

Søren Kierkegaard

Fear and Trembling

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Objectives

1. Introduce *Fear and Trembling* within the context of Kierkegaard's wider authorship.
2. Identify the pseudonymous author of the book and suggest some additional complications that this introduces for understanding it.
3. Explain the main themes and structure of the book.
4. Outline some of the main concerns of each section.

Reading Assignment

Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Sylvia Walsh, introduction by C. Stephen Evans. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

At the time of writing, there are three different English translations in widespread use: as well as the above edition, there are earlier translations by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong and by Alastair Hannay. In this article, I give page references to the above edition, alongside the most recent Danish edition (abbreviated SKS). A table comparing the pagination of all three translations and the most recent Danish edition can be found at Lippitt 2016: xxii.

Commentary

The Danish philosopher and Christian thinker [Søren Kierkegaard](#) (1813-1855) was the author of an extraordinary series of books that have influenced a wide variety of writers and artists, as well as other philosophers and religious thinkers. These works, most of them produced during an extremely productive few years during the 1840s, can be roughly divided into two types. First, those written under a variety of different pseudonyms, whose very names sometimes have an important significance. Second, a series of works published under Kierkegaard's own name, often under the title of 'upbuilding discourses'. Many of these are typically less commonly studied than the pseudonymous works, though this group also includes such major texts as *Works of Love*, arguably Kierkegaard's most significant work of Christian ethics. *Fear and Trembling* {*Frygt og Bæven*}, published in 1843, belongs to the first group, and is authored by a figure named Johannes *de silentio* {John of Silence}. Of all Kierkegaard's works, it is probably the best-known and most read. This is in some ways unfortunate, not least because it has meant that the views of its pseudonymous author are often uncomplicatedly taken to be Kierkegaard's own. To do this is to ignore the request to respect the integrity of the pseudonyms that Kierkegaard made, in his own name, in 'A First and Last Explanation', a supplement to the otherwise pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: 'if it should occur to anyone to want to quote a particular passage from the [pseudonymous] books, it is my wish, my prayer, that he will do me the kindness of citing the respective pseudonymous author's name, not mine' (Kierkegaard 1992: 627). The pseudonyms sometimes express views distinct from

Kierkegaard's own – and as we shall see, there is some reason to think that this might be true of Johannes *de silentio*. What we certainly should not do is treat *Fear and Trembling* as being Kierkegaard's own final word about [faith](#).

In my experience of teaching it, *Fear and Trembling* always makes an impact on the reader. In a much-quoted 1849 entry in his journal, Kierkegaard seems to have anticipated this. He predicts that 'once I am dead, *Fear and Trembling* alone will be enough for an imperishable name as an author. Then it will be read, translated into foreign languages as well. The reader will almost shrink from the frightful pathos in the book.' (Kierkegaard 1978: 221 [entry 6491]). What is this 'frightful pathos'? The narrative around which the book revolves is God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering (Genesis 22: 1-18). There is something instantly striking about the horrific drama of Abraham's ordeal, and as well as being one of Kierkegaard's shorter works, the book is on one level an easier read than many texts in the history of philosophy. However, unlike many such texts, which wear their difficulty on their sleeve (think of [Kant's Critique of Pure Reason](#) or [Heidegger's Being and Time](#)), *Fear and Trembling* is the kind of multi-layered work that one needs to read multiple times in order fully to appreciate its complexity.

What is the book about? If one were to answer that question in a single word, the word would have to be 'faith'. But, as already hinted, Johannes approaches faith not in general terms, but by exploring a particular biblical exemplar of it: Abraham, the 'father of faith' whose exploits are detailed in the book of Genesis. Johannes is particularly fascinated by the events of Genesis 22. Abraham has been promised by God a long-awaited son, Isaac, through whom he will be the father of many nations. His wife Sarah gives birth when both she and Abraham are at an extraordinarily advanced age. Yet now Abraham receives the shocking command to take his long-awaited son to Mount Moriah and offer him as a sacrifice or 'burnt offering'. In the biblical account of the *akedah* (or 'binding' of Isaac), Abraham shows his willingness to do this, setting off with Isaac on a three-day journey. At the last minute, however, God sends an angel to prevent him from killing Isaac. Abraham sees a ram caught in a thicket by its horns and sacrifices it instead.

If this 'trial' is what faith involves, Johannes professes, then he is unable to understand Abraham. He circles around the events of Genesis 22, telling and retelling the story from various angles, aiming to get closer to understanding faith by understanding what it is not. In other words, as the book progresses, we get offered a series of figures, each apparently similar to Abraham, yet each, Johannes argues, in significant respects importantly different.

This approach is illustrated by the fact that *Fear and Trembling* may be said to have several different introductions. The heart of the book has often been taken to be what Johannes calls its 'dialectical' sections, the three 'Problemata' or Problems - especially the first, with its infamous question of whether, in the story of Abraham, there is a 'teleological suspension of the ethical' (more of which shortly). But the reader overlooks the earlier sections at her peril. First is the Preface, in which Johannes discusses the tendency of his age to devalue faith and declares his aim to try to recognise its true value. He starts this project by seeking to do for faith what others have done for doubt, namely showing its importance as a genuine existential challenge and a task for a lifetime, rather than simply a position from which everyone begins. But after the Preface come three further introductory sections: 'Tuning Up' (or 'Attunement' {*Stemning*}); 'A Tribute to (or 'Speech in Praise of') Abraham' {*Lovtale over Abraham*}; and a 'Preliminary Outpouring (or 'Preamble') from the Heart' {*Foreløbig Expectoration*} (which introduces the Problems).

'Tuning Up' is noteworthy in that it begins a strategy that is essential to the methodology of the book. We are introduced to four different versions of Abraham – call them 'sub-Abrahams' – all of

whom are prepared to obey God, but each of whom differs from 'the' Abraham in various ways. So, Johannes insists, they are not truly exemplary of faith. This often-overlooked section alerts us to something crucial. The message of *Fear and Trembling* has, time and again, been taken to be that if ethical requirements clash with divine commands, then 'the ethical' must give way to the 'higher' value of the will of God. (Often, it is simply *assumed* that this is what the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' means.) In other words, the book is often taken to be ultimately a speech in praise of obedience to God. But if that were so, then the presence of the sub-Abrahams would be deeply mysterious, since for all their differences, what they have in common is that each of them is prepared to obey. And yet, Johannes insists, none of them is the Abraham he admires.

In the 'Tribute', Johannes sets the story of the *akedah* in its wider context, demonstrating ways in which Abraham's life has shown him keeping faith in God's promise despite (from a common-sense point of view) the apparently decreasing likelihood of its being fulfilled. The section sets up faith as an alternative to the threat of nihilism with which it opens. Abraham's faith – which requires him to believe or have faith in what might appear absurd – is contrasted with 'worldly understanding'. (Significant here and elsewhere in *Fear and Trembling* is that the Danish *tro* can mean either 'faith' or 'belief'. Translators therefore must decide whether to render a phrase repeated multiple times in the text – *Abraham troede* – as 'Abraham believed' or 'Abraham had faith'.) There are in this section several puzzling passages that seem to offer *non sequiturs*, and so which might cause us to doubt Johannes' reliability (see Lippitt 2016: 32-4, 220-50). As we shall see, it may indeed be significant that Johannes confesses to being an outsider to faith, aiming to understand a figure, Abraham, whom he claims to admire but not to comprehend. But perhaps this is simply meant to underscore the contrast between faith and worldly understanding as different lenses through which to view life: the section highlights what I take to be a key theme in the book, namely, to valorise Abraham as an exemplar of [trust](#) and [hope](#), this being one of the ways in which he is a 'guiding star that rescues the anguished' (18/SKS 4, 117). Importantly, it offers an understanding of faith such that faith is for *this* life, not just about an after-life. Trust in God's promises is not just trust that they will be fulfilled in eternity. Thus, the measure of Abraham's faith is more his *trust that he will receive Isaac back* rather than his willingness to offer him up in sacrifice. And, connected to this, the 'Tribute' points towards what will emerge as a crucial distinction in the next section: between faith and 'infinite resignation'.

Continuing to try to imagine himself in Abraham's sandals, in the 'Preliminary Outpouring', Johannes stresses 'the anguish' [*Angesten*] of the *akedah* experience (something which, he complains in a famous passage (22-3/SKS 4, 124), preachers often gloss over). In his discussion of a preacher who lazily heaps praise upon Abraham, Johannes raises a question that will strike most readers of *Fear and Trembling*: what, precisely, is the difference between what Abraham is prepared to do, and the actions of any number of murderers or religiously inspired terrorists who also claim divine warrant for their actions? Johannes wonders here about his own project: 'Can one ... speak candidly about Abraham without running the risk that an individual in mental confusion might go and do likewise?' (25/SKS 4, 126). We might see the whole of *Fear and Trembling* as wrestling with this question. The difficulty of 'understanding' Abraham is presented as a difficulty for the imagination, and Johannes seems keen to stress the limitations of 'philosophy' (specifically, Hegelian philosophy) in this regard. Johannes' own exercise in imaginative identification brings him to the next important contrast between faith and what-faith-is-not: that between the 'knight of faith' and the 'knight of infinite resignation' (29-32/SKS 4, 130-4). The knight of infinite resignation has an openness and recognisably heroic quality that the knight of faith lacks (see the discussion of the 'tax-collector' knight of faith (32/SKS 4, 133-4)). Moreover, the knight of infinite resignation is comprehensible – indeed, Johannes claims to be capable of this movement himself – whereas Abraham *qua* knight of faith remains to him an enigma.

Faith and infinite resignation are further illustrated via an analogy with two versions of a story of a young lad of modest station in life who falls in love with an unattainable princess (34ff./SKS 4, 136ff.). This is an example of a strategy Kierkegaard uses at various places in his authorship, seeking to illustrate faith by drawing parallels with love. Infinite resignation – which is presented as a prerequisite of faith; the first in the ‘double movement’ of faith – turns out to resemble what many people think of when they think of religious faith. It involves the renunciation of important goods or commitments in favour of goods or commitments conceived of as higher, and there is in this movement ‘peace and rest and consolation in the pain’ (38/SKS 4, 140). Yet the knight of faith manages fully to value finite goods (Isaac, the princess) in a way that the knight of infinite resignation risks losing. (How to understand this is a point on which commentators differ: compare for instance the different interpretations of Edward F. Mooney, Ronald L. Hall and John J. Davenport (discussed in Lippitt 2016: 59-73).) Whereas infinite resignation is a movement that the self can achieve by itself – to resign something is a function of my own will – the knight of faith not only recognises his utter dependence on a (divine) power outside himself but trusts in God’s promises in a way that appears – to the outsider at least – ‘absurd’. What makes him most remarkable is his ability to take a genuine joy in the finite world: joyfully to receive it back (in the form of Isaac or the princess) despite having genuinely ‘resigned’ it. This movement of faith takes what Johannes calls a ‘paradoxical and humble courage’ (41/SKS 4, 143).

The Preamble is followed by what many have taken to be the heart of the book, the three Problems (or Problemata). Each begins with a riff on the same phrase: the idea that ‘the ethical as such is the universal’, a different dimension of which is then brought out in each Problem. Although ‘the ethical as such is the universal’ sounds like a statement Johannes is making, it might better be read as a claim that he is putting under scrutiny. A key question is whether ‘the ethical’ – thus understood – really is the highest task for human beings, or whether faith involves something ‘higher’. In addressing this, the relationship between ‘the universal’ and ‘the single individual’ [*den Enkelte*] – a phrase that echoes throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship – is central.

Problem I tackles the question for which *Fear and Trembling* is best known: whether the Abraham case (and the faith that it illustrates) involves a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’. Here ‘the universal’ – which Johannes says ‘applies to everyone ... is in force at every moment’ (46/SKS 4, 148) – has been variously read in either Kantian terms (as applying to all rational agents, at all times) or in Hegelian terms (as referring to the concrete public life of a people, in ways I shall explain shortly). Given much of what Johannes says (and Kierkegaard’s running battle with certain influential Danish Hegelians such as [Hans Lassen Martensen](#)), the latter seems the more plausible target – but I do think that at least some of what Johannes says can also be raised against elements of [Kantian ethics](#). How does Abraham *qua* knight of faith offend against the ethical? In four, closely interconnected ways. First, he is an *exception*, apparently violating, for instance, the version of Kant’s categorical imperative known as the formula of universal law, the idea that ‘I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law’ (Kant 1993: 14). Second, this amounts to the ‘paradox’ that ‘the single individual’ stands ‘higher’ than the universal. To understand this, we need to note an important distinction [Hegel](#) makes between *Moralität* (to do with an individual agent’s inner will and intention) and *Sittlichkeit* (to do with the customs, norms and institutions of a given, rational society). For Hegel, concerned as he is about the dangers of runaway subjectivity, *Moralität* needs to be subordinated to *Sittlichkeit*. This does not amount to the unthinking acceptance of whatever happens to be the norms and conventions of the society into which you were born. Rather, on this view, the educated member of a modern state accepts its customs and institutions because they have reflected on how these may be rationally justified. Indeed, Hegel sees his own ethical thought as contributing to this enterprise. Modern states are

themselves the realisation of reason's demands, and the highest duty of an individual is to be a member of such a state (Hegel 1996: sect. 258). The problem with Abraham, then, is that he seems to consider his own, private relationship to God to have priority over his duties as a social creature. Hence, Johannes insists, Hegel should have condemned him unequivocally, since if Hegel is right, Abraham is in the wrong. The third point connects to this: Abraham stands in a direct, unmediated relation to God, and so – the fourth point, on which Problem III elaborates further – he cannot, according to Johannes, explain his actions in the public arena of language. One dimension of 'the universal' concerns language: public, sharable concepts. Against this background, the radical privacy and incommunicability of Abraham's God-relationship looks suspicious. This is central to Johannes' discussion of the distinction between the knight of faith and the 'tragic hero', the latest in the growing list of figures embodying what-faith-is-not. Illustrated through the three examples of Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus (50-2/SKS 4, 151-3) – each of whose stories should be understood to grasp Johannes' point (see for instance Lippitt 2016: 104-8) – these stories give us further cases of where a father feels an obligation to sacrifice one or more of their own offspring for a purpose conceived of as a 'higher' good. We might question, far more than Johannes does, whether each of these three figures is ethically in the right to do so. But this would be to risk missing his main point, which is that in each case, the 'tragic hero' can explain himself; can give a publicly accessible account of why he acts as he does (say, in terms of the duties a military leader has to the state trumping his familial duties of love for his daughter). Such an explanation remains 'within the ethical'. Whereas according to Johannes, all that Abraham can offer is such enigmatic utterances as 'It is a trial in which I am being tested' or 'I believe on the strength of the absurd'. In contrast to the tragic hero, therefore, Abraham's act 'transcended the whole of the ethical' – that is, the ethical understood as 'the universal' – 'and had a higher telos outside, in relation to which he suspended it' (52/SKS 4, 152). So whereas the tragic hero's greatness inheres in his ethical virtue – that is, a virtue of *Sittlichkeit* – Abraham's greatness inheres in 'a purely personal virtue' (52/SKS 4, 153).

Problem II approaches the relationship between the single individual and the universal from a different angle. Here the issue is the nature of our duties to God. On one view, *all* our duties are duties to God (Kant, for instance, claims that 'Religion is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands' (Kant 1998: 153)). But what room does this leave for particular duties to a promise-making God with whom it is possible to enter into a direct relationship? Johannes is troubled by the idea of God becoming an 'invisible vanishing point' whose power can effectively be reduced to the ethical, which fills or 'completes' existence (59/SKS 4, 160). Faith as Abraham illustrates it seems to require an 'absolute relation to the absolute' [God], in relation to which the ethical *qua* universal is relativised (61/SKS 4, 162). For the knight of faith, the ethical is the 'temptation', in part because there is something consoling about being able (like the tragic hero) to share one's dilemma with others; by being able to 'speak'. This in turn connects with Problem III, which tackles the question of whether it was ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his purpose from interested parties such as Isaac and Sarah. The dimension of the universal that Johannes is interested in here is that it is 'the disclosed', and he contrasts Abraham with further cases of what-faith-is-not that he labels four 'poetic personages' (77/SKS 4, 178). Elsewhere in Kierkegaard's authorship, ethical openness is contrasted with the hiddenness and concealment of the 'aesthetic' sphere. (For the contrast between the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence, see especially *Either/Or*.) So, if one key mark of the ethical is openness or disclosure, and Abraham (exemplar of faith) is marked by concealment, is this not just a return to the aesthetic? Johannes gets at his answer – which is No – by drawing on his examples to try to show how different aesthetic concealment is from the paradox of faith. He thus argues that Abraham would offend 'aesthetics' as

well as 'ethics' (99/SKS 4, 200-1). Once again, Abraham's inability to 'speak' – to make himself understood – is stressed.

Problem III is probably the part of the book that most divides commentators. Some have found the excursus on the four 'poetic' figures a somewhat rambling diversion (and Johannes himself comes close to admitting this (99/SKS 4, 200)). Whereas others – especially those who give serious attention to the idea, hinted at in the book's motto, that *Fear and Trembling* may contain a hidden message that its messenger (Johannes) fails to understand – have seen it as of vital importance. Amongst the latter, the discussion of sin and repentance in the story of Agnete (or 'Agnes') and the merman (82ff. /SKS 4, 183ff.), is often given central weight. (For a discussion of various options here, see Lippitt 2016: 196-206, 220-250.) Key to this disagreement is a question about how much we can expect someone like Johannes to tell us about the mysteries of faith. He continually stresses that he does not himself possess faith, merely admiring it and seeking to understand it from the outside. The book's brief Epilogue returns to the mercantile imagery of the Preface, reminding us that one of Johannes' main concerns is that we should not make the common mistake of his contemporaries, of failing to recognise the true value of faith, selling it off cheap. But for an insider's perspective on faith, we need to turn to some other major texts in Kierkegaard's authorship - such as *Works of Love*, *The Sickness unto Death* and various *Upbuilding Discourses* and *Christian Discourses*.

Questions for Self-Review

1. What is your default understanding of 'faith'? In what ways, if at all, does *Fear and Trembling* challenge it?
2. What would you say are the roles of hope and trust in the life of faith? How might *Fear and Trembling* help us to understand this?
3. Consider what the four 'sub-Abrahams' of the 'Tuning Up' section all have in common. How might this be used to challenge the claim that *Fear and Trembling's* central message is 'always obey divine commands'?
4. What are the key differences between the 'knight of faith' and a) the 'knight of infinite resignation', and b) the 'tragic hero'? Why does Johannes *de silentio* consider faith to be an advance on infinite resignation? Should he?
5. Consider the name of the book's pseudonymous author. What would you say is the main significance of silence in *Fear and Trembling*?

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