OVERCOMING THE DEMONIC: FAITH, SIN, AND REDEMPTION IN KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR AND TREMBLING*

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by

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PREFACE

> "A preface is a mood. Writing a preface is like sharpening a scythe, like tuning a guitar, like talking with a child, like spitting out of the window. One does not know how it comes about; the desire comes upon one, the desire to throb fancifully in a productive mood, the desire to write a preface…Writing a preface is like having arrived standing in a comfortable parlor, greeting longing's desired object, sitting in an easy chair, filling a pipe, lighting it—and then having endlessly much to converse about. Writing a preface is like being aware that one is beginning to fall in love—the soul sweetly restless, the riddle abandoned, every event an intimation of the transfiguration. Writing a preface is like bending aside a branch in a bower of jasmine and seeing her who sits there in secret: My beloved."
> -Nicolaus Notabene[1]

Kierkegaard loved to write prefaces, and after writing eighty-some pages on Kierkegaard I see no reason why I shouldn't enjoy writing one as well. My first experience of Kierkegaard occurred during my last semester at Capital University. As a philosophy major, I had heard much of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but I had never studied or read either. I immediately sought to remedy the situation and arranged for an independent study on the two thinkers with Dr. Tom Christenson, a man who has had much influence over my own philosophical interests and thinking, and for whom I am forever thankful. It was during this independent study that I first read *Fear and Trembling* and I was captivated. Here was a philosopher who seemed to be speaking directly to me. It was while under the influence of this book that I was inspired to take

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Prefaces, Writing Sampler.* Trans. Todd W. Nichol (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 5-6.

my own "leap." Unfortunately it failed miserably, but it was other works by Kierkegaard that consoled me and I came through a better and stronger person.

On future readings of *Fear and Trembling* I came to view my initial reading as naïve and lacking depth. The book was not so much about amazing and fantastic actions, but more about a certain sort of receptivity, an ability to receive grace and forgiveness. I once heard a preacher tell a congregation to make a list of all the rules and principles that they would like to live up to. He then rhetorically asked, "How's that going?" The implication was that no one would be able to live up to their own list. We all have high aspirations but we fail at them again and again. We have all wronged others, treated people we love and cherish in ways that we regret. We'd like forgiveness, but often we are afraid to ask. We know we don't deserve it, and we really don't want to forgive ourselves. To accept forgiveness is to admit our imperfection, admit our frailty, and admit our need for the other. And these are things that we, all too often, refuse to do. In the third Problema, Johannes de Silentio mentions the "little mystery" of it being "better to give than to receive." But, he tells us, there is a greater mystery than this: "Namely that it is much harder to receive than to give."[2]

I have had the opportunity to receive much from the family, friends, and teachers in my life. And I hope that I have always been appreciative of their gifts, though I have a nagging suspicion that this has not always been so. I should begin by thanking Dr. Gene Pendleton, my advisor, who read through numerous ramblings and drafts and provided much helpful criticisms. Dr. Michael Byron provided me with much sound advice and

[2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, (New York: Penguin, 2003), 129.

fruitful criticisms that I have found most helpful. I am thankful for the many conversations on Kierkegaard with Zac Purdue who kindly invited me to sit in on his independent study on Kierkegaard with Dr. Gina Zavota and Dr. David Odell-Scott, to whom I am also appreciative. Mary Riley, Jesse Butts, and Daniel Peterson, colleagues from Kent, Capital, and St. John's respectively, have offered me much support in this project through their conversation, correspondence, and occasional proofreading. Lastly I would like to think three other people, who for certain reasons must remain nameless. They do not know it but my interactions with them have had a profound impact on my interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*. Though our lives touched only for a brief moment, they have had a lasting influence upon me and I only wish them the best.

INTRODUCTION

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is a puzzling and troubling book. At its most fundamental level, it is a book about faith. Its picture of faith is Abraham's trip to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac—hardly the picture of some benign and easy faith. Does Kierkegaard expect us to take this view of faith seriously? Is this atrocious act something Kierkegaard would have us emulate? If this is what authentic faith is, wouldn't we be better off without it? There are some who would argue that such an understanding of faith is essentially correct. Religion is dangerous and therefore we would be better off without it. But Kierkegaard didn't think we'd be better off without it. He thought that his age had cheapened faith and had turned it into something easy and thereby robbed it of any value.

And yet, would we really want to live in a world where everyone acted as Abraham did? What sort of loving God would command a man to sacrifice his son? What sort of man would follow such a God or command? And most troubling of all: If Abraham is truly an exemplar of faith, how are we to distinguish him from a religious zealot? These questions are central, but they are also difficult. They are made even more so by the fact that the work is the product of a pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio—John the Silent. Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms is more than just a ploy for anonymity. The various pseudonyms are more like characters in a Platonic dialogue—each one offering a

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different perspective and life-view.[3] This means that we cannot equate what any given pseudonym says with what Kierkegaard actually thinks. Kierkegaard himself writes:

> What has been written, then, is mine, but only insofar as I, by means of audible lines, have placed the life-view of the creat*ing*, poetically actual individuality in his mouth, for my relation is even more remote than that of a poet, who *poetizes* characters and yet in the preface is *himself* the *author*. That is, I am impersonally or personally in the third person a *souffleur* [prompter] who has poetically produced the *authors*, whose *prefaces* in turn are their productions as their *names* are also…Therefore if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the books, it is my wish, my prayer that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine.[4]

Though it is troublesome to do so, I shall try to respect his wishes.

Complicating matters further is the epigram of the book, a quote from the counter-enlightenment thinker, Johann Georg Hamann:

> What Tarquin the Proud said in his garden with the poppy blooms was understood by the son but not by the messenger.[5]

The quote alludes to the story of the legendary Tarquinius Superbus, a king of Rome, who was involved in a war against Gabii. His son went to the town, pretending to be in bad terms with his father, and was made their military leader. Tarquinius sent a message to his son, but, not trusting the messenger, made it enigmatic. When the messenger relayed the message to the son, the son understood what the messenger did not—that he was to kill the leading citizens of Gabii and thus give victory to Rome.[6] How are we to

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[3] For further exploration of this issue see Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 246-255.
[4] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments,'* trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 625-626, 627.
[5] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, (New York: Penguin, 2003), 39. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from *Fear and Trembling* will be from this edition.
[6] See *Fear and Trembling*, 149n1 and also John Lippitt, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and "Fear and Trembling"* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 137-138.

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understand this epigram in relation to *Fear and Trembling*? One plausible interpretation is to say that Johannes de Silentio is the messenger who does not comprehend the message he brings. This interpretation also helps explain the meaning of the pseudonym –John of Silence. It does not appear that the pseudonymous author is all that silent. He has much to say and does not hesitate to say it. However, perhaps the true message of the book is not to be found in what is said, but in what isn't.[7] This, at least, is the guiding presupposition of this inquiry.

In what follows, I seek to defend the importance of sin in Kierkegaard's understanding of faith as exemplified in *Fear and Trembling*. One obstacle to any interpretation of this work is the inability to distinguish between Abraham and the religious zealot. A philosophy professor of mine once confessed that he did not think that any such distinction could properly be defended. A session on Kierkegaard and divine law command at a recent American Academy of Religion Meeting was overwhelmed with questions on whether or not such a distinction could be made and if so how. The most that was said was that Kierkegaard was not concerned with the epistemological status of Abraham's knowledge of God's command. While I think that this is correct I also think much more can be said. While sitting through this session various passages and connections began coming to mind and the seeds of this thesis were formed. It is my contention that a proper understanding of the place of sin in *Fear and Trembling* allows us to distinguish Abraham from the zealot. True faith must have an adequate conception of sin and it is this conception of sin that the religious zealot lacks. Furthermore, when

[7] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), x.

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we are aware of the proper conception of faith and sin, the problem becomes irrelevant as we are called to examine ourselves and our own relation to faith. To this end, I will distinguish Johannes de Silentio's view of faith from the faith which Kierkegaard hopes the careful reader will see. This authentic faith is one which must take seriously the concept of sin and our fallen nature. Chapter one will examine the viewpoint of Johannes de Silentio, his character, and his conception of faith. It will focus on what he says about faith in the beginning sections of the book. According to Johannes, there are three problems or difficulties we must face in examining this faith. The first problem asks whether there is a teleological suspension of the ethical, the second whether Abraham has an absolute duty to God, and the third whether Abraham is justified in remaining silent. Chapter one will deal with the first two of these problems while chapter two will move on to a consideration of the third problem. In particular it will emphasize the introduction of both the demonic and sin that occurs in this problem. I will argue that this brief and often overlooked treatment of sin is central to the text. The third chapter will take a step back and examine the treatment of these two concepts along with faith in the pseudonymous works *The Concept of Anxiety, Sickness Unto Death*, and *Unconcluding Scientific Postscript*. I hope to show that much that is discussed in these work is already prefigured in *Fear and Trembling*. In the fourth chapter, I turn to hermeneutics and the role that the pseudonyms play in our understanding of faith. In particular I will relate Kierkegaard's thought to the work of such thinkers as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. I will conclude that the religious zealot cannot be seen as a person of faith because he is self-deceived, and this deception is sin. Kierkegaard's aim in writing the book is to call us to self-

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examination and realize our own state of sin. More than this, he wants us to see the possibility of redemption, which involves faith.

CHAPTER I

JOHANNES DE SILENTIO AND HIS CONCEPTION OF FAITH

Our inquiry must begin with an overview of the text, its author, and the way it approaches its subject matter. The subtitle of *Fear and Trembling* tells us that the work is a "dialectical lyric"—a sort of philosophical poem.[1] Hence we should not be surprised to see that Johannes de Silentio makes use of many imaginative constructions in his attempt to understand faith in addition to philosophical dialectic reasoning. In many respects Johannes' use of dialectics depend upon his poetic constructions. These constructions allow him to make nuanced distinctions between similar circumstances. These distinctions are then brought out to highlight how paradoxical and unique faith is. For these reasons the philosophical and poetic are intertwined and cannot be separated. Thus it would appear that Johannes is both a dialectician and a poet. Yet he both affirms and denies both of these titles. In the Preface he informs us that he is no philosopher and does not understand "the System"—a disparaging reference to Hegel's philosophy. Instead he describes himself as a "freelance."[2] And yet he is able to boast of his philosophical understanding:

> I for my part have devoted considerable time to understanding the Hegelian philosophy, believe also that I have more or less understood it, am rash enough to believe that at those points where, despite the trouble

[1] Edward F. Mooney describes it as a "philosophical lyric" in Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling'* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 2.
[2] *Fear and Trembling,* 42-43.

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> taken, I cannot understand it, the reason is that Hegel himself hasn't been altogether clear. All this I do easily, naturally, without it causing me any mental strain.[1]

At the beginning of the Speech in Praise of Abraham he describes the role of the poet:

> [A]s God created man and woman, so too he shaped the hero and the poet or speech-maker. The latter has none of the skills of the former, he can only admire, love, take pleasure in the hero. Yet he, too, no less than the hero, is happy; for the hero is so to speak that better nature of his in which he is enamored, though happy that it is not himself, that his love can indeed be admiration. He is the spirit of remembrance, can only bring to mind what has been done, do nothing but admire what has been done.[2]

This is a perfect description of Johannes de Silentio. He is not a man of faith but a poet; he cannot understand Abraham, but he does nonetheless admire him and sing his praises. And yet in the third problem he denies even being a poet but claims only to practice "dialectics."[3]

Surely, we are being manipulated. The book abounds with evidence of Johannes' ability as a poet and dialectician. What are we to make of his repeated denials? The Hongs suggest that such denials are "akin to Socratic disclaimers of knowledge."[4] Socrates claimed to be a philosopher—a lover of wisdom. The term arose in order to make a distinction between those who merely loved and sought after knowledge (Socrates) and those who claimed to know (the Sophists). Thus the philosopher could claim ignorance while still pursuing knowledge. Today (as in Kierkegaard's time) the word philosophy does not bring up such a distinction. When we think of philosophy we

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[1] Ibid., 62. In context, the statement is made to compare how easy it is to understand Hegelian philosophy in contrast to the difficulty of understanding Abraham—a feat that Johannes is unable to do.
[2] Ibid., 49.
[3] Ibid., 116.
[4] Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 352n21.

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tend to think of abstraction and theorizing. When Johannes speaks of philosophy and "the System" he has Hegel in mind.[5] But the Hegelians think that faith is easy, that it is something that we can move beyond. For the Hegelians, philosophy surpasses faith. Johannes is not so sure. In the preface he likens faith to doubt (another idea that modern philosophy has made easy). Both ideas have been cheapened.[6] Faith, like doubt, used to be the project of a lifetime, not something that everyone quickly passes over. In the midst of such philosophical hubris, Johannes lifts up his "weak head" in protest.[7] If philosophy is a discipline that weakens a concept and then has the audacity to brag about overcoming it, Johannes will take no part in it. He will renounce the title of philosopher. Even if philosophy can tell us important things about faith, it in no way entails, as Johannes points out, "that one had grasped faith, grasped how one came to it, or how it came to one."[8] Johannes wants to grasp faith, and this means he must raise the price to its true value. For this he turns to the story of Abraham, and in particular to the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac.

IMAGES OF ABRAHAM

The first mention of Abraham occurs in the Attunement. Johannes presents us with a story about a man who seeks to understand the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. The older he gets, the more he wants to understand, but the less he finds himself

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[5] Mooney writes: "For [Kierkegaard], *philosophy* is a pejorative he reserved for bankrupt intellectual system building." (Mooney, 2)
[6] Mooney notes that the *Fear and Trembling* is framed by a picture of the world of commerce. This is the world that we inhabit in which we are constantly tempted to give everything an economic value. This world has devalued faith and it is Johannes' goal to raise the price to its proper value. See Mooney, 20.
[7] *Fear and Trembling,* 43
[8] Ibid.

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understanding. He finds himself troubled; he cannot understand it. He wishes he could have been there so that he could have *seen* Abraham's act of faith. Johannes tells us that this man is "no thinker," "no learned exegete."[9] He is only a simple man who seeks to understand Abraham. He might even be Johannes himself, though this is never explicitly stated. Whoever the man is, he is troubled—troubled in a way that no theologian would be troubled, about the story. In order to understand the story the man formulates four different versions of the Abraham story. In each version, something is missing, something is "slightly off-key."[10] In each Abraham is lacking faith.

The basic elements of each telling are the same. Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac, he wakes up early in the morning to begin his trip, he reaches Mount Moriah, and is willing to follow through on the sacrifice. In the first telling, Abraham attempts to explain his actions to Isaac. But Isaac cannot understand. Abraham continues to lead him to the alter and finally changes his tactic. He portrays himself as a madman, as a man who is killing his son on some whim. This deception allows Isaac to keep his faith in a *loving* God. This loving God that Isaac has faith in is a marked contrast to the God that commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. Isaac places faith in a different God from Abraham. Abraham feels the need to protect his son from the real God.[11] It is hard to imagine a man of faith, feeling the need to hide his God from his son. A further difficulty with this Abraham is the fact that he is easily understood. We have already been told that it is impossible to understand Abraham. But this story presents us

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[9] Ibid., 44.
[10] Mooney, 25.
[11] Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook,* 24.

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with an Abraham who is perfectly understandable. He wishes to protect his son and will even lie and demonize himself if it means that it would protect Isaac's faith.

The second telling of the Abraham story consists in Abraham drawing the knife, readying the sacrifice, when he sees the ram that is to be offered in Isaac's place. However, the story does not end here:

> From that day on, Abraham became old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac throve as before; but Abraham's eye was darkened, he saw joy no more.[12]

Abraham has lost all joy in life. The third telling is similar, in that Abraham goes through with the deed, but is troubled afterwards. He travels back to Mount Moriah and throws himself to the ground asking God to forgive him for being willing to sacrifice his son. But despite this he is unable to find peace. There are two things that trouble this Abraham: 1). He cannot understand how it can be a sin to be willing to give up his very best to God. John Lippitt points out that the language used here to refer to Isaac being "the best he owned" shows that this Abraham does not have a proper understanding of his true relation of ethical duty to Isaac.[13] 2). If it is a sin, Abraham cannot understand how it is possible that he be forgiven. The final telling of the story consists in Isaac seeing the anguish of his father as he holds the knife. Lippitt writes that Abraham "has no sense of joy or confidence in what he is prepared to do."[14] Isaac returns home but has lost his faith though he is silent about this fact. Abraham is unable to help his son because he has been crushed by his ordeal. Like the second Abraham, he has become old and unable to

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[12] *Fear and Trembling,* 46.
[13] Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook* , 26.
[14] Ibid., 28.

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partake of joy. In such a state he is unable to inspire others to aspire to a life of faith; he is unable to be the father of faith.

These four versions of the Abraham story do not tell us what faith is. They merely show us what it is not. But they do much more than this. They orient our way of looking at the story. In this respect they are crucial to the way in which Johannes practices dialectics. By conjuring up new versions of the story, constructing new scenarios, and allowing the imagination to run free, Johannes is able to draw our attention to authentic faith and distinguish it from its counterfeits. In each version of the story Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son and yet he is not a man of faith. It is not the particular act that Abraham does that makes him the father of faith. The various versions of the story in the Attunement show that Abraham can be willing to sacrifice his son without having faith. This suggests that faith is to be found in the manner in which Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son. It might even consist in Abraham's ability to receive Isaac back with joy. This is exactly what Abraham is unable to do in the second and third versions of the Attunement. Mooney, with terms to be introduced later, writes:

> What will distinguish the knight of faith from his cousin, the knight of infinite resignation or some other failed Abraham, is not obedience. The faithful knight is distinguished by the quality of his attunement to others, to the world, to himself, and to God: by the quality of his joy and dread; by the spirit with which he *gives up* the object of his love, believing all the while that he will surely *get it back*.[15]

For the moment we will put aside the manner of giving up and getting back. We will return to this topic later.

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[15] Mooney, 28.

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These false images of Abraham are followed by another image—the image of the Abraham of faith which we find in the Speech in Praise of Abraham. In this image, Abraham's deed is put into the context of his life as found in the biblical account. Johannes reminds us that Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is not his only act of faith. He reminds us:

> It was by his faith that Abraham could leave the land of his fathers to become a stranger in the land of promise.[16]
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> It was by his faith that he could be a stranger in the promised land.[17]
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> It was faith that made Abraham accept the promise that all nations of the earth should be blessed in his seed.[18]

Each of these statements is elaborated on to show the difficulty of each of these occurrences of Abraham's faith. Without faith he would not have left his native home to live amongst strangers. Without faith he could not believe that he would be the father of nations. He grew older and older, and Sarah was well past the age of child bearing. Still he kept the faith. He could have renounced everything declaring it not to be God's will, but he did not.[19] He held on to all despite the obstacles; he kept the faith. We should not see Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as an isolated act of faith but as a continuation of a life of faith. In contrast to the second view of Abraham in the Attunement, the Abraham of faith grows old only in time, not in his outlook. His faith gives him youth:

> But Abraham believed, and therefore he *was* young; for he who always hopes for the best becomes old, deceived by life, and he who is always

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[16] *Fear and Trembling,* 50.
[17] Ibid., 51.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 51-52.

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> prepared for the worst becomes old prematurely; but he who has faith retains eternal young.[20]

Abraham's youthfulness does not consist in a blind hope that things will turn out all right. Such a hope is despair.[21] Neither is Abraham expecting the worst. It certainly seems as though Abraham is hoping for the best. He believes that he will father a child and be the father of nations through that child. This despite the fact that both he and his wife are too old to have children. How is this different from merely hoping for the best? For the moment, this question must be put to the side. Yet we must note that—miraculously—a child is born—the promised child. And it is this child, this impossible child that was made possible only through divine aid, that Abraham must sacrifice by his own hand. Hasn't Abraham already shown himself to be a remarkable man of faith? Is this final trial necessary? These questions haunt us but they receive no answers, neither in the biblical account nor in *Fear and Trembling*.

Instead, Johannes is interested in the way Abraham lives through his trial. Abraham could accept this task and give up his joy, give up the promise that God had made him. He could, instead, focus on his rewards in heaven. This stance would be difficult enough, but it is at least understandable. Instead, Johannes tells us that Abraham had "faith for *this* life."[22] Abraham believed that he would be blessed in this life, that he would see God's promises fulfilled in this life. This stance is faith and not hope. What distinguishes the two?

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[20] Ibid. 52.
[21] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 2004), 89.
[22] *Fear and Trembling,* 53.

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THE DIALECTICS OF FAITH

The preceding section has dealt with the various images of Abraham. The text began with four false images of Abraham followed by a more lengthy speech in praise of the true Abraham, father of faith. There are no arguments here, only pictures that are meant to focus our attention on faith. They aim to break us of our commonplace conception of Abraham. We tend to think of faith as giving us peace and alleviating the pain of our world. Johannes, in contrast, wants to focus our attention to the anguish of faith—the long and tedious three day journey, binding Isaac to the altar, and wielding the knife. This was not an ordeal that lasted but a moment. For Abraham that three day trip must have seemed an eternity. We want to focus on the outcome; Johannes wants to focus on the journey. In the Problemata, Johannes brings out the paradoxical aspects of faith—those aspects that he finds impossible to grasp and understand. In order to bring out these difficulties, he introduces us to the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith. The latter being representative of Abraham.

Johannes, who humbly admits that he lacks faith, tells what he would do if he were in Abraham's situation:

> If—*in the guise of tragic hero*, for higher than that I cannot come—I were summoned to such an extraordinary royal progress as that to the mountain in Moriah I know very well what I would have done…I am fairly certain I would have been there on the dot, with everything arranged—I might even have come too early instead, so as to have done with it quickly. But I also know what else I would have done. The moment I mounted the horse I would have said to myself: 'Now everything is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him, and with him all my joy—yet God is love and for me continues to be so.' For in the temporal world God and I cannot talk together, we have no common language. Perhaps someone or other in our time would be foolish enough, envious enough of the great, to want to suppose, and have me suppose, that had I actually done this I would have

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> done something even greater than Abraham, for wouldn't my immense resignation be far more idealistic and poetic than Abraham's narrow-mindedness? And yet this is the greatest falsehood, for my immense resignation would be a substitute for faith.[23]

Johannes can achieve no greater status than that of the tragic hero—i.e. the knight of infinite resignation. The stance of infinite resignation appears to be greater than what Abraham did, appears to be greater than faith. It is a relinquishing of all earthly and finite joy. Like Abraham, the tragic hero, is willing to sacrifice his son. This sacrifice is not done out of whim but in order to aim for something higher. However, unlike Abraham, he sacrifices all of his worldly joy. For him there is no longer any joy on earth. But Abraham got Isaac back, and was able to receive him back with joy. This is the move that Johannes cannot make:

> [M]y behavior would have vitiated the whole story, for I would have been at a loss had I got Isaac back again. What Abraham found the easiest of all would for me be hard, to find joy again in Isaac! For he who with all the infinity of his soul, *proprio motu et propriis auspiciis* [on his own accord and on his own responsibility], has made the infinite movement and can do no more, that person only keeps Isaac with pain.[24]

In contrast to the knight of infinite resignation, Abraham makes the double movement of resignation and faith. He believed that he must sacrifice Isaac, must give him up, but he also believed that God would not demand Isaac. This despite the fact that God had already demanded Isaac! Furthermore, even if Abraham had carried out the sacrifice, he would not cease to believe. For he would believe that God would give him a new Isaac, or bring this one back to life. Johannes tells us that "he believed on the

[23] Ibid., 64.
[24] Ibid., 65.

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strength of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since been suspended."[25] What does Johannes mean by the phrase, "strength of the absurd"? Does he mean that Abraham believes something that is logically impossible? It certainly seems so. If Abraham believes that he must sacrifice Isaac to God, and also believes that God will not require him to sacrifice Isaac, we are in the midst of a logical contradiction. Abraham cannot be understood because he is irrational. But if Abraham's act is entirely irrational, there is no point in writing a book about it. One could easily write a book about the incomprehensibility of the irrational number but to write a book about an inherently contradictory concept such as a square circle would be preposterous. Abraham's faith is best understood on the assumption that it is not a logically contradictory belief. What, then, does Abraham believe?

John Lippitt offers two possibilities. The first is one argued for by Andrew Cross, a view rejected by Lippitt. The second is Lippitt's view. Both Cross and Lippitt argue that it makes no sense to see Abraham as believing a logical contradiction. Cross argues that Abraham believes that he will lose Isaac but acts as though he will not.[26] This might seem as though it is a logical contradiction but on closer inspection we find that it is not. If I believe A and not A, I am affirming a logical contradiction, which is unthinkable. However, it is not difficult to construe a situation in which I believe that A while I act as though not A. Imagine, for example, that a loved one has died. We see him in the casket. We know that he is no longer with us. These are our cognitive beliefs. But we might act as though these are false. I might talk as though he were still alive. I might continue to

[25] Ibid.
[26] Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook,* 68.

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set a place for him at the table. In practice, I act as though he is alive, despite the fact that I know that he is dead. In like manner, we can imagine Abraham as knowing that he will sacrifice Isaac but carrying on as though he will keep him.

Lippitt, in contrast, argues that Abraham believes that he will not lose Isaac, despite all evidence to the contrary. Abraham's belief is "absurd" from a human perspective, or at least from the perspective of one who is outside faith.[27] This belief, however, seems to be one of wishful thinking and it has already been stated that faith is not merely hoping for the best.[28] Lippitt, taking note of this, states:

> But this 'caricature of faith' (FT 66)—which *does* look like a form of self-deception, of hiding one's head in the sand—surely does not capture all possible manifestations of a belief in the possibility of divine grace…The picture I am endorsing is of an Abraham who trusts in God, who believes in the possibility of divine grace even in this, the most terrible of situations. This cannot be dismissed as identical to an Abraham who, at the point of unsheathing the knife, says 'Of course, it's *improbable* that I won't have to kill Isaac.'[29]

According to Lippitt, Abraham is not involved in self-deception but is able to accept the gift of divine grace. It might seem that the acceptance of grace would be easy. We might wonder why a person would reject such a gift. Johannes will later show us a person who cannot accept the gift of grace. This person is under the grasp of the demonic, a concept which we will introduce in the following chapter and will focus on for the remainder of this thesis.

But first, we must bring out the various difficulties Johannes says that faith has. Johannes begins each of the three Problemata with a statement about the ethical:

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[27] Ibid., 69.
[28] *Fear and Trembling* 52
[29] Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook,* 70.

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> The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies at every moment.[30]
>
> The ethical is the universal and as such, in turn, the divine. It is therefore correct to say that all duty is ultimately duty to God.[31]
>
> The ethical is as such the universal as the universal it is in turn the disclosed.[32]

Each reiteration of the ethical in the three Problemata states that the ethical is the universal and each gives a different characteristic of what it means for the ethical to be the universal. We learn that the ethical applies to everyone at all times and that there are no exceptions (Problema 1), that in following it we are also following God (Problema 2) and finally that it can be understood by everyone—i.e. when we do an ethical act we can speak about it and disclose ourselves (Problema 3).

Various commentators have concluded that such statements about the ethical are either Kantian or Hegelian, or perhaps both. In Kant there is the notion of the universality of moral laws for all rational and autonomous beings. A moral law is binding on me and there can be no exception to it—to exempt oneself from a moral duty is to embrace a contradiction. For Kant, a moral duty is one I can apprehend through my own use of autonomous reason. The Hegelian view centers on the fact that the good an individual does must be based on the good of the state. Ethics derives from the social good of the collectivity. It is probably safe to say that Hegel is Johannes' primary subject. Why else would he insist on the importance of disclosure in ethics? Disclosure in ethics

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[30] *Fear and Trembling* 83.
[31] Ibid., 96.
[32] Ibid., 109.

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is important because it shows that what is done can be understood by everyone. It makes sense to the community at large. Furthermore, it allows us to understand how and why Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia can be justified—it is for the good of the state. This can be understood and spoken about, as well as justified.

All this discussion about the ethical leads one to think that ethics is central to the book. We are faced with two options. Either the discussion of ethics is made solely to compare and bring out the difference between the ethical person and the knight of faith, or it is an attack on a certain conception of faith. On first reading it does seem as though the discussion of ethics is merely used to draw out the contrast with faith. Abraham is out to sacrifice Isaac. Why is he going to sacrifice Isaac? God has told him to do so. God has not told him that great evil will occur if he does not, that the family will be ruined, that the nation will be destroyed, all this unless he sacrifices Isaac. Furthermore, Johannes tells us that Abraham genuinely loves Isaac. In fact he tells us that if a person truly wanted to emulate Abraham and understood just how much Abraham loved his son, this would be plenty of work for the person's life. How can Abraham even begin to justify his action to anyone? He cannot, and this is in marked contrast to someone who is solely in the ethical realm. While all this is no doubt true, it is important to keep in mind that the book is written by Johannes de Silentio and that this man is a man who claims not to have faith, not to understand it. He looks at faith as one who is outside it. Perhaps there is something that Johannes gets wrong, that he misunderstands. And perhaps this misunderstanding points at something that is crucial to a true understanding of faith.

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Or perhaps he does get it right. Maybe we are not to take Johannes' assertions about the ethical at face value. We might ask the question, does Johannes necessarily believe the ethical assertions that he makes? He takes no time to argue and defend these assertions about the ethical. He merely states them as though everyone would agree with them. Or does he? John Lippitt argues that he does not:

> It might appear as if Johannes is offering us a *definition* of 'the ethical', whereas in fact the problemata are written—indeed, the whole book is written—in order to question the very assumption that the ethical is the universal… [In other words] the sentences that begin each of the Problemata can be read as conditionals: that is precisely the issue that the Problemata bring into question is *whether or not* 'the ethical… is the universal'. On this reading Johannes is trying to draw out what the implications of commitment to such a view would be. One reason that he might engage such a project is to show that these implications are such that we might need to reject the view on which they are founded. That is, if such a view cannot explain why Abraham, the father of faith, is held as exemplary, we might indeed need to reject such a view.[33]

One plausible interpretation is that Kierkegaard is showing us a divine command theory of ethics, meaning that it is ethically right to do whatever God commands us.[34] At first glance this appears to be a reasonable interpretation. Abraham is praised for doing the command of God. We could even perhaps interpret the title *Fear and Trembling* as commenting on the fact that one can never truly know what God will command so that one is always in fear and trembling. There are, however, a few problems with this view.

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[33] Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook,* 81-82, 143.

[34] C. Stephen Evans presents a similar argument, though it is more nuanced and for that reason much more difficult to refute than that given here. Furthermore Evans view is not necessarily incompatible with the view expressed in this thesis. See C. Stephen Evans, "Is the Concept of an Absolute Duty toward God Morally Unintelligible?" in *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling:' Critical Appraisals*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (1981; repr., Eugene Oegon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), and also the chapter on *Fear and Trembling* in C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). In this work Evans also argues for the importance of the concept of sin in *Fear and Trembling.* He also notes that *Fear and Trembling* cannot be the starting point for a divine command theory based in Kierkegaard.

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Johannes constantly says that Abraham is outside ethics (but once again this could be because Johannes has misunderstood something). But if this is the case how are we to understand a number of examples that Johannes has given us. Besides Abraham, Johannes gives us another example of the knight of faith, this time it is just an average man, easily mistaken as an example of bourgeois values, but nonetheless a man who is constantly making the movement of infinity and then finitude again. But there does not seem to be any fear in this man of being asked by God to do something outrageous. As a matter of fact there is nothing about this man that seems unethical from a Hegelian, or even Kantian stand point. Furthermore, Lippitt points out that in all four examples given in the attunement, Abraham does as he is commanded—he obeys God. And yet we are told that in each of these examples, Abraham fell short of faith. Mere obedience to God is not equivalent with faith. The distinguishing mark of the real Abraham, as noted before, is his ability to receive Isaac back with joy. How is this possible?

SUMMARY

This chapter began with a discussion of the character of Johannes de Silentio. We found that he is both a philosopher and poet though he is hesitant to accept either of these titles. Johannes stands outside of faith; he admits that he simply does not have it. But he is also convinced that there is something great about it, something that philosophy and modern society have overlooked and devalued. Thus begins his own examination of faith through the story of Abraham.

The first sections of the book—the Attunement and the Speech in Praise of Abraham—help orient and focus our discussion. It contrasts the Abraham of faith with

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several false Abrahams that are put in the same predicament as Abraham, are willing to carry out the deed, yet do so in a way that lacks faith. These views of the various Abrahams pave the way for the more dialectical treatment that faith receives in the Problemata. However, Johannes' treatment of faith, even in the Problemata, is far from clear. We know that it is not the outward act that is faith but the manner in which Abraham does this act. But what is this manner? Johannes says he does it on the strength of the absurd. We have already ruled out the possibility of the absurd as a logical contradiction. At least two possibilities still remain. Does Abraham believe Isaac will die or does he believe he will somehow keep him? And if the latter, how is this different from merely hoping for the best? A further question concerns the relation of ethics to faith. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is an unethical act. Johannes says that it lies outside ethics. Is faith necessarily outside of ethics? If this is so how are we to understand the other example of faith, a man who seems to live perfectly well within the ethical? More troubling, how are we to be sure that faith will not demand heinous and violent acts? In order to answer these questions we will have to examine the concept of sin.

CHAPTER II

SILENCE, SIN, AND THE DEMONIC IN *FEAR AND TREMBLING*

Most commentary on *Fear and Trembling* concentrates on the first two Problemata—those concerning the teleological suspension of the ethical and whether or not there is an absolute duty to God. It is as if commentators have assumed that all of the interesting philosophical problems are to be found only in these two problems. And yet the third problem is over twice the size of each of its two predecessors. Indeed, it is the largest single section of the entire book. The question it concerns itself with—"Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his purpose from Sarah, from Eleazar, from Isaac?"—is about silence, a concept that must be of central concern given that the name of the book's author is Johannes de Silentio—John the Silent.[1] Interestingly enough, it is this discussion of silence that ultimately gives rise to a discussion of sin and the demonic. And since sin is of central concern to this thesis it is only proper that we devote an entire chapter to this Problema. This chapter will give us a preliminary account of Johannes' understanding of sin, an account that will be supplemented in the next chapter by those given in other pseudonymous works. We will then have the materials necessary to prove the centrality of sin in the conception of faith offered us in *Fear and Trembling.* We will begin with an examination of silence.

[1] *Fear and Trembling,* 109.

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SILENCE

Like the two previous Problemata, Problema III begins with a statement about the ethical:

> The ethical is as such the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed. Seen as an immediate, no more than sensate and psychic being, the individual is concealed. So his ethical task is to unwrap himself from his concealment and become disclosed in the universal.[1]

If the ethical is universal, it ought to be communicable. This is the working assumption in our day to day life. We expect that people will give reasons for their actions. If these reasons are poor we believe we can correct them by offering criticisms of these reasons. A good action is one that is understandable and capable of rational defense. When someone commits a heinous crime we also seek to understand it, but not in the same way. We understand it by saying that the perpetrator is mentally ill, or that he has been brain-washed. In doing so we separate him from the world of rational persons. This despite the fact that he might be perfectly rational in every other aspect of life. An ethical action, it would seem, is one that can be revealed and be understood by the members of society.

If we are to conceive of the ethical in this way, we must conclude that Abraham's action is not ethical. Not only does he conceal his intentions from Sarah, Eleazar and Isaac, he is also unable to reveal them. If he tries to explain what he is going to do and why he is going to do it, they will be unable to understand him. They will say that he is delusional and a madman. Johannes tells us:

> Unless there is a concealment which has its basis in the single individual's being higher than the universal, then Abraham's conduct cannot be defended, since he disregarded the intermediate ethical considerations. If,

[1] Ibid.

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> however, there is such a concealment, then we face the paradox, which cannot be mediated, just because it is based on the single individual's being, in his particularity, higher than the universal, and it is precisely the universal that is the mediation..For faith is not the first immediacy but a later one. The first immediacy is the aesthetic, and here the Hegelian philosophy may well be right. But faith is not the aesthetic, or if it is, then faith has never existed just because it has always existed.[2]

In order for Abraham's action to be justifiable, he must be higher than the universal. But the universal is usually construed as that for which we aim, i.e. ethics. Kant's ethics, for example, stresses universalizability as a criterion for ethical action in keeping with rational agency. The moral evaluation of any given action is dependent upon whether or not it leads us to the universal or away. But if the particular individual is higher than this universal, it would be possible for him to commit an action that goes against morality. Furthermore, if such an action is committed, it does not appear that it could be justified or understood by the community of which the individual is apart. As a matter of fact, it would appear that the individual is setting himself up as higher than society. And if the individual is truly higher than society, why should he not do whatever it is that he wants? For the moment, we will have to postpone this question until Chapter IV. At the present we will concern ourselves with understanding the concepts of silence/concealment, sin, and the demonic.

In order to understand Abraham's concealment, Johannes decides to look at concealment from the point of view of aesthetics and in particular the category of the interesting. There are times when aesthetics demands concealment. By exploring this aesthetic demand we will be able to compare it with Abraham's act of silence:

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[2] Ibid., 109.

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> My procedure here must be to let concealment pass dialectically between aesthetics and ethics, for the point is to show how absolutely different the paradox and aesthetic concealment are from one another.[3]

In order to illustrate aesthetic concealment Johannes uses the example of a girl in love with a man, who for various reasons must marry another. The man is also in love with her but cannot tell her for fear of compromising her. They are both concealed from each other by their own free act. They could talk, but they do not. If they were to explain their actions, they could be understood. The aesthetic solution to such concealment is coincidence. A coincidence will bring about disclosure. Perhaps the girl will overhear a private conversation where the man speaks of his love for her. Perhaps a close friend of the girl, knowing the truth, will rush to the man and tell him how everything really stands. The result is a happy ending. Such stories are the subject matter of romantic comedies.

Kierkegaard compares this aesthetic view to the ethical one. Aesthetics tell the lovers that they must conceal their feelings, ethics tells them that they must disclose them. Aesthetics rewards them for their concealment, ethics punishes them for it. Aesthetics is not concerned about time, it rushes past the hard part, while ethics focuses on the hero's responsibility. Johannes writes that ethics

> condemns as presumptuous his [the hero's] thought of wanting to play providence in his action, but also condemns him for wanting to do likewise with his suffering. It enjoins the belief in reality and the courage to contend with all its tribulations, rather than with those bloodless sufferings he has taken on himself by his own responsibility; it warns against putting faith in the calculating shrewdness of reason, more treacherous than the oracles of the ancients. It warns against all misplaced magnanimity. Let reality decide the occasion, that is the time to show

[3] Ibid., 112.

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> courage. But then ethics, too, will offer every possible assistance. If something deeper had been stirring in those two, however, if there had been a seriousness to see the task, to set about it, then no doubt something would have come of them. But ethics cannot help them. Ethics is offended because they are keeping a secret from it, a secrecy they have incurred on their own responsibility.[4]

Johannes appears to have a deontological view of ethics. The right course of action is right regardless of what the consequences are and thus no matter what, it is my ethical duty to disclose myself. Ethically the girl and man should not try to control the situation by refusing to speak. This is how Johannes construes their silence—as trying to control their situation. But it is not just their situation that they are trying to control—it is their suffering. As spectators we like to see these two characters suffer and it is possible that these two characters relish their suffering as well. Why would this be? Is their suffering for the sake of the other person or is it for their own sake?

Commenting on this particular example, Edward F. Mooney writes:

> From an aesthetic standpoint contingent outcomes or chance occurrences can make a life better or worse. The playwright can make fortune smile on otherwise hapless lovers. And, of course, my *own* life is a drama of sorts. Being in the right (or wrong) place at the right (or wrong) time, being blessed with talent or cursed with deformity can make all the difference. I can sometimes "fix up" these fortunes or misfortunes to make my story happy or sad, go this way or that. To an extent, I can *script* my life.[5]

At first glance, Mooney's passage seems to contradict my claim that the two lovers are trying to control their situation. Instead, Mooney claims that the aesthetic life is dictated by "contingent outcomes." Coincidence might bring the lovers together, but it might just as easily keep them apart. We could say that by their silence, the lovers give themselves

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[4] Ibid., 113.
[5] Mooney, 116-117.

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over to coincidence, allow their happiness to be determined by fate. Right above Mooney's discussion of this "aesthetic standpoint" is the following quote:

> Aesthetics is a respectful and sentimental discipline which knows more ways of fixing things than any assistant house-manager.[6]

In the immediate context of the passage, Johannes suggests that the playwright can make this situation turn out all for the better by means of a coincidence. Unfortunately, in real life our two lovers have no playwright looking over them with the ability to set all things right. But our lovers can take the role of playwright for themselves. I take it that this is what Mooney is pointing to when he says that we can "fix up" our "fortunes or misfortunes" to make our lives "happy or sad." If things turn out well for us, we turn our life into a fairy tale. If things do not turn out well we might justify our suffering—*It is for her happiness that I have given myself up as a martyr in silence*. In such a case we take pleasure in our pain. As Mooney puts it:

> In the aesthetic sphere, there is no end to rationalization, explanation, or justification. Things can be explained and explained away—endlessly…[I]n aesthetic dimensions of life, we devote endless time and energy to explain *why* a proposal is permissible, or why a course of action is in fact the *best* available. And there are always those dishonorable grabs for permission to compromise, lie, deceive, or needlessly harm.[7]

Johannes then turns to the example of Agamemnon and his sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia. In this example we have a mixture of the aesthetic and the ethical. Ethically, Agamemnon ought to tell his wife Clytemnestra what he must do. But he does not. The play has this disclosure made by a servant. However, Agamemnon does tell Iphigenia her fate, which is what he is ethically required to do. Agamemnon's

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[6] *Fear and Trembling,* 112. Qtd. in Mooney, 116.
[7] Mooney, 117.

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predicament appears at first glance to be very similar to that of Abraham's. Both Abraham and Agamemnon are commanded to sacrifice their children. The key difference is that Agamemnon's action can be understood while Abraham's cannot. We can understand Agamemnon as the tragic hero. It is the oracle that has commanded him of this sacrifice, and it is for the good of the state that he carries it out. The oracle is a publicly accepted mode of disclosure for the gods. True, it is a horrible deed he must carry out, but it is also one he is able to justify. He has the courage to tell his reasoning and to carry out the deed. Thus Agamemnon is a shining example of ethics.

The above two examples are given so as to orient our discussion of concealment. They bring out the relationship between the demands of the aesthetic and the ethical with regards to concealment. Aesthetics demands concealment while ethics demands disclosure. Aesthetics allows coincidence to resolve the conflict while ethics demands that we act and do our duty. The problem, though, is that Abraham's actions cannot be understood either aesthetically or ethically. Aesthetically, Abraham is not trying to protect anyone by his silence. He does not help Isaac by concealing the intended sacrifice. He cannot hope for a coincidence because he knows that it is he, himself that must draw the knife to harm Isaac. Ethically Abraham must love Isaac with all his heart. This we are told he does, but ethically Abraham is also required to speak—to disclose himself. But this is exactly what Abraham cannot do. Even if Abraham did speak, he could not be understood. "I love Isaac with all my heart, but I must sacrifice him for God!" "But if you truly love him with all your heart, then you would not sacrifice him." If Abraham is to be understood, there must be a realm above that of aesthetics and

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ethics—the religious realm. And it is this possibility that we must now explore. In order to do this, Johannes must move to a new set of examples:

> By exercising the power of dialectic over them I shall keep them at extremes, and by waving the scourge of despair over them I should prevent them from standing still, so that in their anguish they might perhaps bring something or other to light.[8]

The examples that Johannes will now consider are not directly examples of the religious.[9] Like the false Abrahams of the Attunement these examples will be slightly off-key. By examining exactly where and how they fail, we might gain insight into the true nature of Abraham's act of faith and its relation to silence.

The first example he considers is taken from Aristotle's *Politics*. A misfortune for the bridegroom is predicted by augurs should he marry the girl. Now the bridegroom must act. But what is he to do? Johannes tells us that he has three options (with a fourth briefly mentioned in a footnote). The bridegroom can remain silent and get married but by doing so he wrongs the girl. Here he silently hopes that the augurs will be wrong but he also fails to fulfill his duty to the girl—his duty of honesty. He wrongly places her in a situation in which she is ignorant of all the facts, ignorant of the potential misfortune of her situation. When misfortune finally hits him, so will his guilt, and he will be held ethically responsible. A second would be to remain silent and not get married. This is the option that aesthetics would suggests. He would give up the girl he desires in an act of resignation and would take refuge in his pain. And yet this option also wrongs the girl because it denies her the love that the bridegroom has for her. The ethical option (the

[8] Ibid., 115.
[9] Johannes later comments: "It was also mentioned that none of the stages described contained an analogue of Abraham, they were elaborated only so as to indicate, from the point of view of their own sphere, the boundary of the unknown land by the points of discrepancy." *Fear and Trembling,* 136.

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third option) is for the bridegroom to speak, to disclose himself. This does not bring happiness to either party. But we must remind ourselves that neither do the above two options. The fact is that the bridegroom, by remaining silent, takes the easy way out, whether he marries the girl or not. He convinces himself that it is for her sake but in reality it is for his. Lastly, Johannes, in a footnote, gives us a fourth option. The bridegroom could live with the girl without marrying her at all. This option is quickly disposed of as it wrongs the girl by not expressing the universal. The bridegroom must speak. Ethics demands it.

Like the Abraham story, this example has a religious dimension. The augurs have predicted a misfortune for the bridegroom. This news demands action. The bridegroom must act, but the question is: How should he act? Unlike Abraham, the prophecies of the augurs are understandable by everyone. An augur is one who is known to be able to divine the will of the gods. It is a public office. This is why Johannes writes that "there is no secret writing that only the hero can read."[10] Abraham receives his command from God. There is no publicly recognized mediator or diviner bringing the message to Abraham. The central characteristic of the Abraham story is that Abraham has a private relation with God and in this relation he is set up as higher than the universal. And it is to this "higher than the universal" that we must now turn.

[10] *Fear and Trembling,* 119.

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THE DEMONIC, SIN, AND REDEMPTION

Johannes' next example sketches a story "along the lines of the demonic."[11] For this he uses the story of Agnete and the Merman. The merman is a seducer who seduces innocence. In Johannes' telling of the story the Merman wishes to seduce the innocent Agnete (in the original story Agnete is not completely innocent), but in the end is overtaken by her innocence and cannot carry out his seduction. He takes her back home and returns to the sea in despair. If the merman is given a human consciousness, Johannes tells us he has two options:

> There is nothing to prevent his being a hero; for the step he now takes is reconciliatory. He is saved by Agnete, the seducer is crushed, he has bowed to the power of innocence, he can never seduce again. But immediately two powers claim control of him: repentance [alone] and repentance with Agnete. If repentance alone takes possession of him he remains concealed, if repentance with Agnete take possession of him he is disclosed.[12]

If the Merman chooses repentance alone, he will make Agnete unhappy because she was truly in love with him. But the Merman will also be unhappy because he loved Agnete as well, but he will now also feel the guilt of his previous intentions. It is the Merman's sincere and genuinely felt guilt that will bring him a uniquely new temptation:

> The demonic side of repentance will now no doubt explain to him that this is precisely his punishment, and the more it torments him the better."[13]

Johannes tells us that if the Merman gives in to this demonic repentance he might try to save Agnete "by resort to evil." He would torture her more in an attempt to tear her away from himself. Why does he feel the need to torture her? Because he has wronged her.

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[11] Ibid., 120.
[12] Ibid., 122.
[13] Ibid.

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She does not know this, but he does, and it is in her best interest to be rid of him. But in torturing Agnete, the Merman also tortures himself:

> He will spare himself no torment, for this is the deep contradiction in the demonic and in a sense there dwells infinitely more good in a demonic than in a superficial person.[14]

The Merman sees this torture as his just punishment for his actions. This is what he deserves and though his actions torture Agnete, it is for her own good. It is best that she despise him and has nothing to do with him. As for the suffering he endures in torturing Agnete, he feels that he deserves it. It is his penance.

We are told that "by means of the demonic the merman would thus aspire to be the single individual who as the particular is higher than the universal."[15] How exactly is the Merman higher than the universal? He is higher than the universal because he is concealed, he does not disclose his guilt and love. He does not try to fulfill his duty. Instead he takes matters into his own hands. While concealing his guilt he will punish himself and by this punishment will justify to himself the depth of his love for Agnete. "It is because I truly love her that I will suffer all this for her sake, alone and in silence." The Merman's love for Agnete is not directed towards her but inwards to himself. He does not try to prove his love to Agnete but to justify his actions and love of Agnete to himself. He is frightened of the possibility of truly giving himself over to Agnete and so he gives himself over to the demonic. He does not try to save Agnete by doing his duty, but instead elects to save Agnete by controlling and manipulating the situation.

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 122-123.

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In many respects, the Merman's concealment is similar to the aesthetic concealment previous described. The Merman could talk. He could tell Agnete of his original intentions. He could tell her of his change of heart and his genuine love for her. But he does not. He chooses to remain silent. In addition to remaining silent he also puts much thought into rationalizing and justifying his silence, claiming that it is for her own good. A key difference between the Merman, exemplar of the demonic, and the merely aesthetic, is that the Merman does not stop with silence. Aesthetic concealment leaves everything to fate and coincidence. It is true that silence is a choice and thus an act, but this act of silence allows circumstances to dictate the outcome. It is a resigning of the role of actor in the world. The Merman does not stop with silence; he takes things into his own hands. If Agnete is better without him, then he will do everything in his power to make sure that Agnete will leave him—even if he must torture her to do so. The pain he causes her will save her and the pain he causes himself will atone for his guilt:

Johannes tells us that the Merman can escape the demonic side of repentance in two ways. The first, is also within the category of repentance alone. Johannes tells us that

> he can hold himself back, remain in hiding, but not depend on his astuteness. In that case he does not come as the single individual into an absolute relation to the demonic, but finds repose in the counter-paradox that the divine will save Agnete.[16]

If the story were to take place in the middle ages, the Merman would have entered a monastery. He would have continued to have loved Agnete, but he would have given up all claim to her. He would thus be a knight of infinite resignation. This would be a noble

[16] Ibid., 123.

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and beautiful thing for the Merman to do. No doubt poets would sing the Merman's praises. But Johannes does not see this course of action as the greatest thing that the Merman can do. The Merman can also repent and receive Agnete back. He writes:

> [The Merman] will be saved in so far as he is disclosed. So he marries Agnete. But he must still resort to the paradox. For when through his own guilt the individual has come out of the universal, he can only return to it on the strength of having come, as the particular, into an absolute relation to the absolute.[17]

Johannes is quick to point out that this is not the same thing as being saved from being a seducer through Agnete's love. This would merely be an aesthetic construal "which always avoids the main issue, namely the continuity of the merman's life."[18] Instead, the Merman is saved through his disclosure.

Johannes says that this is repentance *with Agnete*. Furthermore, he says that such repentance leads to his marriage with her. This leads us to wonder if the Merman's repentance is not somehow dependent upon Agnete. If Agnete refuses to marry the Merman, or has married someone else prior to his disclosure, is this second form of repentance unavailable to the Merman? If so, the Merman's salvation will not be predicated upon his own actions but upon the actions of someone else's, upon coincidence. The Merman can act. He can disclose himself, but he cannot guarantee Agnete's marrying him. I think that the key to this second repentance with Agnete is not that the Merman will marry her but that this is a possibility that he can accept. While under the demonic, the Merman could not marry Agnete without pain and torture. It would be a sign of humiliation for him. Through this second repentance he is able to

[17] Ibid., 124.
[18] Ibid.

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reclaim her and accept her in joy. In this way he is like the true Abraham that Johannes presents us with. Abraham, who though he is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, is able to accept him back in joy. The Merman is able to receive Agnete back despite the fact that he has seriously wronged her, had intended to seduce her. However, unlike Abraham, he has done this of his own accord. There was no divine command telling him that he must seduce Agnete.

Still, there is much similarity between this story and the story of Abraham. Johannes even keys us in on the similarity by telling us that

> By means of the demonic the merman would thus aspire to be the single individual who as the particular is higher than the universal. *The demonic has that same property as the divine, that the individual can enter into an absolute relationship with it* [emphasis added]. This is the analogue, the counterpart to the paradox we are discussing.[19]

All of the examples previously dealt with in this chapter have been easily distinguished from Abraham. They have all been easily understood from the standpoint of either aesthetics or ethics. The story of the Merman is the first example that has also included a part that is akin to the paradox found within the Abraham story. Like Abraham, the Merman is a particular individual who is higher than the universal.

Commentator Louise Carroll Keely also sees an important similarity between Abraham and the Merman. However, within this similarity lies a deep contrast. Whereas Abraham sets himself up as the single individual by obeying the command of God to sacrifice Isaac, the merman does so by sin:

> The merman functions in a dialectically similar capacity [as Abraham]. As the representative of sin, he is ticketed as the individual who, like

[19] Ibid., 123.

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> Abraham, has overstepped the universal but who, unlike the Father of Faith, has gone outside the universal in the direction of the demonic. Viewed from the demonic side, sin is the category of the individual par excellence. In both instances, the individual has set himself outside the universal and has conceded primacy to the particular. Nevertheless, by virtue of their respective directions (either toward the divine or toward the demonic paradox), their passions are completely opposite. That is, Abraham and the merman concretize the "two opposite ways of being an exception, depending on whether one is led into isolation by faith or by guilt." [20]

Abraham is higher than the universal because of his relationship with God, that is because of his faith. The Merman is higher than the universal because he has sinned. Interestingly enough, the story of the Merman contains the first and only substantial reference to sin in the entire book. Immediately after mentioning the possibility of a second repentance with Agnete, Johannes writes:

> For when through his own guilt the individual has come out of the universal, he can only return to it on the strength of having come, as the particular, into an absolute relation to the absolute. Here I will insert a comment which takes us further than anything that has been said anywhere in the foregoing. Sin is not the first immediacy, sin is a later immediacy. In sin the individual is already in terms of the demonic paradox higher than the universal, because it is a contradiction on the part of the universal to want to impose itself on someone who lacks the *conditio sine qua non* [the necessary condition]…An ethics that ignores sin is an altogether futile discipline, but once it postulates sin it has *eo ipso* [thereby] gone beyond itself.[21]

Many commentators have pointed to the above passage and seen it as one of the key passages to interpreting the entire book. Johannes, himself, focuses our attention on the importance of this passage by noting that the comment goes "further than anything" previously said in the book. Further emphasis is gained by the addition of a further

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[20] Louise Carroll Keely, "The Parables of Problem III in Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling,' in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1993), 139-140.
[21] *Fear and Trembling,* 124.

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footnote commenting on the relation between sin and ethics. It would seem that the demonic belongs to the category of sin. But what is sin? Beyond the brief statement about the relation between sin and ethics, there is no discussion of sin within *Fear and Trembling*. If the concept of sin is crucial to the interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*, then we will have to further explore this concept. This will be done in the following chapter.

First, I would like to point out another important comparison between the Merman and Abraham: They both are described as making a double movement. Abraham in infinite resignation must give up Isaac. The Merman, in his repentance gives up his claim on Agnete. But beyond this, Abraham is able to make the second movement of faith wherein he is able to receive Isaac back. Likewise the Merman through the acceptance of forgiveness is able to marry Agnete. Again Keely:

> Just as Abraham's movement is a double-jointed one, proceeding from *resignation* to *faith*, so too the merman is asked to make a double movement. In *repentance,* he first acknowledges the reality which sin has acquired over him. Unless the apprehension of sin is total and unqualified, repentance is "dialectically prevented from constituting itself" (SLW, 446). Subsequently, he is called to affirm his belief in a "power which through forgiveness can create the point of departure for a new immediacy and a new relation to the universal." With this, the penitent is brought back into association with the concrete tasks of life—an altered person, but one whose continuity has been preserved.[22]

What seems to be crucial for both Abraham and the Merman is that they are able to come back to life and they are able to do so with joy. This is exactly what the false Abrahams of the Attunement and the Merman under the demonic cannot do. This means that faith, as Johannes construes it, is not about some afterlife, some other world. It is about the

[22] Keely,143.

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here and now. Johannes tells us that Abraham's faith "was not that he should be happy sometime in the hereafter, but that he should find blessed happiness here in this world."[23] A few lines before this he admits that

> What Abraham found the easiest of all would for me be hard, to find joy again in Isaac! For he who with all the infinity of his soul, *proprio motu et propriis auspiciis* [on his own accord and on his own responsibility], has made the infinite movement and can do no more, that person only keeps Isaac with pain.[24]

Likewise the Merman is able to marry Agnes without pain but with joy. Like Abraham, this Merman is not acting in the realm of aesthetics or ethics but in another realm, the religious realm. Whereas Abraham, through faith, is able to keep Isaac, the Merman, through faith is able to be forgiven. The two cases are clearly different—one an example of the divine, the other of the demonic, yet they might not be as different as Johannes suggests. The key to Johannes' misunderstanding of faith might be his inability to see the Merman too, as an exemplar of faith—a knight of faith more akin to our own situation, i.e. one that is in need of redemption. There is one problem with this interpretation and that problem is silence. The Merman is saved through disclosure. Abraham remains concealed; he cannot talk.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have concentrated on Johannes' discussion of concealment and disclosure in the third Problema. Concealment was seen to be akin to silence and disclosure to language. We then distinguished between the role of concealment in aesthetics and ethics. In aesthetics, silence is required as it allows for circumstances to

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[23] *Fear and Trembling,* 65.
[24] Ibid.

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come as they may. Aesthetics keeps its own hidden justification and allows coincidence to dictate the aesthete's happiness. Ethics, in contrast, demands disclosure. An ethical action is one that can be communicated and understood by others. It is concerned with duty, with what any rational agent must do. It is not concerned with outcomes but with actions. Abraham, in his faith, remains concealed. But his concealment is neither aesthetic concealment nor an ethical failure to disclose himself. He cannot disclose himself because he cannot speak of what he is to do to others in a way that he can be understood by them. If Abraham is to be justified in his silence there must be some third sphere, the religious sphere, which is different from both the aesthetic and the ethical.

It was exploring this possibility that led us to the example of the Merman. The Merman is like Abraham in that he is set higher than the universal. But unlike Abraham, he has set himself higher on his own accord through sin. In response to this sin, the Merman enters into a relation with the demonic in which he tortures Agnete and himself in order to atone for his guilt. He remains concealed and seeks to control his situation as well as the response of Agnete. Johannes likens the demonic to sin. The Merman can escape the demonic by means of a double movement. This double movement consists in repentance and the acceptance of forgiveness. Such language mirrors that of the description of Abraham's action. This leads us to believe that this double movement of the Merman might also be an example of faith, but a faith that arises out of the need to escape sin. Johannes emphasizes the concept of sin but does not explain or dwell on it for long. If we are to gain a full understanding of sin we will have to turn to other sources.

CHAPTER III

SIN AND THE DEMONIC IN KIERKEGAARD'S OTHER WRITINGS

It is my contention that sin, for Kierkegaard (though not necessarily for Johannes de Silentio), is of central importance for understanding *Fear and Trembling*. In the previous chapter I said that sin is mentioned in the third Problema. The mention is emphasized by the clause claiming that this comment goes further than anything else that has been said previously in the text, and also by a further footnote concerning sin. Johannes writes:

> An ethics that ignores sin is an altogether futile discipline, but once it postulates sin it has *eo ipso* [thereby] gone beyond itself.[1]

In the footnote, he furthers comments:

> But once sin makes its appearance ethics comes to grief precisely on the question of repentance. Repentance is the highest ethical expression but for that very reason the most profound ethical self-contradiction.[2]

These quotations suggest that ethics and sin must somehow be related, but they also suggest that the two are incompatible. The ethical is a recurring motif in *Fear and Trembling* while the concept of sin is hidden and concealed, making only a brief appearance. If ethics without sin is a "futile discipline" and there is no real discussion of sin, we can only conclude that *Fear and Trembling* does not offer us a complete understanding of ethics, particularly of its relation to sin. For that we will have to take a

[11] *Fear and Trembling,* 124.
[2] Ibid.

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look to see if any light is shed on this problem by any of the other pseudonymous works. This is what we shall turn our attention to in the present chapter.

SIN AND ETHICS

The most immediate candidate to begin our inquiry into the notion of sin is *The Concept of Anxiety,* subtitled "A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin." The book is signed by the pseudonymous author Vigilius Haufniensis—watchman of Copenhagen. However it would be a mistake to assume that this book belongs to the same category as the other pseudonymous writings. Kierkegaard had originally intended to sign his own name to the work. He even allowed the published edition to bear a dedication to one of his most influential teachers Poul Martin Møller. This has been seen by Kierkegaard scholar Reidar Thomte as evidence that the book is "not strictly pseudonymous."[1] Other evidence, given by Gregory R. Beabout, includes the facts that, unlike many of the other pseudonyms, there is little mention of Vigilius in Kierkegaard's journals, the pseudonym Johannes Climacus writes that the book is essentially different from the other pseudonymous writings, and that Kierkegaard felt the need to complement the book with the humorous *Prefaces,* rather than one of his *Upbuilding Discourses* which had previously accompanied all the other pseudonymous writings.[2] Except for the preface, Vigilius is not as present in the text as Johannes de Silentio or Johannes Climacus, and the *Concept of Anxiety* lacks much of the literary playfulness that the books of these other authors often deploy. For these reasons,

[1] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 223.
[2] For a more detailed discussion of this topic see Gregory R. Beabout, *Freedom and Its Misuses: Kierkegaard on Anxiety and Despair*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009), 39-47.

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I think the book can be taken more literally than can *Fear and Trembling,* and the need to understand the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis is not as important in interpreting his book as it is in interpreting Johanes de Silentio's.

The Concept of Anxiety is concerned with the psychological category of anxiety looked at with the dogma of hereditary sin in mind. Vigilius is quick to note that

> Sin, however, is no subject for psychological concern, and only by submitting to the service of misplaced brilliance could it be dealt with psychologically. Sin has its specific place, or more correctly, it has no place, and this is its specific nature. When sin is treated in a place other than its own, it is altered by being subjected in a nonessential refraction of reflection. The concept is altered, and thereby the mood that properly corresponds to the correct concept is also disturbed, and instead of the endurance of the true mood there is the fleeting phantom of false moods.[3]

This passage informs us that sin is not a category that belongs to psychology. It belongs to the domain of dogmatics. Furthermore, if we try to understand it under a discipline such as psychology, we will only misunderstand the concept. We will alter it and therefore falsify anything we might say about it.

Vigilius continues:

> Thus when sin is brought into esthetics, the mood becomes either light-minded or melancholy, for the category in which sin lies is that of contradiction, and this is either comic or tragic. The mood is therefore altered, because the mood that corresponds to sin is earnestness. The concept of sin is also altered, because, whether it become comic or tragic, it becomes in any case something that endures, or something nonessential that is annulled, whereas, according to its true concept, sin is to be overcome.[4]

This passage tells us two important things about sin: 1). The proper mood that corresponds to sin is earnestness. This is in marked contrast to the mood corresponding

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[3] *Concept of Anxiety,* 14.
[4] Ibid. 14-15.

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to aesthetics which is light-mindedness or melancholy. What exactly is meant by the use of the term mood here? In everyday usage we use the term to describe our emotional states. At one time I am depressed, at another time I am overjoyed. This is not quite the usage of mood that Vigilius is making use. Lee Barret writes that:

> "mood" suggests a passional quality that accompanies the linguistic and nonlinguistic activities typical of that domain of discourse.[5]

Different activities require different moods. The proper mood for a comedy is laughter. I might go to a comedy feeling depressed. My depression is not the proper mood corresponding to comedy. Instead, an openness to laughter is. Different activities require different states of mind, and if I am not of the proper state of mind then I am not properly engaging in that particular activity. Thus, if my mind is not in the proper state when considering sin, I will misunderstand it. 2). The passage tells us that the proper conception of sin is to think of it as something that must be overcome. However, if sin is viewed from the stance of aesthetics, it is not conceived in this way. It is conceived as either tragic or comic, as something accidental which can appear or disappear.

Vigilius proceeds to elaborate on sin as conceived in the domains of metaphysics and psychology. Metaphysics looks at sin with disinterest, as something merely to be thought about. Psychology looks upon sin from the third person perspective, as mere observer. It sees sin as a state which can be described quantitatively as a more or a less. Each of these domains misunderstand sin because they fail to take hold of it in earnestness. The results of which can be seen in the following table:

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[5] Lee Barrett, "Kierkegaard's 'Anxiety' and the Augustinian Doctrine of Original Sin," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985), 40.

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DOMAIN	MOOD	CONCEPTION OF SIN
Aesthetics	Light-heartedness Melancholy	Comic or tragic, Accidental Endures or is annulled
Metaphysics	Disinterestedness	Sin is to be thought about.
Psychology	Persistent Observation	Sin is a state, a quantitative more or less
Dogmatics (The Proper Domain for a Conception of Sin)	Earnestness	Sin is to be overcome

The proper mood which corresponds with sin is earnestness and this earnestness wishes to overcome sin. It is earnestness about one's self as subject and not object. This mood properly belongs to dogmatics and the proper vehicle for its exploration is the sermon "in which the single individual speaks as the single individual to the single individual."[6] Sin, properly conceived, involves the individual and his self-understanding. Sin, when conceived by any of the other three domains, is distanced from the individual. In aesthetics it is seen as an accident, in metaphysics something to think about, and in psychology something to observe. In none of these domains is sin seen as being something that is essentially a part of the self. Instead, they look at sin from the third person while sin is properly looked at only from the first person.

Ethics is also a domain that concerns the self and so it would appear that sin could be properly conceived from within this domain. But there is an incommensurability between ethics and sin as was briefly mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Vigilius writes that "ethics proposes to bring ideality into actuality."[7] Ethics makes demands of

[6] *Concept of Anxiety,* 16.
[7] Ibid.

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us. It demands that we act in a certain way, that we fulfill our duties and obligations. Ethics also assumes that it is within everyone's ability to fulfill these duties and obligations. In other words, 'ought' involves 'can.' It might be difficult to do it, but according to ethics it is possible. Sin, however, is concerned with the impossibility of fulfilling the demand of ethics. Sin sees the demands and knows that it not only cannot succeed at this task but that it has already failed. Echoing Johannes de Silentio, Vigilius writes:

> Sin, then, belongs to ethics only insofar as upon this concept it is shipwrecked with the aid of repentance…In the struggle to actualize the task of ethics, sin shows itself not as something that belongs only accidentally to the accidental individual, but as something that withdraws deeper and deeper as a deeper and deeper presupposition, as a presupposition that goes beyond the individual.[8]

Our failure at achieving the ideal of ethics leads us to look deep within us and leads us to presuppose a quality, the quality of sin. This sin is not an accident but is something that essentially belongs to us, something that we are responsible for. Vigilius does not attempt to prove that sin exists, he suggests only that our failure to live up to the high standards of ethics leads us to presuppose it. This presupposition belongs to the domain of dogmatics. He does not even claim that dogmatics can explain sin; it can only presuppose it.

But given this presupposition of sin, a new ethics emerges—a second ethics, one that takes sin as a presupposition. This second ethics does not deal with the "coming into existence" of sin but with its "manifestation."[9] Vigilius says that the first ethics—the

[8] Ibid., 17-19.
[9] Ibid., 21.

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ethics that ignores sin—makes a movement "from above and downward."[10] It starts with a conception of the ideal and attempts to bring reality up to that ideal. The second ethics, in contrast, which presupposes sin makes a movement "from below and upward."[11] It starts from the reality of sin and seeks to move upward and regain the ideal that it has already lost. In a footnote discussing *Fear and Trembling*'s relevance to the notion of the shipwrecked state of ethics, Vigilius writes:

> Either all of existence comes to an end in the demand of ethics, or the condition is provided and the whole of life and of existence begins anew, not through an immanent continuity with the former existence, which is a contradiction, but through a transcendence.[12]

Vigilius relates this idea of transcendence to the related idea of repetition, the title and subject of another pseudonymous work:

> If repetition is not posited, dogmatics cannot exist at all, for repetition begins in faith, and faith is the organ for issues of dogma. In the realm of nature, repetition is present in its immovable necessity. In the realm of the spirit, the task is not to wrest a repetition as if spirit stood only in an external relation to the repetition of spirit..but to transform repetition into something inward, into freedom's own task, into its highest interest, so that while everything else changes, it can actually realize repetition.[13]

Repetition is to be contrasted with recollection, a metaphysical theory postulated by theory. In the *Meno,* the title character poses a dilemma for Socrates. Either we know what we are looking for, and hence do not need to look for it because we already know it, or we do not know and would thus never be able to recognize it. In this way Meno shows that learning is impossible. Socrates responds by saying that the soul is immortal but has forgotten, and that learning is possible through the soul recollecting what it already

[10] Ibid., 20.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 17.
[13] Ibid., 18.

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knows. Whereas recollection is backwards looking, repetition is forward looking. Recollection looks to the past for eternity while repetition looks to the future. More specifically repetition is the meeting of the present with the eternal future. Stephen Crites writes that for Vigilius, "repetition is the opening of the present to boundless possibility; it is the *momentum* in which the self is set in self-transformative motion."[14]

Dogmatics is an outgrowth of faith and since dogmatics is impossible without repetition, it would also seem that faith is impossible without repetition. If we are to look at repetition as it relates to *Fear and Trembling*, we would have to say that Abraham's ability to receive Isaac back with joy is an example of the religious repetition that is referred to here. Abraham was willing to give Isaac up and yet despite this fact he is able to receive Isaac back. He is able to go on living. He does not look to the past for happiness but to the present and on into the future. Likewise the Merman's acceptance of forgiveness can be seen as a repetition. Ethics demands that the Merman fulfill the universal, but this is precisely what the Merman has failed to do. It is only through repetition that the Merman is able to reclaim his ethical task and fulfill the universal by marrying Agnete. Both Abraham and the Merman require a transcendental condition, a condition given by God. But it is also possible that they can refuse this offered condition. Abraham can decide to infinitely resign Isaac. The Merman can decide to take matters into his own hands, to remain in the demonic. Both would rest entirely on their own strength.

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[14] Stephen Crites, "'The Blissful Security of the Moment' Recollection, Repetition, and Eternal Recurrence" in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985), 243.

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THE DEMONIC AS CATEGORY OF SIN

The Concept of Anxiety is a psychological work that presupposes sin. It does not seek to explain sin or gain a conception of sin as that would only result in misunderstanding the concept. Instead it presupposes sin and observes how it manifests itself in human action.[15] Vigilius writes that psychology is interested in the "possibility of sin" and in doing so it aids dogmatics.[16] Anxiety is a psychological category and concerns our freedom. Our freedom both entices and repels us. Before the individual sinned, sin was only a possibility. Once the individual sinned a whole new possibility is awakened and the anxiety of sin bursts forth. The qualitative leap into sin cannot be explained by psychology (only presupposed by dogmatics), but once it is posited psychology can study its effects.

In Chapter four Vigilius discusses the consequences of sin in the individual. In particular, he concentrates on the anxiety that manifests itself once the individual has already sinned. According to Vigilius, the anxiety of the individual in sin can take one of two ways. It can either be anxiety about evil or anxiety about good. Anxiety about evil can take three forms. Gregory R. Beabout succinctly summarizes these in the following:

> The first form is to be both attracted to and repulsed from continuing in sin (CA, 113). The second is both to love and fear the possibility of sinking more deeply into sin, for no matter how deeply one has sunk, it is always possible to sink further (CA, 113-5). The third form of the anxiety of evil is both to love and fear the sorrow and grief associated with repentance (CA, 115-7).[17]

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[15] "Psychology…traces the countours and calculates the angles of possibility, it does not allow itself to be disturbed any more than did Archimedes." *Concept of Anxiety,* 23.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Beabout, 75-76.

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What is common to all these forms of anxiety about evil is that there is both an attraction and a revulsion to sin, to evil. I both want to continue in sin and don't want to continue in sin. I want to thrust myself into the abyss at the same time that I am horrified at the thought.

But it is anxiety about the good that most concerns us, for this anxiety for the good is also called the demonic, and it is this form of anxiety over sin that is most relevant for our purposes. Virgilus writes:

> [In the demonic] The individual is in the evil and is in anxiety about the good. The bondage of sin is an unfree relation to the evil, but the demonic is an unfree relation to the good. The demonic therefore manifests itself clearly only when it is in contact with the good.[18]

Anxiety about evil is concerned with continuing or falling further into sin. The demonic, in contrast is concerned with whether or not to give in to the good. And the good "signifies the restoration of freedom, redemption, salvation, or whatever one would call it."[19] The Merman, according to Johannes de Silentio, is an exemplar of the demonic. He has wronged Agnete and now must decide what to do. Should he torture himself? Should he tell her the truth? The Merman can bear much pain, but the one thing he cannot bear is the idea of redemption—of repentance with Agnete. Though Johannes never explicitly defines the demonic, his portrayal of the Merman does seem to be consonant with the explanation of the demonic given by Vigilius. The Merman as we recall has been conquered by Agnete's innocence. He cannot stand to be loved by such innocence because he knows that he does not deserve it. It pains him and he must drive it

[18] *Concept of Anxiety,* 119
[19] Ibid.

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away. But at the same time he wants her. The same can be said about his relation to forgiveness. He wants forgiveness, but he is also repulsed by it. If he were to accept it he would have to, in a way, give up his identity, become a new person.

Further insight into the demonic is given in the *Sickness Unto Death*. Whereas the pseudonymous authors of the first authorship have all claimed not to have faith, Anti-Climacus, the author of *Sickness Unto Death* claims to be a Christian extraordinaire. It was only because Kierkegaard did not believe that he lived up to the Christianity exemplified by this work that he refused to put his name on it, lest it be thought that he claimed to have reached that level of existence.[20] The book is subtitled "A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening." It concerns the self and the various ways in which a self can fail to be itself. The self, according to Anti-Climacus, is spirit, and the spirit is a "relation's relating itself to itself."[21] On first reading, it is hard to understand what is meant by this. Ultimately, Anti-Climacus sees the self as consisting of two poles. The one pole consists in that which limits—the finite, temporal, and necessity. The opposite pole consists in the unlimited—the infinite, eternal, and freedom. The individual consists of both of these poles and the self exists insofar as it is aware of these two poles and relates the two in a synthesis. For Anti-Climacus, proper selfhood is achieved by properly relating these two poles in the correct proportion as well as relating properly to that which has established the relation—namely God.[22] The individual who

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[20] *Sickness Unto Death*, 14-15.
[21] Ibid., 43.
[22] Anti-Climacus briefly mentions the possibility of the self as being self-established but neglects to fully follow up on this possibility. Kierkegaard's pseudonyms appear to always take the existence of God as presupposition. While Johannes Climacus argues that it is absurd to attempt to prove the existence of God, there is nowhere in the authorship that I know of where the idea of God's non-existence is taken seriously.

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fails to achieve the proper balance is said to be in despair. And in the second part of the book, despair is labeled as sin. Despair can be either conscious or unconscious, and the distinction between the two is more a continuum than a binary distinction. The purpose of *Sickness unto Death* can be seen as an attempt to bring our despair fully into consciousness so that we might seek its cure—faith.

Anti-Climacus tells us that "being in a state of sin is always new sin."[23] Sin is something we are in, it is not something we do. In other words, sin is not an act but a fact about ourselves. We commonly think of sin as an act. We think of the ten commandments. If a commandment is broken, we have committed a sin. Thus stealing is a sin. For Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard, such an act is a manifestation of sin but is not sin in its deepest and truest sense. The common view is quantitative. I can keep a tally of my sins—yesterday I sinned, today I didn't. Such a view focuses on individual acts. For Anti-Climacus, sin is qualitative. Sin is not something I do, but something I am. This is why Anti-Climacus writes that "the being in sin is a worse sin than the particular sins; it is the sin."[24] Furthermore, there is an "inner consistency" in sin.[25] Anti-Climacus tells us that most people lack consciousness of this "inner consistency." They see their disparate acts as good and bad. They fail to see their actions as having any essential relation to their person. The person who is conscious of sin is not struck by the fact that this or that act was an act of sin, but instead by the fact that he is the sort of person who

[23] *Sickness Unto Death,* 138.
[24] Ibid., 139.
[25] Ibid.

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does sinful things. Consciousness of sin is achieved when he sees sin as an essential part of himself.

Though Abraham is not, according to Johannes de Silentio, a sinner, he also has an inner consistency. His consistency consists in the good. Anti-Climacus describes such a person as a believer, and thus the believer is the counterpart of the demonic—one whose internal consistency is sin.[26] Anti-Climacus describes the demonic person as follows:

> Precisely because he has an internal consistency and a consistency of evil, the demonic person, too, has a totality to lose…That is, he has given up the good in despair; it couldn't help him in any way. But it can still disturb him…Only in the continuation of sin does he remain himself; it is only in this that he lives, has the impression of himself. But what does this mean? It means that in the depths to which he has sunk it is his state of sin which holds him together, wickedly strengthening him with its consistency.[27]

The demonic person is not one who lacks consciousness. He has consciousness and is fully aware of his sin. As a matter of fact, he self-identifies with it. Sin is what he is. This corresponds to what we previously said of the Merman. He is afraid of Agnete, afraid of forgiveness because he knows that in order to accept either of these things he must give up his internal consistency of evil. He must allow himself a repetition, a rebirth.

Just as the believer is afraid of the tiniest sin, the demonic person is afraid of the slightest good. The good is a threat to his very being, to his very self. He wants nothing to do with it:

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[26] Ibid., 140-141.
[27] Ibid., 141.

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> Sin is itself separation from the good, but despair over sin is separation a second time. Naturally, this extorts from sin the utmost powers of the demonic, gives it the ungodly hardiness or obduracy to look upon all that goes by the name of repentance, and all that goes by the name of grace, not merely as empty and meaningless, but as its enemy, as what more than anything must be guarded against, exactly as the good guards itself against temptation.[28]

The demonic person sees grace and forgiveness as an affront to his very self. Sin is who he is and to accept a healing or transfiguring of himself would be to annihilate his self. Anti-Climacus calls this despairing to be oneself. It is despair because, under the presuppositions laid out in the book, the self is established by God and is made to achieve its purpose in relating to God and the good. Seen from the perspective of this presup-position, the demonic person is one who is in rebellion against God. He wants to make the final decision of the sort of person he wants to be, instead of the person he was made to be. He wants to accept his sin and live in it rather than allow it to be washed away:

> A self which in despair wants to be himself suffers some kind of pain which cannot be removed or separated from his concrete self. He then heaps upon this torment all his passion, which then becomes a demonic rage. If it should now happen that God in heaven and all the angels were to offer to help him to be rid of this torment – no, he does not want that, now it is too late. Once he would gladly have given everything to be rid of this agony, but he was kept waiting, and now all that's past; he prefers to rage against everything to be rid of this agony, but he was kept waiting, and now all that's past; he prefers to rage against everything and be the one whom the whole world, all existence, has wronged, the one for whom it is especially important to ensure that he has his agony on hand, so that no one will take it from him – for then he would not be able to convince others and himself that he is right. This finally fixes itself so firmly in his head that he becomes frightened of eternity for a rather strange reason: he is afraid in case it should take away from him what, from a demonic viewpoint, gives him infinite superiority over other people, what from the demonic viewpoint, is his right to be who he is. Himself is what he wants to be. He began with the infinite abstraction of the self, and has now

[28] Ibid., 142.

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> finally become so concrete that it would be impossible to become eternal in that sense, and yet he wants in despair to be himself. Ah! demonic madness; he rages most of all at the thought that eternity could get it into its head to take his misery away from him.[29]

The demonic person is not only against God, but against the world. He prefers to see himself as over and against the world, as one who has been wronged by the world. He relishes his pain and torture and through this pain and torture sees himself as superior to the world.

Johannes de Silentio writes that "there dwells infinitely more good in a demonic than in a superficial person."[30] The reason for this is that the demonic person is fully conscious of himself as self. He sees himself as having an inner consistency, and this consists in his sin. He sees his actions not as individual acts judged as good or bad but as acts that are an essential outgrowth and manifestation of the person he is. The demonic, then, is not merely in sin but is one who is fully conscious of this sin and has decided to accept this sin as his identity. This is not to say that the demonic person feels no guilt. The Merman clearly feels guilt about his actions and refuses to forgive himself. Instead, as we have seen, he punishes himself. But what if, as Anti-Climacus asks of such a person, God would forgive him?[31] The person would reject such forgiveness. He rejects such forgiveness because sin is who he is. To be forgiven of sin is to give up his self, to allow his self to be transformed. For Anti-Climacus the demonic is the highest consciousness of despair.

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[29] *Sickness Unto Death,* 103.
[30] *Fear and Trembling,* 122.
[31] *Sickness Unto Death,* 144.

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THE TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL

So far we have explored Kierkegaard's treatment of sin and the demonic in the *Concept of Anxiety* and *Sickness unto Death*. This discussion was begun in hope that it would shed light on the place of sin in *Fear and Trembling*. Aside from a few brief mentions of *Fear and Trembling* these two works have been used to exemplify the concepts of sin and the demonic. They have not added any evidence for my contention that sin is crucial to understanding *Fear and Trembling*. The only evidence given to this effect has been internal to *Fear and Trembling*. Before proceeding to the next chapter I would like to add some external evidence for this claim.

Kierkegaard originally intended to end his authorship with his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* by the pseudonym by Johannes Climacus. The book is a long account of subjectivity as truth as well as a parody of Hegel. Of interest to us is the fifty page appendix entitled "A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature" in which Climacus discusses the meaning and significance of the pseudonymous works as well as Kierkegaard's uplifting discourses. Climacus points out that the teleological suspension of the ethical is a major point of interest within *Fear and Trembling*. Indeed, Johannes de Silentio, dedicates an entire section of the book to this topic. Climacus, in discussing this suspension relates it directly to sin and redemption:

> The teleological suspension of the ethical must have an even more definite religious expression. The ethical is then present at every moment with its infinite requirement, but the individual is not capable of fulfilling it. This powerlessness of the individual must not be seen as an imperfection in the

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> continued endeavor to attack an ideal, for in that case the suspension is no more postulated than the man who administers his office in an ordinary way is suspended. The suspension consists in the individual's finding himself in a state exactly opposite to what the ethical requires. Therefore, far from being able to begin, every moment he continues in this state he is more and more prevented from being able to begin: he relates himself to actuality not as possibility but as impossibility. Thus the individual is suspended from the ethical in the most terrifying way, is in the suspension heterogeneous with the ethical, which still has the claim of the infinite upon him and at every moment requires itself of the individual, and thereby at every moment the heterogeneity is only more definitely marked as heterogeneity. In temptation (when *God* tempts a person, as is said of Abraham in Genesis), Abraham was not heterogeneous with the ethical. He was well able to fulfill it but was prevented from it by something higher, which by *absolutely* accentuating itself transformed the voice of duty into a temptation. As soon as that something higher sets the tempted one free, everything is in order again, even though the terror, that this could happen even for one-tenth of a second, remains forever. How long the suspension lasts is of minor importance; that it is, is the crucial point.[32]

There are a few interesting things happening in this passage. For one Climacus claims that the "suspension consists in the individual's finding himself in a state exactly opposite to what the ethical requires." This state prevents the individual from even beginning to act ethically. This is sin. But this is not Abraham's predicament. For Abraham it is God that prevents Abraham from doing the ethical. For Abraham the ethical is a temptation.[33] But for us it is something different. We have already been prevented from achieving the ethical by sin. Climacus elaborates:

> The situation is different now. Duty is the absolute, its requirements the absolute, and yet the individual is prevented from fulfilling it…The dreadful exemption from doing the ethical, the individual's heterogeneity with the ethical, this suspension from the ethical, is *sin* as a state in a human being. Sin is a crucial expression for the religious existence. As

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[32]Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments.'* Vol. 1, trans. Howard V. and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 267.
[33] Ibid., 262.

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> long as sin is not posited, the suspension becomes a transient factor that in turn vanishes or remains outside life as the totally irregular.[34]

It is not that we need to teleologically suspend the ethical to achieve faith. We have already suspended it. We have sinned. And this sin has come between us and our ability to achieve the ethical. While Abraham was placed outside the ethical by God, we placed ourselves there. But just as the ethical can be a temptation for Abraham, it can also be a temptation for us. We might be tempted into thinking that we can make up for our moral shortcomings by our future good deeds. Or perhaps, like the Merman, through our own self-inflicted punishment. Of course all of this has been presupposing that we, ourselves, are sinners. Maybe there is someone out there, like Abraham, who is without sin. And wouldn't such a person be justified in doing as Abraham did?

SUMMARY

In the proceeding chapter, we discussed the demonic and sin as it is presented within *Fear and Trembling*. Though Johannes de Silentio emphasized the importance of sin, he said very little about it. Thus in order to gain an understanding of sin, we had to go outside of *Fear and Trembling*. The present chapter was an exploration of the concept of sin in two of Kierkegaard's other works, the *Concept of Anxiety* and *Sickness Unto Death*. From the *Concept of Anxiety* we learned that the proper mood from which to consider sin is earnestness. Earnestness is not an objective view point I take, but is the subjective concern I have for myself. Earnestness does not want to observe and study sin, it wants to overcome sin. We also learned that when sin is posited, ethics becomes an

[34] Ibid., 267-268.

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impossibility. This led Vigilius to postulate a second ethics that takes sin seriously. This second ethics presupposes dogmatics. This ethics allows us to overcome our sin through faith. We next explored the conception of the demonic. The demonic is a subcategory of sin and can best be thought of as one who is in anxiety about the good. The demonic person self-identifies with his sin and the thought of overcoming sin or the annihilation of sin horrifies him because he equates it with the annihilation of self. We found that the descriptions of the demonic can easily be reconciled with the picture of the demonic that we are presented with by Johannes de Silentio.

In addition to these two works the *Unconcluding Scientific Postscript* was used to add further evidence to my contention that a proper understanding of sin is necessary for understanding the faith presented to us in *Fear and Trembling*. This was shown through Johannes Climacus discussion of the teleological suspension of the ethical in regards to *Fear and Trembling*. The teleological suspension of the ethical places ourselves outside of the ethical. In the case of the righteous Abrham this was achieved by a command from God. In the case of the Merman, and most likely in our own predicament, this is done by ourselves through sin.

CHAPTER IV

ABRAHAM AND THE ZEALOT

I began this thesis by giving a basic overview of *Fear and Trembling*. I then gave a more complete analysis to the third Problema focusing on its discussion of sin and the demonic. I pointed out that Johannes had emphasized the concept of sin by saying that this concept brought us further about our own condition than anything else previously said in *Fear and Trembling*. But I also noted that he did not elaborate on this topic. For this reason we had to turn to a few of Kierkegaard's other works in order to better understand sin. Among the things we learned in the last chapter was that the proper mood by which to consider sin is earnestness, and earnestness is best understood as a concern for oneself. In order to be earnest about sin we must be honest with ourselves, and such honesty requires self-examination; it is to this self-examination that *Fear and Trembling* is attempting to lead us. Once we examine ourselves we find that we are in sin and are in need of redemption. This redemption can only be received by faith. It is the purpose of this chapter to show how *Fear and Trembling* seeks to bring us to this realization. To this end we shall look at the problem of the religious zealot. I will show that if we examine ourselves closely we will find that we are never justified in committing a deed like Abraham because we are tainted with sin. The only way that the religious zealot would be justified is if he were morally pure and without sin. I will argue that this is not possible. If the zealot would examine himself he would find that he is

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more like the Merman than Abraham.

THE PRIEST AND HIS PARISHIONER

The problem of the religious zealot is not one of which Johannes de Silentio is unaware. Towards the beginning of the "Preamble from the Heart" he includes a lengthy passage on the preacher who robs the Abraham story of any meaning by simplifying it to the idea that Abraham's greatness "was that he so loved God that he was willing to offer him the best he had."[1] But then Johannes mentions a member of the congregation who takes this sermon to heart and decides to follow in Abraham's footsteps. The preacher is appalled and goes to denounce the man, remaining unaware that the source of the entire episode was the result of the preacher's own misunderstanding of the Abraham story. But instead of coming to a self-realization of his own misunderstanding, he prides himself on his encounter with his parishioner:

> And this priest, who had felt no signs of heat or perspiration while preaching about Abraham, would be surprised at the righteous wrath with which he fulminates against that poor man; he would be pleased with himself, for never had he spoken with such pungency and fervor before.[2]

Interestingly enough, Johannes' focus in this passage is not in the parishioner who seeks to emulate Abraham but in the priest who had put the idea into his head! Of this poor parishioner Johannes writes:

> Should the sinner, on the other hand, not be convinced [that this action was wrong], his situation would be tragic enough. He would no doubt be executed or sent to the madhouse; in short he would have come into an

[1] *Fear and Trembling,* 58.
[2] Ibid., 58-59.

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> unhappy relation to so-called reality, though in another sense I should think that Abraham made him happy; for he who labours does not perish.[3]

Johannes claims that the parishioner would be in an "unhappy relation" to reality and yet he also says that Abraham would have "made him happy." These are hardly words of condemnation and more like those of pity.

Johannes' harshest criticism is not against the parishioner but the priest. For the priest makes no connection between the words he said on Sunday and the thoughts that they inspired in the parishioner. He condemns this parishioner and does so without realizing that the parishioner only wishes to do what the priest preached about last Sunday. This suggests to me that the priest is not concerned with his own accountability. Instead of feeling guilt for the misunderstanding he has caused he judges, and in judging feels his own self-superiority over his parishioner. If such is the case, the priest's interest in his parishioner is misplaced. He has gained his superiority at the expense of his soul. In like manner are we, in focusing on the religious zealot, avoiding the issue that Johannes wishes us to confront? As long as we are concerned about some other person, we are missing the point. We are using the other person as a red herring to avoid confrontation with ourselves. By focusing on the priest instead of the parishioner, Johannes suggests that our primary concern should be with our own relation to faith rather than someone else's.

Still the passage suggests that there is an inherent danger in talking about Abraham. Someone might actually get it in his head that he is like Abraham and attempt

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[3] Ibid., 59.

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to carry out a similar deed. The thought is horrifying, and we might conclude that it is best not to talk of Abraham at all. It is with such thoughts in mind that Johannes writes:

> Can one speak unreservedly of Abraham, then, without risking that someone will go off the rails and do likewise? Unless I dare to speak quite openly I will simply keep quiet about Abraham, and above all not diminish him so that by that very fact he becomes a snare for the weak. *If one makes faith the main thing – that is, makes it what it is –then I imagine one might dare speak of it without that risk in this day of ours which can hardly be said to outdo itself in faith, and it is only in respect of faith that one achieves resemblance to Abraham, not murder* [emphasis added].[4]

Johannes suggests that we can continue to talk about Abraham, provided that we do so honestly, concentrating on all the difficulties of Abraham's actions. If we are only going to water it down and make the story easy, as the priest did, it is best that we stay quiet. To speak of Abraham as the priest does is to diminish him or turn him into a cliché. This diminishment of faith is something that Johannes will not do. Instead, Johannes tells us that if we concentrate on Abraham's faith in its fullness, and not on this particular deed, a comic episode like that above will not happen. This suggests that faith is not exemplified in Abraham's particular deed but in the manner in which he carries it out.

But in order for us to speak honestly of Abraham, we must be honest with ourselves. We must not try to bring Abraham down to our level. We must not pride ourselves on a superiority of understanding when we have not actually done the hard work of understanding. We cannot pretend to have faith or to have gone further than faith. We cannot turn faith into something simple and easy, and therefore meaningless. We must seek to understand Abraham and faith in their complexity and fullness. Like sin,

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[4] Ibid., 60-61.

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faith is not something that can be understood dispassionately and objectively. The proper mood for understanding faith is earnestness, and this means that faith must be understood existentially, as something that concerns myself. The preacher is given the opportunity to come to terms with his own misunderstanding but instead decides to remain within his own self-deception. He misunderstands faith because he thinks that faith is something to be talked about and preached instead of a way of existing. Crucial to the priest's misunderstanding is his neglect of self-examination, and it is to self-examination that Kierkegaard would like to lead us. The problem of the religious zealot, if it is about some other person, is a decoy. It is posed in order to escape the self-examination to which Kierkegaard's writings are intending to lead.

THE CALL TO HONESTY

Anthony J. Burgess, in his article "Kierkegaard's Call for Honesty" argues that honesty is an important theme throughout Kierkegaard's thought:

> All of Kierkegaard's authorship, including both the published and unpublished elements, exhibits a deep commitment to what he calls "human honesty." In one popular sense of the term, Kierkegaard's writing is "confessional" from start to finish. That is to say, if the term "confessional" is taken to mean that a person is rigorously honest with oneself in one's writings, setting the moral standard as high as possible, and sparing no pains to scrutinize every action to see whether it measures up, then not only his published works but also his journals are about as "confessional" as can be.[5]

The theme of honesty can be seen throughout *Fear and Trembling*. It is a concept that begins and ends the book. In the preface, Johannes contrasts those dishonest

[5] Anthony J. Burgess, "Kierkegaard's Call for Honesty," in *Why Kierkegaard Matters: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert L. Perkins,* ed. Marc A. Jolley and Edmon L. Rowell, Jr. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2010), 44-45.

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philosophers and professors who go further with doubt in creating the system, with the honest figures of Descartes and the Greek skeptics.[6] In the epilogue he poses the question of what the present generation needs. Is it self-deception or rather an

> honest seriousness which fearlessly and incorruptibly calls attention to the tasks, an honest seriousness that lovingly fences the tasks about, which does not frighten people into wanting to dash precipitately to the heights, but keeps the task young and beautiful and charming to behold, and inviting to all, yet hard too and an inspiration to noble minds, since noble natures are only inspired by difficulty.[7]

Honesty is also brought up in "Preamble to the Heart." In contrasting himself with those preachers who simplify and make faith easy Johannes writes:

> For my own part I don't lack the courage to think a thought whole. No thought has frightened me so far. Should I ever come across one I hope I will at least have the honesty to say: 'This thought scares me, it stirs up something else in me so that I don't want to think it.' If that is wrong of me I'll no doubt get my punishment. If I had conceded the truth of the judgement that Abraham was a murderer, I am not sure that I would have been able to silence my reverence of him. But if that is what I myself thought, then I would presumably keep quiet, for thoughts like that are not to be intimated to others.[8]

Unlike the priest mentioned earlier, Johannes strives to be honest with himself. He admits that he does not understand Abraham, admits that he does not have faith, but at the same time his honesty forbids him from turning Abraham's story into a cliché and simple moralty tale. If such were his understanding of Abraham, he would prefer to remain silent as integrity would demand it.

In the second Problema Johannes quotes Luke 14:26 concerning duty to God:

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[6] *Fear and Trembling,* 41-42. See also Burgess, 43.
[7] *Fear and Trembling,* 145.
[8] Ibid., 60.

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> If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.[9]

Johannes finds these words horrifying. But he refuses to follow the lead of those theology students who would resort to a scholarly and linguistic explanation of the text that makes it less horrifying, that is, easier to the reader. Instead he connects it to a following verse about planning to build a tower and evaluating one's ability to carry it out. He concludes that

> the close link between this story and the verse quoted seems to suggest precisely that the words are to be taken in as terrifying a sense as possible in order that everyone should examine his own ability to erect the building.[10]

The scholar who explains away the problem, by making the text easy to understand, has robbed himself of the opportunity of self-examination and in doing so completely misses the point of the passage. The scholar seeks an objective explanation of the text that allows him to avoid a subjective evaluation of his own self. The point of the passage is not to get us to hate our parents but to get us to examine ourselves:

> The words are terrible, but I feel sure they can be understood without the person who understands them necessarily having the courage to do as they say. And yet there must be honesty enough to admit what is there, to confess to its greatness even if one lacks the courage oneself. Anyone who manages that will not exclude himself from a share in the beautiful story, for in a way it contains a kind of comfort for the man who lacks courage to begin building the tower. But he must be honest and not pass off this lack of courage as humility, since on the contrary it is pride, while the courage of faith is the only humble courage.[11]

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[9] Ibid., 99.
[10] Ibid., 100.
[11] Ibid., 100-101.

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To say that *Fear and Trembling* is about faith is both true and false. The book is indeed about faith, but more importantly, it is about our relation to faith: The book is a call to self-examination. It asks readers whether or not they are up to the challenge of faith.

Many commentators insist upon bringing Kierkegaaard's life into the interpretation of the book and ignore his own wishes of allowing the pseudonymous works to speak for themselves.[12] In doing so, such commentators ignore what for Kierkegaard is the crucial point of his indirect communication: self-examination. They shift the focus from themselves to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's task is a Socratic one. Socrates described himself as a midwife to knowledge. He claimed not to give birth to knowledge but to be able to help others give birth to knowledge. In the same manner, Kierkegaard wishes us to arrive at the truth about ourselves. He could explicitly say the truth he wishes us to arrive at, but then we might fail to appreciate it, to appropriate it existentially. Furthermore, in order to arrive at the truth we must discard those things that we think we know. Socrates did this through his questions; Kierkegaard through his pseudonyms. After nineteen centuries of Christianity, Kierkegaard believed that his age had turned Christianity into something trivial, into something simple. He believed that his task was not to make Christianity easy but as difficult as possible.[13]

This does not mean that nothing can be gained by bringing in Kierkegaard's life to examine *Fear and Trembling* as long as the central notion of self-examination is not forgotten. If Kierkegaard's life is taken into account, it gives us a good example of such examination. Burgess comments:

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[12] See *Fear and Trembling* (Hong), x-xi.
[13] See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 274-277n.

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> Each of the works *Fear and Trembling, Repetition,* and *Stages on Life's Way*, for example, casts some light on his engagement with Regine, in one way or another; but none of the interpretations is definitive. The distraught Constantin Constantius in *Repetition*, the merman in *Fear and Trembling*, and the weepy, self-pitying Quidem in the "Guilty?/Not Guilty?" essay from *Stages on Life's Way* may all reflect aspects of Kierkegaard's psyche, but how, and to what extent, they hit the mark, even he does not seem sure. Despite the self-scrutiny of his motivations, often the best answer he can give is that he (honestly?) does not know what they were. Such protestations of ignorance have a surprisingly contemporary sound today. For a century that understands human motivation to be largely, perhaps entirely, subconscious, and that expects to find self-deception at every turn, Kierkegaard's penchant for radical self-analysis fits right in.[14]

KIERKEGAARD AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

Burgess' quote above brings to mind those hermeneuticists of suspicion—Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche—who focus on our hidden motivations of action. The reasoning we give for our actions, they argue, masks our true intentions not only to others but more importantly to ourselves. Despite their many differences, all three seek to unmask the hidden motives of individuals and society, and bring them to the fore. Merold Westphal writes:

> What unites [Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud]…is their joint practice of the *hermeneutics of suspicion, the deliberate attempt to expose the self-deceptions involved in hiding our actual operative motives from ourselves, individually or collectively, in order not to notice how and how much our behavior and our beliefs are shaped by values we profess to disown.*[15]

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[14] Burgess, 45.
[15] Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 13.

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All three of these thinkers are atheistic and make use of their hermeneutics of suspicion to attack religion. This leads many people to assume that the hermeneutics of suspicion is fundamentally atheistic, leading many Christian oriented philosophers and apologists to attack these thinkers. Westphal suggests a different path. Instead of trying to discount Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, the Christian should read them carefully and learn from their critique as it is "*all too true all too much of the time.*"[16] Westphal distinguishes this suspicion from skepticism. Skepticism questions the truth of beliefs and propositions, suspicion on the other hand

> seeks to discredit the believing soul by asking what *motives* lead people to belief and what *functions* their beliefs play, looking for precisely those motives and functions that love darkness rather than light and therefore hide themselves.[17]

Suspicion is not concerned with discrediting beliefs but with discrediting the people who hold those beliefs. They might hold themselves up as model citizens, but really they are full of cowardice, repression, and resentment.

Through this lens of hermeneutic suspicion we can derive two possible interpretations of Kierkegaard's work: 1). Kierkegaard's works exemplify the sort of self-deception that Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche sought to expose, or 2). as Burgess suggests, Kierkegaard himself can be considered a hermeneuticist of suspicion who uses his works to bring attention to the various ways we deceive ourselves (as well as the various ways in which he has deceived himself). If we accept the first interpretation, we might interpret *Fear and Trembling* as a justification for Kierkegaard's broken

[16] Ibid., 16.
[17] Ibid., 13-14.

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engagement with Regine Oleson. Like Abraham, Kierkegaard was called to sacrifice what was dearest to him for the sake of his religious calling. Kierkegaard was able to console himself through the use of the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. After all, Abraham did get Isaac back. If only Kierkegaard will maintain faith and trust in God, he will get her back. Thus *Fear and Trembling* is nothing short of self-deception and wishful thinking.

The problem with this interpretation is that there is no single formulation of Kierkegaard's engagement with Regine. There are a number of other formulations of Kierkegaard's engagement throughout the pseudonymous works, often with different motivations implied, and not always in so glorifying a light. The Seducer in *Either/Or* can also be seen as a formulation of Kierkegaard's broken engagement, but his actions are hardly praiseworthy and his motives anything but noble. In addition to these two works, *Repetition* and *Stages on Life's Way* contain at least two other formulations. But more importantly, there is another formulation within the text of *Fear and Trembling* itself—that of the merman. Such a plethora of formulations is more easily explained by a man who is well-aware of his own tendency to deceive himself and who is struggling to understand himself and his true motives than of one who is unaware of such deception. The consequence of such a struggle might be, as Burgess suggests, that he might never know his motives with any certainty. Thus for Kierkegaard, the writings serve a double purpose. They seek to lead their readers to a self-understanding, to weed out self-deception and to understand what Christianity really is. But they also allow Kierkegaard to come to grips with himself:

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> I have nothing new to proclaim; I am without authority, being myself hidden in a deceit; I do not go to work straightforwardly but with indirect cunning; I am not a holy man; in short, I am a spy who in his spying, in learning to know all about questionable conduct and illusions and suspicious characters, all the while he is making inspection is himself under the closest inspection.[18]

Kierkegaard is keenly aware of the difficulty of knowing one's self and the many ways of self-deception. This shows that he himself is a hermeneuticist of suspicion and that nowhere is this more apparent than in his discussion of sin.[19]

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE MERMAN

As noted in chapter two, the concept of sin is curiously absent from most of the text of *Fear and Trembling*. Issues such as the paradox, infinite resignation, and the relation of faith to ethics seem to be the central concerns of the text. And yet there is the title—*Fear and Trembling*—which refers to Philippians 2:12, which Ronald Green points out is part of "Paul's discussion of sin, grace, and redemption."[20] But where are sin, grace and redemption to be found in *Fear and Trembling*?

> Although sin and forgiveness are only touched on early in the book, they suddenly spring up before us in the story of Agnes and the merman that dominates the third Problema. Examining the painful choices facing the merman who has seduced and then fallen in love with an innocent young woman, Johannes now embarks on an extended discussion of the problems of sin and repentance.[21]

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[18] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 87.
[19] Nor am I alone in this assessment. Westphal writes: "There is no better example of the hermeneutics of suspicion in the service of faith than Kierkegaard's writings." *Suspicion and Faith*, 144.
[20]Ronald Green, " 'Developing' *Fear and Trembling."* in *The Cambridge Companion o Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 272.
[21] Ibid.

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The story of Agnete and the Merman is given in order to contrast it with the silence of Abraham concerning his sacrifice of Isaac. It is the demonic counterpart to the divine paradox.

The Merman, as we recall, wanted to seduce Agnete. But then he fell in love with her and found that he could not go through with the seduction. It was here that repentance entered. But this was not a repentance that saves. It was demonic repentance. The Merman knew that he had wronged Agnete. He knew that he did not deserve her. So he decided to save her from himself. He would hide his self from her and torture her so that she would leave him. He tells himself that this is for her own good. And yet this does not make him feel any better *for he truly loves Agnete*. The demonic repentance of the Merman is self-inflicted punishment. But what is the purpose is this self-inflicted punishment? It allows the Merman to pay for his guilt.

Freud saw a similarity between the obsessive compulsions of the neurotic and the practices and ceremonies of the religious. Both make use of a way to defend against unconscious guilt.[22] As Westphal explains:

> As a symbolic undoing or repudiation of the forbidden act(s) they express sorrow or *repentance*, and as a burdensome imposition on one's time and peace of mind they represent a self-imposed *punishment*. In the former capacity they are a defense against the anxiety associated with the ongoing temptation to repeat the forbidden act(s), while in the latter capacity they are a defense against both the fear of punishment and the guilt that gives rise to that fear. In the ceremonial I say to myself and anyone else concerned: (1) "I'm sorry and I'll never do it again," (2) "You do not need to punish me; I'm already punishing myself," and (3) "Because I've already been punished, I don't need to feel guilty." The ceremony

[22] *Suspicion and Faith,* 83.

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> provides a triple protection: against anxiety, against fear, and against guilt.[23]

The Merman illustrates Freud's neurosis perfectly. In demonic repentance, the Merman gives up all claim to Agnete. He is sorry that he wished to seduce her and vows to never make such an attempt again. He does not believe that he needs to be punished externally because he is punishing himself, and by punishing himself he is able to justify himself and rid himself of his guilt.

Freud connects the religious to the neurotic because he wishes to discredit religion. He wishes to uncover the "real" motives behind religious observance. Kierkegaard sees some of these same motives operating in religious observance but unlike Freud, Kierkegaard does not think that these motives exemplify genuine religious faith. These impure motives are found in demonic repentance, not in that second repentance—repentance with Agnete. Johannes says that Abraham had faith for this life. The faith that Abraham exemplifies is not a faith that seeks to deny the reality of life and live in a world of make believe. It is a faith that faces the reality of the world while silently trusting in God. Whereas the Merman tries to rid himself of his anxiety, Abraham wields the knife in fear and trembling.

A popular conception of sin is to equate sin with an act. On this conception, if I break one of the ten commandments, then I have committed a sin. Kierkegaard's conception of sin is much more radical. Sin is a condition that I am in and is manifested through my actions. My actions have not made me a sinner, instead my being a sinner has manifested itself through my actions. However, sin is more than just manifest in my

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[23] *Suspicion and Faith,* 88.

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actions, it is also manifest in the way I view myself in the denials and justifications of my actions. Sin is manifest in the way I try to hide my true motives and desires from myself and seek to pretend that they are pure and righteous. Even when I do honestly examine myself I am unsure exactly what my true motives are. Kierkegaard seemed to have discerned many different motives for his actions concerning Regine, some good, some bad. But he was never fully able to see which motives were most dominant. Such suspicion for Kierkegaard is irreducibly linked to the condition of sin.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES ABRAHAM FROM THE ZEALOT

Before proceeding, two points need to be mentioned. It is very tempting to inquire how Abraham can be certain that the command he is given is truly from God. Perhaps it is simply a voice in his head or a devil. If we read *Fear and Trembling* carefully, we find no reference to such an epistemological problem. From the very outset it is assumed that Abraham knows that the command is from God. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's purpose in writing the book is not to give us an objective criteria in distinguishing whether this person is or is not a knight of faith. The knight of faith cannot be known from his outward actions but only from his inner life, an inner life that is simply not available for us to examine.[24] Besides Abraham, Johannes gives us one other example of the knight of faith, and he appears to be nothing more than a "tax-gatherer" and man of the world. And yet he is continually making the two movements of

[24] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: Part I*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3-4.

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infinite resignation and faith.[25] The problem is that we cannot know this by observing him. Thus it is a mistake to try to identify the knight of faith. There is only one person with whom we have access to this inner life, and that is ourselves. This suggests that Kierkegaard and Johannes are simply not interested in identifying a certain person as either a knight of faith or not.[26] Instead, he is interested in leading the reader to examine whether or not he is able to build the tower of faith.

Secondly, we must keep in mind Kierkegaard's audience. He is not writing for atheists in an attempt to prove Christianity to them. Such would be an attack against religious skepticism. Instead he is writing for Danish Christendom, for those people who consider themselves Christians. He wants to reintroduce Christianity to Christendom. He is trying to root out their misunderstanding of Christianity and to replace it with its proper understanding. As such, he is not required to prove presuppositions which both he and his target audience share. It is true that from Abraham's outward actions, we cannot say whether he is a knight of faith or a fanatic. But the authority of the Bible, which is a presupposition of both Kierkegaard and his intended audience, tells us that Abraham is a man of faith.[27] The person of Christian faith (or even of assumed Christian faith) will grant this. Once Abraham is accepted as a prototype in this way we can gain an understanding of his outward actions by assuming his inner state (which in real life we do not have access). The atheist and agnostic will not accept this on authority, but this

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[25] *Fear and Trembling*, 67-70.
[26] Johannes writes: "In my own experience I frankly admit to having found no reliable examples [of the knight of faith], though I would not deny of that ground that possibly every other person is one" (*Fear and Trembling*, 67). This is followed by the description of the shopkeeper. The implication is that the knight of faith is simply not capable of being distinguished by his outwardness.
[27] John Lippitt "What Neither Abraham nor Johannes de Silentio Could Say," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82, no. 1 (2008): 83-85.

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argument is not meant for them nor is it meant to overcome their epistemological doubt.[28] Instead Kierkegaard is attempting to overcome the complacency and self-deception of modern Christendom and to lead that single individual to a proper understanding of faith. As has been mentioned, Kierkegaard's aim is to bring about self-examination. If I am concerned with whether or not person X, who has committed a heinous deed in the name of God, is a person of faith or not, I am entirely missing Kierkegaard's point. Kierkegaard wishes me to examine myself, not someone else. To accomplish this he makes use of exemplars like Abraham with which to contrast ourselves.

That Abraham is sinless is to say that his motives are pure. Suspicion cannot be cast upon them. He does not have, either consciously or unconsciously, ulterior or hidden motives. This is in marked contrast to the Merman. The Merman, we are told, loves Agnete "with a multiplicity of passions."[29] The merman genuinely loves Agnete but at the same time he wishes to seduce her. His love is not pure, and this is precisely his torment. It is the guilt he cannot shake. Abraham's motives are pure. It is the purity of Abraham's love for Isaac that allows him to sacrifice him:

> The moment he is ready to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical expression for what he does is this: He hates Isaac. But if he actually hates Isaac he can be certain that God does not require this of him; for Cain and Abraham are not the same. Isaac he must love with all his soul. When God asks for Isaac, Abraham must if possible love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him; for it is indeed this love of Isaac that in its paradoxical opposition to his love of God makes his act a sacrifice.[30]

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[28] The religious skeptic misses the point when he demands absolute certainty. For as Lippitt points out, uncertainty "is part of the very nature of Kierkegaardian faith." (Ibid., 85.)
[29] *Fear and* Trembling, 122.
[30] Ibid., 101.

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If Abraham secretly hates Isaac and wants to get rid of him, then he is unable to sacrifice Isaac. Furthermore, if Abraham merely hates Isaac unconsciously, and is thus unaware of this hate, his motives are also impure though he does not realize it. When Johannes talks of the churchgoer who wishes to follow in the footsteps of Abraham he quickly brings in a discussion of Abraham's love for Isaac:

> I would hope to describe it in such a way that not many a father in the realm would dare maintain that he thus loved his son. I would hope to describe it in such a way that not many a father in the realm would dare maintain that he loved his son thus. Yet if he did not love as Abraham, all thought of offering Isaac would be a temptation. Here we already have plenty to speak of for several Sundays, so there is no need to rush. The result, if the speech does justice to the theme, will be that some fathers will simply not want to hear more, but happy for the time being if they have really succeeded in loving as Abraham did.[31]

The implication is that if the churchgoer truly understood Abraham's sacrifice he would also understand that this was a deed he could not emulate. For the churchgoer's love of his son is always in question. Does he truly love his son or does he subconsciously wish to be rid of him? Thinkers such as Marx and Freud have shown that ill feelings such as these are often hidden even from ourselves. Furthermore, Johannes suggests such doubts in his use of the Merman. Any doubt of moral perfection is a sign of its lack. Stephen Mulhall writes that

> Any imperfection, the slightest grain of impurity in one's attachment to the Isaac in one's life, and one's attempts to carry out that command would align one with Cain rather than Abraham, revealing the voice in one's head as that of an evil demon.[32]

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[31] Ibid., 61.
[32] Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 384.

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If the churchgoer truly understood how he was to love Isaac, he would have enough to work on. Instead of focusing on sacrificing his child he would focus instead on loving him as completely as Abraham. But this requires that the churchgoer seek to know himself and become conscious of his own motives and impurity of love**.** It would require that he not quickly rush to the assumption that he was a paradigm example of such love. It was mentioned previously that Kierkegaard offers many different formulations of his relationship with Regine, and Burgess even suggested that Kierkegaard might not have known what they truly were.[33] Why couldn't Kierkegaard know them? Because self-deception runs deep in the individual. And this self-deception is sin.

When we examine our own selves we find that we are more like the Merman than Abraham. We do not have the single passion of faith. We do not love Isaac with the purity of Abraham's love. Instead we find ourselves with a multiplicity of passions. We are both attracted to and repulsed by sin. We love Agnete and wish to do her good, but at the very same moment and along with the very best of motives, we wish to seduce her and use her to satisfy our own desires. If we were to become aware of our multiplicity of passions, we might seek forgiveness, or instead punish and torment ourselves as an act of self-justifying atonement. In short, we find ourselves in sin. We find that we need a teleological suspension of the ethical on the part of God, a suspension that cancels and forgives our guilt, and allows us to live in the world with joy under God. Kierkegaard's Christianity is not other-worldly, but this-worldly. Despite our guilt we can receive the world back as a gift from God. For Kierkegaard, salvation is possible only through the

[33] Burgess, 45.

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consciousness of sin and the willingness to accept forgiveness and divine grace. This acceptance of divine grace is itself an act of faith that stems from our own self-awareness as sinners. The zealot, unless he is as pure in his passion, love, and motivation as Abraham, is not the knight of faith, but a man blinded by his own self-deception.

We are told by Johannes that Abraham is a man without sin. God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham was willing to follow through on God's command. But this is not what is amazing about Abraham. The amazing thing about Abraham is that Abraham was able to receive Isaac back. We all have an idea of how we ought to live, and we all know that in a very deep and crucial way we have failed to live up to these standards. With this in mind, the movements of faith take on an entirely new level of meaning. Green comments:

> Infinite resignation is now seen to require an abandonment of one's sense of moral integrity and an acknowledgement of the reality of sin (a movement the merman can make), whereas faith, the second movement, becomes an absurd hope of redemption and renewal beyond all one's reasoned claims or expectations (a movement beyond the merman's powers).[34]

There is no reason why the Merman should be able to marry Agnete. He has tried to seduce her, and the only reasonable thing for him to do is to give her up. But with that absurd second movement of repentance with Agnete he is able to marry her in honesty and openness. From the point of view of the Merman this looks like an impossibility.

The Merman is like Abraham in the fact that he must make two movements. The movement of infinite resignation (repentance) and also the movement of faith (the ability to marry Agnete). But unlike Abraham, the Merman approaches the paradox from a

[34] Green, 277.

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different perspective, from that of the demonic. Abraham, we are told, is righteous and is outside the universal only by the command of God. The Merman has defiantly put himself outside of the universal. This difference serves to explain why Abraham must remain silent and cannot talk, while the Merman discloses himself.

CONCLUSION

When reading *Fear and Trembling* for the first time, it is difficult to know what to make of the book. It is not a standard book of philosophy. It's written by a literary character, it makes use of many imaginative constructions, and is seldom straightforward. For these reasons we have taken a more literary approach to the text. We examined Johannes de Silentio and found him to be both a dialectician and a poet. Furthermore we found that these two methods of dialectics and poetics are not opposed but complement each other. By creating imaginative and poetic constructions, Johannes is able to further his practice of dialectics by bringing out the distinctions between cases. We also took notice of our pseudonym's name—John the Silent—and postulated that this might be a hint to look for the meaning of the text in what is not said explicitly. The epigram of the book gave us further evidence of this fact.

We next began an examination of *Fear and Trembling*. The book is about faith and in particular faith as it is exemplified in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. It has been the contention of this thesis that faith for Kierkgaard must involve a proper conception of sin. To this end we began our study with an examination of what is said about faith throughout *Fear and Trembling*. Through most of the book there is little if any mention of sin. In the Attunement we are shown various images of false Abrahams—Abrahams who imitate to real Abraham but are lacking in faith. All are willing to sacrifice Isaac but none have faith. From this we learned that faith does not consist merely in obeying the

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word of God, for all these false Abrahams are willing to obey God. Instead we found that faith must consist in the real Abraham's ability to receive Isaac back with joy. This ability to receive Isaac back with joy is made possible by belief in the divine grace of God. He knows that he is commanded by God to sacrifice his son, but he also knows that this son has been promised to be the son through which his line of descendants will be established. Even though it is against human reason he has faith in the goodness of God and has faith that God will somehow keep his promise.

Abraham's act of sacrifice puts Abraham outside of the realm of ethics for it is wrong to sacrifice your son. And so Johannes says that if Abraham is justified in doing what he does then there must be a teleological suspension of the ethical, an absolute duty to God that trumps all other duties, and an inability to communicate his deed to others. And Johannes offers an entire section on each of these categories. All have in common the fact that they tie Abraham and his act of faith to ethics and suggest that faith itself must break with ethics. But if Abraham breaks with ethics he cannot explain his actions to others. How can he possibly explain to other people that while he loves Isaac with all his heart he also must sacrifice him? Such a statement sounds absurd because if Abraham truly loved his son he would not sacrifice him. Thus, in a very important way, Abraham is separated from the community of other human beings.

In Chapter two we examined another example of a man who is separated from the community—the Merman. The Merman has not been separated from others through a command of God but through himself, through an act of sin. He wants to seduce Agnete but finds that he cannot go through with the seduction because he has been conquered by

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her innocence. He immediately gives himself over to demonic repentance. He feels guilt for his wrong doing and makes himself pay for his guilt. He still loves Agnete, but he knows that he does not deserve her, that he has wronged her. And so he tortures her so as to turn her away from himself. Here the Merman is in a similar situation as Abraham. He loves Agnete, but at the same time he is torturing her for her own good. The Merman cannot explain this mindset to another person, and so he remains silent. The Merman has no interest in explaining this to another person. He intends to remain separated from the community and suffer in silence.

It is possible for the Merman to escape the demonic, and that is from a second form of repentance—repentance with Agnete. Here we found that the movements of this second repentance mirror that of the double movements of Abraham. Abraham makes the movements of infinite resignation and faith, while the Merman makes the movements of repentance and the acceptance of forgiveness. Furthermore, we are told that the Merman, like Abraham is the particular made higher than the universal. Based on this textual evidence I concluded that this second repentance is also a form of faith, but from a different direction. Whereas Abraham is an example of the divine, the Merman is an example of the demonic.

It was in conjunction with Johannes' discussion of the Merman that the first mention of sin is brought up. Johannes tells us that this mention of sin has brought us further than anything else previously said in the text. I took this as an important comment meant to signal the reader of the importance of sin for the conception of faith that Kierkegaard would like to show us. But since sin was only briefly mentioned in

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Fear and Trembling we had to go to several of Kierkegaard's other writings to understand further what sin is for Kierkegaard and what relation it might have to faith. To this purpose we turned to the *Concept of Anxiety* and *Sickness Unto Death*. In the *Concept of Anxiety* we learned that sin must be thought within the mood that properly corresponds to it, and that mood is earnestness. Earnestness takes sin seriously as having something to do with myself, something that is a part of me. When I earnestly look at sin I wish to overcome it. This is in marked contrast to other improper moods of looking at sin. These improper moods all are similar in that they look at sin as something that is out there, as something we can study or observe. Such moods lack the subjective passion that a true understanding of sin demands. Once sin is posited and we look at this sin in earnestness we realize that we are not up to the demands of ethics. Ethics for us becomes impossible because we have already failed. This led Vigilius to posit a second ethics, an ethics that takes sin seriously and presupposes dogmatics. This second ethics makes use of the idea of transcendence whereby we are able to return to the demand of ethics through a transformation of ourselves, through what Vigilius describes as a repetition. This is what Abraham does when he is able to take Isaac back with joy, what the Merman does when he is able to marry Agnete with joy.

We next examined what these two works said about the demonic. The demonic we found was a category of sin, and in particular one that was fully conscious of this sin and self-identified with it. The demonic finds itself in an unfree relation with the good. It is both attracted and repulsed by it. The good is associated with freedom and redemption, and the demonic sees these as threats to his selfhood. In *Sickness Unto*

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Death we found that sin is not best thought of as discrete acts but as a condition of the self—something the self is. In sin there is an inner consistency, and this inner consistency is what the demonic identifies as himself. The Merman sees the sin in himself, sees himself as a seducer of Agnete. He feels guilt over this but still continues to identify himself in this way. The possibility of redemption, of actual marriage with Agnete, is an affront to his self. It would mean giving up his internal consistency of sin. And so instead of giving himself over to God and Agnete he takes things into his own hands.

With the preceding information at hand, we had the necessary material to argue for the place of sin in *Fear and Trembling*. The book is a call to self-examination. Kierkegaard is not interested in being able to call this or that person a person of faith, but is instead interested in getting his reader to examine himself, to see if he is up to the challenge of faith. This is seen in Johannes' illustration of the priest and the parishioner. Johannes focuses not on the parishioner, but on the priest. The priest lacks any reflection and fails to see how his own misunderstanding of the text caused the parishioner to do what he did. Looking at the text more closely we find that the theme of honesty has been seen throughout the text. It is prominent in both the beginning and ending of the book.

We then linked Kierkegaard to the hermeneuticists of suspicion, Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. This was done because Johannes' scenario of the Merman questions his motives and drives. In particular we compared the Merman to the obsessive compulsion of Freud's neurotic. The Merman like the neurotic feels guilty and seeks to punish himself for his guilt as a way to justify himself and avoid any externally imposed

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punishment. This mode of existence we likened to sin. Whereas Freud's neurotic is unconscious of these ulterior motives, the Merman seems to be fully conscious of them and to uphold them defiantly.

Abraham is in direct contrast to the Merman. He is completely righteous. His love for Isaac is perfect and beyond all doubt. The book calls us to compare ourselves to Abraham and the Merman. If we examine ourselves we find that we fall short in our love. We can never be sure that our motives are pure because there are always possible hidden motives underneath. If we feel commanded to sacrifice our son, we can never be sure that is the voice of God and not the voice of some hidden, secret desire from within us. Thus we find ourselves outside of the universal, in sin. When we become conscious of this fact we have the choice to self-identify with this sin or to suffer a rebirth in which we are again able to accept our life with joy and come back to the ethical.

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