



## Fathers and Sons

an attempt to make some loving sense of Johannes de Silentio's Fear and Trembling  
Lundsgaard-Leth, Kresten

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# Fathers and sons: an attempt to make some loving sense of Johannes de Silentio's *Fear and Trembling*

Kresten Lundsgaard-Leth<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract:

In this article, I take a closer look at the inconsistencies of Johannes de Silentio's position in *Fear and Trembling*. First, the article lays out the different inconsistencies of de Silentio's text. Secondly, I argue the case that the ultimate tension of the Abraham narrative is the way in which it points toward the self-sacrifice - and teachings - of Christ. Thirdly, I consider Robert A. Paul's reconstruction of Freud's analysis of the foundational myth of Moses and the establishment of Western civilization. Whereas it is Paul's point that we need to re-experience the guilt of mythical crimes to make sense of Christian atonement, I suggest that we must go through Abraham's - potentially fatal - faithful suspension of the ethical in order to understand why both God and loving deeds must be ultimately be understood as self-sacrificial and other-concerning.

**Keywords:** Kierkegaard; *Fear and Trembling*; ethical life; faith; paradoxality; existentialism

So Abraham did not speak. Only *one word* of his has been preserved, his only reply to Isaac, which we can take to be sufficient evidence that he had not spoken previously. Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb is for the burnt offering. 'And Abraham said: God will provide *himself* a lamb for a burnt offering.'

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* <sup>2</sup>

Nothing would make complete sense without *that* being told first.

Richard Ford, *Canada* <sup>3</sup>

*Fear and Trembling* is a genuinely fascinating book. It is also a deeply disturbing book. Above all, though, it is a very weird book.

In the following, I will present an interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* that takes very seriously the weirdness of the text. As I will argue, there is a quite precise meaningfulness to the apparent weirdness of the work.

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**Correspondence:** Kresten Lundsgaard-Leth, [inscriptions@tankebanen.no](mailto:inscriptions@tankebanen.no)

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<sup>1</sup> Aalborg University.

<sup>2</sup> SKS 4, 203 / Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 139, my italics.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Ford, *Canada* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 3, my italics.

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The interpretative challenge presented by Johannes de Silentio<sup>4</sup> largely revolves around the question of what to make of the protagonist of *Fear and Trembling*, namely the “[v]enerable father Abraham.”<sup>5</sup>

Who is father Abraham? As is well known: in *Genesis*, the first Book of the Torah, Abraham is called upon by God to settle down in the land of Canaan, which God then promises to Abraham and his progeny. When Abraham is one hundred years of age, a son, Isaac, is born to him and wife, Sarah. At some unspecified point during Isaac’s boyhood, God commands Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. For three days, Abraham and Isaac ride to Mount Moriah where the sacrifice is to be performed. Having arrived at the foot of Mount Moriah, they carry on by foot with Isaac carrying the wood for the imminent burnt offering. To Isaac’s question about the whereabouts of the sacrificial animal, Abraham answers that “God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.”<sup>6</sup> At the very instant Abraham has pulled his knife in order to execute God’s bidding, he sees a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham sacrifices the ram instead of Isaac, whereupon father and son together return journey back to the promised land.

It is clear that the author of *Fear and Trembling* is somewhat obsessed with “that beautiful tale of how God tried Abraham” which he has kept reading and re-reading with still “greater admiration” throughout his entire life. It is not only the “greatness” of the story of how Abraham “kept his faith and for the second time received a son against every expectation” that has so caught Johannes’ attention, however. It is also its “appallingness.”<sup>7</sup> For Abraham does not exclusively have faith. He is also unequivocally prepared to commit murder to “prove” this faith – or to be more succinct: he is ready to *kill his own son* – if asked to do so by God. As de Silentio realizes, the appallingness of Abraham’s readiness to kill ultimately cannot be separated from the greatness of Abraham’s faith therein that God will give him “a new Isaac on the strength of the absurd.”<sup>8</sup> Why? Because it is an integrated part of the intentional scope of Abraham’s very faith that *whatever* God demands of him is necessarily *worth* doing – simply *because* God demands it; even, crucially, if this something happens to be murdering one’s own son – even though Abraham clearly has “hope” that it will not turn out so.<sup>9</sup> Following his analytic integration of Abraham’s faithfulness and his willingness to kill, de Silentio concludes that any attempt to take Abraham seriously forces us to deal with the following issue: “If faith *cannot* make it into a holy deed to murder one’s own son, then let the judgment fall on Abraham as on anyone else.”<sup>10</sup>

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Or so it would *appear*. On closer inspection, though, the most consistent feature of de Silentio’s account (re)appears to be the *tout court* inconsistency of its overall account. For Johannes *also* accentuates that “it is *only* in respect of faith that one achieves resemblance to Abraham, *nor murder*.”<sup>11</sup> Importantly, this particular inconsistency of de Silentio’s position is not the only one of its kind. Rather, a number of palpable inconsistencies seem to pervade the text. Two further examples: Although de Silentio repetitively reassures his readers that he “*cannot* understand” Abraham, he *also* admits that “so far as I can understand the paradox I *can* also understand Abraham’s total presence in that word [about God providing a lamb].” And a little later – and more blatantly ambivalent: “for my part I *in a way* understand Abraham, but [...] I lack the courage to *act* like Abraham.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the lack of understanding for Abraham’s willingness to kill appears to have been transformed into a question of, firstly, (i) an *epistemic* understanding the so-called “paradox of faith”<sup>13</sup> as well as, secondly, (ii) a lacking *existential* courage to *act* like him.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes de Silentio is the alleged pseudonym responsible for having authored *Fear and Trembling*.

<sup>5</sup> SKS 4, 118 / FT, 56.

<sup>6</sup> SKS 4, 203 / FT, 139.

<sup>7</sup> SKS 4, 105-27 / FT, 44-61.

<sup>8</sup> SKS 4, 203 / FT, 139.

<sup>9</sup> SKS 4, 118 / FT, 55.

<sup>10</sup> SKS 4, 126 / FT, 60, my italics.

<sup>11</sup> SKS 4, 126 / FT, 61, my italics. For obvious reasons, we will return to the question of why de Silentio insists on this conspicuous inconsistency.

<sup>12</sup> SKS 4, 132-207 / FT, 66-143, my italics.

<sup>13</sup> SKS 4, 161 / FT, 97.

None of this clarifies, however, what it really means to act like Abraham – let alone why we would ever want to do so. It also does not elucidate what it ultimately implies to understand the alleged paradox of faith. To make matters even more precarious, the question of epistemic understanding in *Fear and Trembling* is in itself ubiquitously obfuscated. De Silentio's inconsistent pronouncements thus also apply to the preeminent standard of both philosophical and ethical intelligibility as such, namely Hegel's speculative philosophy which he believes to "have more or less understood", although Hegel – on certain points – "hasn't been altogether clear."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Johannes *also* declares himself to be a non-philosopher who "has *not* understood the [Hegelian] System, nor does he know if there really is one."<sup>15</sup> Just as Hegel's philosophy intends to be, de Silentio's position is evidently all over the place.

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In summa: Johannes seems certain there is *something* in Abraham's readiness to kill, in his faith as well as in Hegel's philosophy that somehow *both* makes sense *and* does not. But how?

On my interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*, the following passages are essential to unlocking the meaning behind de Silentio's confusion(s):

[i]t is a question of seeing the greatness of Abraham's deed [...] Faith is just this paradox, that the single individual as the particular [*den Enkelte som den Enkelte*] stands higher than the universal [*det Almene*] [...] [and who] stands in an absolute relation to the absolute [...] Now the story of Abraham contains just such a teleological suspension of the ethical [...] If one looks a little closer I doubt very much whether one will find in the whole world a *single* analogy, except a later one that *proves nothing*, for the fact remains that Abraham represents faith, and that faith [...] [is] so paradoxical that it cannot be thought. [...] On the strength of the absurd he got Isaac back.<sup>16</sup>

The first couple of sentences of the above passage indicate what the reader is supposed to be looking for if he or she wishes to see the "greatness of Abraham's deed." More to the point, they specify *how* the reader ought to be looking *in order to* be able to see Abraham's greatness. First and foremost, the very particular "seeing" hereof presupposes a particular standard of seeing, namely the infamous "teleological suspension of the ethical." To the extent that the category of "the ethical" is meant to encompass the entirety of the domain of reasonable inter-subjective standards of normative justification, a standard which explicitly *suspends* such standards *tout court* must of course present a "paradox" to reason itself.<sup>17</sup> Or to put the same point differently: if the ethical sphere is the only and all-encompassing sphere in(side) which we explain and vindicate *why* we *act* the way we act, it does indeed seem downright paradoxical to try and justify *why* we would suspend – and hereby effectively abandon – this sphere.

The telos of this so-called teleological suspension clearly relies on an inversion of the normative hierarchy between the "single individual as the particular" and the "universal," respectively. Inside (the logic of) ethical universality, to be sure, the positive ontological status of the individual is constituted by means of the individual's recognition of – as well as her becoming recognized by – *other* individuals. In order to be valid (i.e. reasonable), these relations of mutual recognition must unfold as social processes coordinated by intersubjective norms. In faith, however, the individual is surprisingly said to be higher than the universal. Allegedly, it manages to claim this position by entering into an "absolute relation to the absolute", the nature of which must by definition stand in opposition to any given intersubjective (and reasonable) relation inside

<sup>14</sup> SKS 4 128 / FT, 62.

<sup>15</sup> SKS 4, 104 / FT, 42-43, my italics. In fact, de Silentio makes it very clear in a footnote in the "Problemata" that the idea of logically mediated movements in Hegel's philosophy "*is a chimera which in Hegel is supposed to explain everything and besides is the only thing he never tried to explain.*" (SKS 4, 1/ FT, 71).

<sup>16</sup> SKS 4, 146-50 / FT, 81-86, my italics.

<sup>17</sup> As Lippitt (and others) convincingly argues, the "ethical" in *Fear and Trembling* has some Kantian traits but should nonetheless primarily be equated with Hegelian "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*), cf. John Lippitt, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 88-118, and Alastair Hannay, "Introduction" in Kierkegaard, *Fear*, 9-29. In the precise words of Stewart, Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* amounts to "the concrete realm of customs, duties, institutions, and mores that are generally accepted in any given society." Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's relation to Hegel reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 311; cf. Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 181-210.

ethical universality in which the individual is always exhaustively subsumed under the so-called “universality” of ethical relations.

In faith, crucially, the particularity of the singular individual totally transcends *everything* encompassed by Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. That is, it transcends all universality. It does so by relating to “God” in such a way that faith in God completely individuates *who* the individual is as well as determines *what* the individual must do. None of this, evidently, makes any sense inside the ethical sphere in which *everyone’s* identity is exclusively a question of the ethical actions they can (or cannot) become recognized by carrying out.<sup>18</sup> Although de Silentio appears to specify faith in *positive* terms as (i) *loving* God, (ii) expecting “the impossible” (i.e. getting a new Isaac) and (iii) for struggling with (once more) God,<sup>19</sup> it is much less ambiguous that faith must *negatively* be characterized as an “infinite resignation” of all intelligibility and normativity available to ethical agency à la Hegel.<sup>20</sup>

Evidently, de Silentio understands Abraham as having gone through the “movement of resignation.”<sup>21</sup> For this (unreasonable) reason alone is he willing to sacrifice Isaac – whom he dearly loves.<sup>22</sup> The teleological faith-component of Abraham’s “double-movement”<sup>23</sup> is – for its part – of course not the sacrifice *itself* but Abraham’s faith that “on the strength of the absurd” God will give him “a new Isaac.”<sup>24</sup> But as has already been emphasized: Abraham’s faith also does not *prevent* him from sacrificing Isaac. On the contrary, the one and only “entity” he absolutely loves (namely God) specifically orders him to do exactly that. And Abraham is clearly willing to carry out the order.

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But what are we to make of this? It seems self-evident that “we must reject the idea that God could conceivably require a form of worship that involves murder.”<sup>25</sup> But why, precisely? In order to answer to this question, allow me to return to the part of the previous passage where de Silentio expresses doubt that there is not “in the whole world a single analogy” to Abraham, “except a later one that proves nothing.”<sup>26</sup> Unmistakably, de Silentio is here referring to the coming of Christ in the New Testament. And although de Silentio is *sensu stricto* right to say that this later analogy *proves* nothing (providing a proof would return us to the societal reasonableness of *Sittlichkeit*), he also fails to *see* how the life and deeds of the Son of God nonetheless *does* something that transform the way we must relate to the faith of Abraham. I will return to this shortly.

Interestingly, Abraham himself can be said to – also somewhat enigmatically – point towards Christ. When Abraham replies to Isaac that “God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering,”<sup>27</sup> it is thus highly conspicuous that Abraham is simply in the wrong regarding the specific nature of the sacrificial animal they encounter shortly after – namely a ram. And whereas Isaac’s question specifically addresses “the” eminent burnt offering on Mount Moriah, Abraham’s rejoinder – for its part – applies the indefinite article of “a” burnt offering. The original Danish of de Silentio’s text, “Gud skal see sig om

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18 Mulhall captures this point very precisely in his depiction of how faith “isolates him [i.e. the believer] from, by placing him beyond, the realm of the universal; and this isolation finds its most fundamental expression in the believer’s exile from the *logos* – from the realm of articulate thought and speech.” Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality – Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Kierkegaard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 358.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. SKS 4, 113 / FT, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. e.g. SKS 4, 130-45 / FT, 57 ff.

<sup>21</sup> SKS 4, 137 / FT, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Sacrificing Isaac would not be a sacrifice if the resignation would make Abraham stop loving his son. Ethically, nevertheless, Abraham’s willingness to kill Isaac can only be described as an attitude of *hatred*. Whereas a “tragic hero” can sacrifice a loved one because of obedience to a *higher* ethical ideal, Abraham’s faith in God’s demand obliges him to kill Isaac for *no* (ethical) reason at all. As de Silentio puts it, “[t]he absolute duty [towards God] can then lead to what ethics would forbid, but it can by no means make the knight of faith have done with loving [...] Isaac he *must love* with all his soul.” SKS 4, 165 / FT, 101, my italics; cf. Sharon Krishek, *Kierkegaard on Faith and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 75-107.

<sup>23</sup> SKS 4, 131 / FT, 65.

<sup>24</sup> SKS 4, 203 / FT, 131; cf. Lippitt, *Kierkegaard’s Fear*, 183-7.

<sup>25</sup> Mulhall, *Inheritance*, 383. I also agree with Mulhall that this must have something to do with a “reading of Abraham’s ordeal as a prefiguration of Christ’s Atonement” (*ibid.*), although I do not believe Mulhall’s proposal of an “allegorical or analogical reading” makes it entirely clear why this is the case. We will return to this shortly.

<sup>26</sup> SKS 4, 150 / FT, 85.

<sup>27</sup> SKS 4, 203 / FT, 139. Although I think it is ultimately incomplete, the following part of the interpretation owes a large debt to Mulhall’s brilliant interpretation (cf. Mulhall, *Inheritance*, 359 ff.).

Lammet,” is thus semantically underdetermined. Conventionally, in Danish, you can either *look for* (*se sig om efter*) or *take care of* (*sørge for*) something. Since there is no ‘*efter*’ to be found in Abraham’s infamous “word,” however, the reader might be tempted to add a miniscule but meaning-transfiguring ‘*s*’ the sentence which would then read: “Gud skal see sig [s]om Lammet” - or in English: God shall see himself *as* the lamb (for *an* offering).

In summa: Abraham does not foresee what actually happens, nor does he really answer Isaac’s actual question; what he is saying is even unclear. In a way, Abraham therefore “doesn’t say anything.”<sup>28</sup> More importantly, though, Abraham does indirectly preordain that God himself will provide *some* lamb (although possibly not *the* ram on Mount Moriah), just as he indirectly implies that the most important offering of this lamb will not be the exact offering he intends to carry out *hic et nunc*.<sup>29</sup> Abraham’s word might even be hinting at the fact that this *other* offering of *another* lamb may somehow turn out to be offering God to sacrifice *himself* (possibly in some *other*, lamb-like form?) rather than Isaac?

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If the weird tale of Abraham’s faithful willingness to sacrifice his son is primarily constructed to point towards Christ’s message of neighborly love as well as his sacrificial atonement of human sinfulness, however, then why not simply *skip* this story from the Torah of the *Old* Testament altogether and jump straight (in)to the Gospels of the *New* Testament? Qua addressing a contemporary audience, we must – after all – take de Silentio to be concerned with the full-fledged version of Christian faith rather than the pre-Mosaic oddity of Judaism that is the Abraham narrative.

So why are we supposed to occupy ourselves with de Silentio’s inconsistent essay about Abraham when we can simply start reading Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*? I will conclude this interpretation by offering an attempted solution to this enigma. Before I do so, still, allow me to make a brief detour.

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In his intriguing book, *Moses and Civilization: The Meaning Behind Freud’s Myth*, Robert A. Paul forcefully reconstructs how Freud’s retrospective attempt to excavate an *actual* event in which the “junior males” of the “primal horde” killed the dictatorial “primal father” in order to establish “civilization” is ultimately an analytic failure.<sup>30</sup> We simply cannot know for sure whether any such event ever actually occurred. What we can know for sure, nonetheless, is this: the Christian culture of the Western world is deeply embedded in a “living myth” of father-related anger (towards powerful and “bad” senior males), father-related killings (carried out by envious “sons”), father-related longings (towards loving and “good” senior males (most importantly: God *as* the Father)) and not least – as well as mostly “unconscious” – father-related “guilt” (after having killed the father).<sup>31</sup> Furthermore: Although the mythical events may never have happened in actual history, Western man *experiences* this “myth as a felt reality.”<sup>32</sup> As such, we are making sense of our lives *inside* the existential coordinates of this foundational myth in disregard of whether it happened or not. Psychologically, thus, the myth *is* real.

As Paul expounds, the structure of this myth harbors an “inevitable ambivalence”<sup>33</sup> due to which the overall consistency of the myth paradoxically presupposes a crucial *logical* inconsistency at its very core. Thus, the establishment of civilization itself posits both the forbiddance of killing as well as the importance of honoring one’s father as being normatively crucial. The inevitable dilemma arises since the founding fathers will *always already* have had to *violate* these demands in order to inaugurate them. For this reason, they retroactively must experience guilt *as soon as* these norms are established.

Another fundamental principle that the inauguration of civilization has posited is the “law of reciprocity” (as opposed to the arbitrary and entirely hierarchical rule of the pre-civilized primal horde). According to this very law, crucially, “the

<sup>28</sup> SKS 4, 206 / FT, 142.

<sup>29</sup> In de Silentio’s words, Abraham’s answer thus “has the form of irony, for it is always irony to say something and yet not say it.” SKS 4 206, / FT, 142.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Robert A. Paul, *Moses and Civilization – The Meaning Behind Freud’s Myth* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 1-36.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Paul, *Moses*, 170-92.

<sup>32</sup> Paul, *Moses*, 184.

<sup>33</sup> Paul, *Moses*, 179.

logic of the myth” does not merely elucidate the experience of guilt. Moreover, it requires “an equally serious retribution.”<sup>34</sup> The rebellious sons of civilization must thus be punished for killing the father. This reciprocal retribution *can* instantiate itself as the *de facto* death of the son.<sup>35</sup> More often, though, the punishment takes the (alternative) form of a guilt-plagued obedience which abides by the following logic: “Because you killed your father, your father will forever demand obedience to his requirements; you must obey your father because, after all, you are guilty of having killed him.”<sup>36</sup>

After having reconstructed the meaning of the foundational Moses myth, Paul points out that the Christian understanding of (i) Jesus’ self-sacrifice *as* (ii) the atonement of human sin (and guilt) in effect *presupposes* the “dilemma” of the Torah myth. The *meaning* of Christianity (i.e. the “central ideological component of Western civilization”<sup>37</sup>) is thus essentially nothing but the (dis)solution of *this* very dilemma.<sup>38</sup> In Paul’s own words:

Jesus is the actualization of [...] divine grace, but he is also the *just payment* required by the law [...] Ironically, it has thus been in the interests of Christianity, for its *own* success, to insist on the authority and the *truth* of the Torah narrative [...] [O]nly in the context of this myth do people feel guilty enough to desire Christian salvation.<sup>39</sup>

To Paul, the Christ narrative thus fulfills the double function of repaying (i) the necessary debt required by the law while simultaneously (ii) grace-fully emancipating its subjects from the guilt-overload of the Torah narrative (taken in isolation).

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I believe Paul’s reconstruction of the logic of the foundational myth to be highly illuminating – not least because it reveals to us *how* the paradoxical “truth” of the Torah is effectively the (psycho)logical precondition for the very meaningfulness of the teaching, self-sacrifice and atonement of Christ.

To make sense of de Silentio’s use of Abraham, however, we cannot simply reiterate Paul’s analysis. Instead, we must *repeat* his exploration by reconstructing how the Abraham narrative somehow contains a truth that must have been told – and hereby experienced “as a felt reality”<sup>40</sup> *before* it makes sense for the reader – to “go [any] further” than Abraham.<sup>41</sup> I am in principle in agreement with David Kangas’ suggestion that we need to “clarify” the “*phenomenological* meaning” of *Fear and Trembling*. I am just not sure that this “need” requires us to engage into “a *demythologized* reading of the narrative.”<sup>42</sup> In fact: I am convinced that we need to understand the function of *this* precise myth if we wish to understand its appallingness to a modern reader – instead of merely suggesting that it has a weird way of saying (merely) something *other* than what it actually says.

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Importantly, de Silentio’s application of the Abraham narrative in *Fear and Trembling* presents a dilemma which is distinct from the alleged “logic of the myth” in Paul’s account. For whereas the junior males kill their *father* to *establish* the law(s) of civilization, Abraham is willing to kill to his *son* in order to totally *transgress* the most fundamental laws of ethical life. This dissimilarity is crucial, since the teleological structures of the two dilemmas turn out to be effectively inverted. In Paul, we

<sup>34</sup> Paul, *Moses*, 91.

<sup>35</sup> To offer a few examples, Adam is thrown out of the eternal life of Eden after disobeying his father, just as Moses is never allowed to cross the river Jordan and enter Israel after having killed his (step)father, the Pharaoh.

<sup>36</sup> Paul, *Moses*, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Paul, *Moses*, 193.

<sup>38</sup> Paul, *Moses*, 193.

<sup>39</sup> Paul, *Moses*, 204-16, my italics.

<sup>40</sup> Paul, *Moses*, 134.

<sup>41</sup> SKS 4, 101 / FT, 41. To de Silentio, as a matter of course, going further can never imply to make mediate Abraham’s faith into intelligible Hegelianism. Instead, we must seek to understand Abraham’s very unintelligibility.

<sup>42</sup> David Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant: On Beginnings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 125, my italics.

need the Christ figure to enable our *return* to ethical life through an absolution of our guilty conscience after having (always already) violated the law *in the past*. In de Silentio, conversely, we need to figure out how a total “teleological suspension of the ethical” can be justified in regard to all *future* actions. If not, there would be no reason to admire Abraham as the father of faith. To de Silentio, thus, Abraham cannot be perceived as performing a *necessarily evil* deed (like killing the primal father). Instead, he must be seen as carrying out a *paradoxically good* deed.

The real dilemma in the Abraham narrative, however, is a different one. Because whereas the infinite resignation of the ethical is actually a meaningful pre-condition for establishing a *different* understanding of normative goodness, God’s command to sacrifice Isaac does not in itself make any *literal* sense. It does admittedly make *allegorical* sense (by pointing towards the lamb of God: Christ), but to understand this allegory we still need to transcend the Abraham narrative and actually “go further.” So, again: if we *must* go further, why *start* here?

De Silentio says:

I am convinced that *God is love* [...] but I do not have faith: this courage I lack. God’s love is for me [...] incommensurable with the whole of reality [...] But none could understand Abraham. And yet think of what he achieved! To remain *true* to *his love*. But he who loves God has no need for tears [...] Just as the lover would [say] [...] ‘I am by no means standing still in my love, for I have my life *in it*.’ And yet he too doesn’t come any *further*, not to anything else. For when he finds that out he has *another explanation*.<sup>43</sup>

On my interpretation, something crucial is revealed here. For while it is certainly the case – as he openly admits – that de Silentio’s understanding of God *as love* is mostly a comforting – and far too abstract – “thought,”<sup>44</sup> it is at least the case that de Silentio also thinks of God as being essentially loving. At no point in the text, conspicuously, do we learn that Abraham also believes this to be true. We do know that Abraham loves Isaac<sup>45</sup>, just as we know that he remains true to “his love” for God – but it is nowhere specified that Abraham has faith in God as being, *literally*, love. Abraham certainly believes that God is “great”<sup>46</sup>, just as he has faith that God will give him “a new Isaac on the strength of the absurd”<sup>47</sup> since “for God all things are *possible*.”<sup>48</sup>

But in all earnestness: why be faithful towards a God whom you believe to possess complete absolute greatness and infinite possibility – but who tells you to murder your own son? And what kind of love for your son do you really have if you believe that *he* – qua this “singular individual” – could ever be replaced by a “*new Isaac*”? According to Abraham’s faith, does not the “single individual as the particular” end up standing “higher than the universal”<sup>49</sup> in a depraved and unloving way in which the *why* of the teleological suspension of the ethical must take the following, appalling form: “*For God’s sake*, and [...] *for his own* [i.e. the knight of faith]. He does it for the sake of God because God demands this *proof* of his faith; he does it for his own sake in order to be able to produce the proof.”<sup>50</sup>

Maybe he who loves God “has no need for tears.” But he whose God demands the sacrifice of one’s only son as a proof of one’s faith has faith in something worth crying over. This is not because faith allows the particular to stand higher than the universal, but because faith *without* love cannot guarantee – or maybe even see – that the most important single individual must be the beloved *other* – and not the believer herself. Not as *another* person who has a claim to ethical recognition that can be argued and reasoned about, importantly, but as a singular individual who must be loved for his or her *own sake because love demands it*. Love is still not intelligible in societal and reasonable terms. It presupposes itself, rather, and to have your “life in it”, like de Silentio’s hypothetical “lover,” is to find out that you have “another explanation” than

<sup>43</sup> SKS 4, 129-210 / FT, 63-142, my italics.

<sup>44</sup> SKS 4, 129 / FT, 63.

<sup>45</sup> SKS 4, 165 / FT, 101.

<sup>46</sup> SKS 4, 113 / FT, 150.

<sup>47</sup> SKS 4, 203 / FT, 139.

<sup>48</sup> SKS 4, 141 / FT, 75.

<sup>49</sup> SKS 4, 146 / FT, 81.

<sup>50</sup> SKS 4, 153 / FT, 88, my italics.



all the ethical ones.<sup>51</sup> Still, you do have *some* meaningful explanation – rather than just a total negation of explanatory devices, namely the reasons of love. This surely “proves nothing,”<sup>52</sup> but it does a whole lot. It calls its believers to carry out deeds rather than contemplate reasons for actions. Not just all *possible* deeds demanded by any *great* God, though, but *loving* deeds demanded by a loving God who does not demand proof of our faith – but who allows his beloved son to sacrifice himself for his beloved people.

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None of this can be directly seen by contemplating Abraham’s greatness. Conversely, none of it makes much sense either *without* Abraham’s faithful suspension of the ethical in which a domain of endless trans-ethical possibilities are revealed to us. We thus need to go through the experience of the full force of Abraham’s radical negativity as well as the full scope of God’s ontological possibility before we can approach the leap of faith – by having the story of Abraham told to us. That being said, we also need to experience – with undiminished fear and trembling – the truly terrifying potency of this negativity and potentiality as long as faith does not become re-qualified as a loving hope where one relates “oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good” for oneself as well as “*for others*”.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, the only actual requalification of faith then becomes an existential matter of acting it out.

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<sup>51</sup> SKS 4, 210 / FT, 42.

<sup>52</sup> SKS 4, 150 / FT, 85.

<sup>53</sup> SKS 9, 251-55 / Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 234-39.