard's *Postscript* in Light of *Fear and Trembling*."

115. Hannay, 73.

116. Andrew Cross, "*Fear and Trembling's* Unorthodox Ideal," *Philosophical Topics* 27 no. 2 (1999): 227–253, 237. Cited in Lippitt.

117. See Andrew Cross, "Faith as Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*," *Inquiry*, 46 (2003): 3–28, 18.

118. *Ibid.*

119. *Ibid.*, 19. Yet Silentio attributes precisely this belief to Abraham, in almost these exact words (36). The text everywhere contradicts Cross on this crucial point: for example, the rich young man of the Gospel would have been a knight of faith if he had given away his fortune in resignation, and still believed that he would get it back by virtue of the absurd (49); Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus are distinguished from the knight of faith because they lack his

belief that the agonizing loss accepted in resignation "will not happen anyway" (59); etc. Also see Whittaker, 104.

120. Lippitt, *Guidebook to Kierkegaard and "Fear and Trembling"*, 71.

121. *Ibid.*, 72.

122. *Ibid.*

123. Kierkegaard must conceive Abraham as recognizing the epistemic possibility that his faith could be wrong (since faith is not knowledge), and therefore as recognizing the possibility that his killing Isaac could (in an epistemic sense) mean the permanent loss of his son.

124. As noted earlier, the modal sense of this "cannot," which is central to the concept of infinite resignation, is a complex one because it covers a large range of physical, psychological, social, moral, and even revelatory (as in Abraham's case) limits that function as obstacles to my achieving this end. The function of "cannot" is to say that these obstacle(s) are such as to be *insurmountable* by any effort of will that I could make.

125. Cross, "Faith as Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*," 14.

126. On this point, see Whittaker, "The Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*," 105–106.

127. See Lippitt's effective critique of Cross's position in his *Guidebook to Kierkegaard and "Fear and Trembling"*, pp. 72–74.

128. *Ibid.*, 65.

129. *Ibid.*, 75. Note that although Lippitt introduces this as Hall's view, he also seems to endorse it.

130. *Sickness unto Death*, Part One, §C(B)b ("In Despair to Will to Be Oneself: Defiance"), 70; see the note on "the dialectic of resignation" which refuses to will one aspect of one's concrete self.

131. *Ibid.*, 71.

132. Of course, Agamemnon does not seem to have received any eschatological promise from his gods, which points out an important epistemic precondition of existential faith: there must be some (apparently) divine sign or revelation in which the agent can trust. Socrates satisfies this condition while several tragic heroes do not. I do not try to decide here whether this epistemic condition can be met by general revelation or whether it requires special communication to the unique individual, as in Abraham's case. But if there are people who do not meet the epistemic condition, then infinite resignation would be the highest heroism possible for them. In their case, a eucatastrophe *could* be embraced with without any regret or loss (again consider Gawain, who receives himself back in poignant joy), whereas an Abraham who failed to trust the divine promise he received could not likewise receive Isaac back with pure joy.

133. Whittaker, "The Suspension of the Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*," 104.

134. Lippitt, 70.

135. Louis Dupré, *Kierkegaard as Theologian*, 72. In the same vein, Dupré adds that "Before there can be any question of pardon, man must first try to fulfill the universal law imposed on him as man; otherwise, redemption will have no effect" (73).

136. In Harry Frankfurt's work, wholehearted or decisive identification means a second-order volition that is unambiguous or not in conflict with any other higher-order volitions expressing the agent's self-defining cares or commitments. I use "wholeheartedness" for the agent's relationship to the ground projects that constitute the heart of her agency, or commitments of her "highest-order will"; see Davenport, "Kierkegaard, Anxiety, and the Will," 163.

137. See my discussion of infinite passion in "The Ethical and Religious Significance of Taciturnus's Letter in Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*," in the *International Kierkegaard Commentary 11: Stages on Life's Way*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, November 2000): 213–244.

138. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, 53.

139. *Ibid.*, 54.

140. From *The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema, 2003). Theoden's statement in Tolkien's original text is slightly different, but in a similar spirit.

141. W. P. Ker, quoted in the Introduction to *Howulf*, trans. David Wright (London: Penguin Books, 1957), 12.
142. Though both Théoden and Beowulf are only knights of infinite resignation, they could have added faith without giving up the infinite commitment of their resigned wills.
143. Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 73.
144. Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality," 16.
145. Whether the human will requires a *different* kind of grace in order to strive towards moral ideals within the limits of its power is another question that does not enter into *Fear and Trembling*, but is left for later specifically Christian pseudonymous and signed works.
146. This point was suggested by Vanessa Rumble in comments on a much earlier version of this paper (see introductory note).
147. See Davenport, "Entangled Freedom: Ethical Authority, Original Sin, and Choice in Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*," *Kierkegaardiana* 21 (2001): 131–151.
148. This quote is from Rumble's comments at the Eastern APA presentation of this paper (see introductory note).
149. Perhaps this thesis is most fully defended in Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love*.
150. Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman, "Divine Command Morality and Jewish Tradition," in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23, no. 1 (1995): 39–67, 39.
151. *Ibid.*, 40. It is not as obvious that the moderate versions of Strong Dependence are compatible with saying that any deontic state of affairs is independent of God's existing. Denying this is central to Philip Quinn's account of divine sovereignty.
152. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
153. *Ibid.*, 44.
154. McLane, "Rereading *Fear and Trembling*," 205. I do not try to decide here whether Kierkegaard accepts that the commands of a loving God are both sufficient and necessary for moral obligation, but on this topic, see Zach Manis's dissertation (Baylor University, 2006).
155. In *Works of Love*, for example, Kierkegaard seems to accept the view that agape is an infused virtue that is not possible for human beings without divine assistance.
156. See Davenport, "Kierkegaard's *Postscript* in Light of *Fear and Trembling*."

## 16. Silence and Entering the Circle of Faith

1. *Papirer*, I 94 (October 1835) ("Philosophic og Christendom lade sig dog aldrig forene"). The entry is No. 13 in *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks*, Vol. 1 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 25.
2. *Postscript*, Hong tr. p. 491, Swenson & Lowrie tr., p. 438 (SKS7, p. 445).
3. Published in August 1844 as *Four Edifying Discourses* (now in *Eighteen Discourses*, SKS).
4. *Postscript*, Hong tr., pp. 270–271, Swenson and Lowrie tr., pp. 242–242 (SKS7, pp. 245–246).
5. *Kierkegaard's Papers and Journals: A Selection*, ed. trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 425.
6. Cf. G. H. von Wright's "Historical Introduction" to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Prototractatus: An Early Version of Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 16.
7. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 83.
8. SKS4, p. 115.

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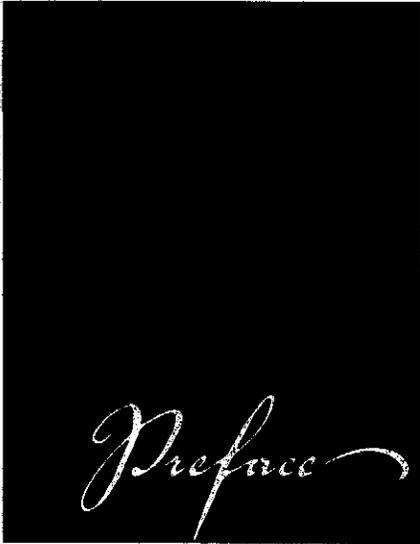
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Preface

These explorations of ethics, love, and faith in Kierkegaard first saw the light of day in Copenhagen, mid-August 2004. They were the centerpiece of a celebration held for Alastair Hannay, a philosopher who has devoted his life to bringing Kierkegaard into the open. Author of *Kierkegaard* in the Routledge *Arguments of the Philosophers* series (1982), and of the landmark achievement *Kierkegaard, A Biography* (2001), Hannay is also translator of a number of texts for Penguin, including *Fear and Trembling*, *Either/Or*, *Papers and Journals*, *Sickness unto Death*, and *A Literary Review*. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn graciously offered the facilities of the Kierkegaard Research Center for the late-summer event, attended by the writers represented here and by many others, who read and discussed versions of these chapters.

Kierkegaard research has been a community venture among students and scholars from a number of sub-disciplines (philosophy, theology, literary studies, history, psychology) and countries. Because Kierkegaard wrote in a minor European language, many arrive in Copenhagen not only to delve into the archives but to learn Danish, or to improve their facility. Thus it is entirely fitting that the papers included here were delivered first, not in Chicago, New York, London, Paris, Oslo, or Sydney, but in Copenhagen.

The collection is presented in parts by theme, each part followed by an appreciative and critical response by Hannay. Thus the volume delivers an active conversation among a dozen-plus distinguished scholars, broadcast for an international audience from that marvelous site where one hundred and fifty years ago a prodigious writer set out those works without which today's intellectual cultures of Paris, Sydney, New York, London, and Kyoto would be unrecognizable.