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Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*

What neither Abraham nor Johannes de Silentio could say: a reply to Michelle Kosch

Abstract:

Though there are significant points of overlap between Michelle Kosch's reading of *Fear and Trembling* and my own, this paper focuses primarily on a significant difference: the legitimacy or otherwise of looking to paradigmatic exemplars of faith in order to understand faith. I argue that Kosch's reading threatens to underplay the importance of exemplarity in Kierkegaard's thought, and that there is good reason to resist her use of *Philosophical Fragments* as the key to interpreting the 'hidden message' of *Fear and Trembling*. Key to both claims is the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. I also briefly sketch an alternative reading of the 'hidden message', one in which Kierkegaard's Christian commitments play a notably different role.

I - *Fear and Trembling*'s secret message

The perennial interest in, and range of interpretations of, *Fear and Trembling* is remarkable. It shows Kierkegaard's prediction in his journals that 'once I am dead, *Fear and Trembling* alone will be enough for an imperishable name as an author'¹ to have been prophetic indeed. For good or ill, *Fear and Trembling* is probably the text most commonly associated with his name, although – *pace* Michelle Kosch - I think there is serious competition for the title of Kierkegaard's 'most elusive' work. Yet as Kosch rightly notes, the mystery trailed by the epigraph - that *Fear and Trembling* might have a 'hidden message', and if so, what that message might be - has long since fascinated commentators. Kosch and I will disagree on what that message is, but before getting down to the points of disagreement, let me outline some central issues on which we do agree. First, and most important, we both think it implausibly simplistic to read *Fear and Trembling* as arguing straightforwardly for the superiority of 'the religious' to 'the ethical'. Second, we both agree that it is important to note how the pseudonymous author Johannes de Silentio makes clear that a key part of his aim is to prevent faith being sold off too cheaply, at a bargain price. To this end, Kosch draws attention, as have numerous other commentators, to the economic imagery with which the book begins and ends. Third, and relatedly, I agree that 'the intended audience consists of people who

¹ Kierkegaard, JP 6: 6491. For references to Kierkegaard's published works, I cite the first edition of the *Samlede Vaerker*, the volume numbers and pagination of which is preserved in the margins of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, the standard English language translations by the Hongs. For quotations from the journals, I use the Hong translation of the *Journals and Papers* (abbreviated JP). See References.

already embrace a religious point of view and are already tacitly committed to regarding conduct like Abraham's as religiously justified' (p. 3). But Kosch would presumably balk at the way I would describe this: that the book properly aims at clarifying what is involved in taking Abraham as a paradigmatic exemplar of faith. This point – on the legitimacy or otherwise of the attempt to understand faith through the use of paradigmatic examples or exemplars – turns out to be probably the main point of disagreement between us.

Kosch claims that the entailed message of *Philosophical Fragments* is that 'faith cannot be learned from another human being' and that this is the hidden message of *Fear and Trembling*: 'taking the biblical Abraham as a model of faith is impossible in principle ... in order to survive in the terrain of faith the reader must eliminate him, along with every other example' (p.16). (Hereafter, I shall refer to this as 'Kosch's conclusion'.) I think this is problematic on a number of levels.

Kosch's critique of the legitimacy of discussing faith through the use of exemplars thereof is interesting because the use of exemplars is, it seems to me, quite central to Kierkegaard's methodology. Vital to his authorship are pseudonyms – Johannes de Silentio, Johannes Climacus, Anti-Climacus, and so on - each of whom represents a distinct existential standpoint. Similarly, characters such as Judge William, the spokesman for 'the ethical' in *Either/Or*, both argue for and in various ways embody the position they represent. Moreover, a number of texts, such as *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life's Way*, present us with *multiple* authors and manifestations of the various existence-spheres. (To understand 'the aesthetic', for instance, requires us to get to grips with Don Giovanni, 'A' and Johannes the Seducer in *Either/Or* and the various speech-makers of 'In Vino Veritas' in *Stages*.) I take this practice to show Kierkegaard's commitment to the following two ideas. First, that the concrete embodiment of abstract ideas in examples and exemplars aids a reader's subjective understanding. Second, with specific reference to ethical and religious notions, that Kierkegaard tacitly endorses a broadly Aristotelian idea: that we learn the good through direct reference to exemplars. This is particularly clear in the case of the imitation of Christ: the ultimate instance, for Kierkegaard, of the idea that human moral growth and education involves imitating the paradigmatically wise and good. To suppose that concrete exemplars of faith play no legitimate role in a Kierkegaardian understanding of it would therefore be a very surprising conclusion.

As I shall argue in what follows, there are ambiguities in Kosch's conclusion that Kierkegaard's view, and *Fear and Trembling*'s hidden message, is that 'faith cannot be learned from another human being'. I shall here make two preliminary assumptions as to what she means. First, since Abraham is an Old Testament figure, I shall assume that, that when Kosch talks about 'faith' she does not (despite the reference to *Fragments*, but in common with Johannes de Silentio) mean specifically *Christian* faith. But second, given what is for Kierkegaard the 'special case' of Christ, I assume that Kosch means her claim to exclude that human being who, according to the Christian

orthodoxy to which Kierkegaard subscribed, was also God. It is very clear that Christ plays a pivotal role for Kierkegaard as an exemplar of faith; as the ‘prototype’ to be followed and imitated. (See especially *Practice in Christianity*.) Nevertheless, the follower does not do this under their own steam:

‘It must be firmly maintained that Christ has not come to the world only to set an example [*Exempel*] for us. ... He comes to save us and to present the example. This very example should humble us, teach us how infinitely far away we are from resembling the ideal. When we humble ourselves, then Christ is pure compassion. And in our striving to approach the prototype [*Forbilledet*], the prototype itself is again our very help. It alternates; when we are striving, then he is the prototype; and when we stumble, lose courage, etc., then he is the love which helps us up, and then he is the prototype again.’²

In view of the centrality of Christ as the prototype or pattern to be imitated, both in Kierkegaard’s thought and in the wider Christian context, therefore, I shall assume that Kosch is taking it as a given that within this tradition Christ’s divine status makes him an exception to her rule. To put this in the language of *Fragments* (more of which imminently) it is, for Kierkegaard, because Christ is ‘the god’ who provides ‘the condition’ that he is ‘the prototype’.

II - Philosophical Fragments: ‘the condition’ and examples

In assessing Kosch’s conclusion, then, let us turn to the aspect of *Philosophical Fragments* on which she bases her argument as to *Fear and Trembling*’s hidden message. In the *Fragments*, Johannes Climacus certainly argues that no human being can provide ‘the condition’³ for understanding the truth necessary for salvation; that the teacher is ‘the god’ who gives both the condition and the truth.⁴ But this leaves open a range of possible views of exactly what ‘the condition’ involves. For orthodox Christian belief, scripture is part of what is ‘given’ in ‘the condition’. It is clear both that Kierkegaard takes seriously the question of what constitutes religious authority⁵ and that he takes scripture to be authoritative.⁶ For instance, in *For Self-Examination*, we read:

‘God’s Word is given in order that you shall act according to it ... If you do not read God’s Word in such a way that you consider that the least little bit you do understand instantly binds you to do accordingly, then you are not reading God’s Word’.⁷

² JP 1: 334.

³ Kierkegaard 1901-6: IV 184.

⁴ Kierkegaard 1901-6: IV 185.

⁵ On this point, as well as Kierkegaard’s manuscript on Adler to which Kosch refers, see Evans 2000.

⁶ For an account of Kierkegaard that puts his acceptance of the authoritative role of the Bible in Christian life and identity at the heart of his enterprise, see Polk 1997. On the importance of Biblical quotations in the pseudonymous authorship specifically, see Pons 2004.

⁷ Kierkegaard 1901-6: XII 318-9.

And in *Without Authority* - in stark contrast to Kant, for instance - we get this:

‘It is not by evaluating the content of the doctrine esthetically or philosophically that I will or can arrive at the conclusion: ergo the one who has delivered this doctrine is called by a revelation, ergo he is an apostle. The relationship is just the reverse: the one called by a revelation, to whom a doctrine is entrusted, argues on the basis that it is a revelation, on the basis that he has authority. I am not to listen to Paul because he is brilliant or matchlessly brilliant, but I am to submit to Paul because he has divine authority...’⁸

Naturally, this will (as Kierkegaard predicted) offend many a secular philosopher, but the point for our purposes is to note that this puts Johannes de Silentio, grappling with Abraham, in a rather different position to someone grappling with an example generated at random from his own imagination. The scriptures clearly do give examples of faith – including Abraham - from whom the reader is expected to learn. Hebrews 11, for example, offers its readers a litany of examples from history of what faith does as encouragement towards perseverance, Abraham being a central such example.⁹ And in Romans 4, Paul famously offers Abraham as a classic example of justification by faith rather than works:

‘For what saith the scripture? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness’.¹⁰

What does this use of exemplars of faith in the New Testament suggest about the Kierkegaardian view of their legitimacy? I propose the following line of interpretation, consistent with the central argument of the *Fragments* which Kosch mentions. It does not follow that we need to eliminate all examples, either when ‘the condition’ is met or when it is not. (I shall return to the latter case in section IV.) Sure, for Kierkegaard (and Climacus), the biblical Abraham, not being divine, does not provide ‘the condition’ for faith. But it does not follow from this that he cannot provide an important example of faith for those who possess ‘the condition’: and this is presumably what the writers of Romans 4 and Hebrews 11 intend. Indeed, in her impressive book, Kosch recognises the possibility of an argument from scriptural authority.¹¹ What I am suggesting here seems perfectly consistent with what she (rightly, I believe) argues there: that rather than read *Fear and Trembling* as an argument intended to take a reader from the ethical to the religious, it should be read as ‘aimed

⁸ Kierkegaard 1901-6: XI 98. I am grateful to Kyle Roberts for reminding me of this passage.

⁹ See especially Hebrews 11: 8-19.

¹⁰ Romans 4: 3-5.

¹¹ Kosch 2006: 156-7.

primarily at articulating the constraints imposed by a life of faith, and so presupposing, rather than arguing for, a religious standpoint'.¹²

In her book, Kosch dismisses the argument from scriptural authority as question-begging. Indeed it is, if we suppose that what Kierkegaard is about is trying to argue the non-Christian into Christianity. But as the above quote shows, this is not what Kosch supposes him to be doing. I wonder, then, whether – to allude to the Hume passage she quotes – we could say of Kosch here something akin to what Hamann said of Hume? That while she intends this 'question-begging' charge as criticism, in fact the claim in question – that a commitment to scriptural authority is part of (Christian) faith – is just orthodoxy?¹³ Kosch worries that *Fear and Trembling's* verdict on Abraham – that *if* there is no teleological suspension of the ethical or absolute duty to God, then Abraham is 'lost', just a common murderer – is 'as likely to drive the bourgeois Christian into the arms of Kant *et al.* as to succeed in driving up the price of faith' (p. 4). What we need, she argues, is an *antecedent* commitment to taking Abraham as a model of faith. But for Kierkegaard, I submit, that antecedent commitment is simply biblical authority.¹⁴

Exactly what is Kosch's charge against Johannes de Silentio? One line of objection to Johannes found in the secondary literature is that his grappling with the Abraham story causes him to play too fast and loose with the biblical Abraham. That is, his attempted imaginative identification with Abraham means that the figure who emerges from his reflections is in fact not the biblical figure, but one of his own invention. There does seem to be *something* in such a charge – though in section IV below, I shall offer a partial defence of Johannes from it. But Kosch's charge seems stronger than this. True, she does claim that the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling* is 'rather idiosyncratic' (p. 4) and Johannes' own fictional creation. But she also concludes that taking even 'the biblical Abraham as a model of faith is impossible in principle' (p. 15). This is because of Abraham's inaccessible interiority: 'While the actions of the knight of faith are visible, his being a knight of faith (rather than a lunatic) is not'.¹⁵ But once we have noted Kierkegaard's commitment to scriptural authority, the answer to the question 'What are the grounds for supposing that Abraham is an exemplary instance of faith?' is clear: 'Because the scriptures tell us so.' While this may strike many as philosophically

¹² Kosch 2006: 160.

¹³ In her discussion, Kosch mentions Kant's rejection of the Abraham story, on the grounds that 'apparent direct manifestations of the will of God can never be action guiding, because they either tell us to do something in conformity with the moral law (in which case they are redundant...), or they tell us to do something in contravention of the moral law (in which case we are obliged to ignore them, because our certainty of the dictates of the moral law is total, whereas our certainty that something is a divine command can never be)' (Kosch 2006: 157). But Kierkegaard is far more sceptical about what we can know about the moral law than is Kant, in significant part because he is more sceptical about what unaided human reason can achieve. Relatedly, special revelation plays a role in his thought that is at odds with Kant's views on the matter.

¹⁴ Kosch claims that in *Fear and Trembling* 'Abraham's righteousness is not even categorically asserted' (p. 3). Yet in Problema III, Johannes asserts that Abraham 'did not become the single individual by way of sin – on the contrary, he was a righteous man, God's chosen one' (Kierkegaard 1901-6: III 146).

¹⁵ Kosch 2006: 158.

disappointing, it does seem to fit quite squarely with Kierkegaard's overall religious position on biblical authority, and also the view, which we have seen that Kosch herself endorses, that *Fear and Trembling* is about articulating what a life of faith may involve, rather than arguing from first principles for 'the religious'.¹⁶ In other words, we do not need to conclude that Kierkegaard's ultimate intention is that we see the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling* as no more than Johannes' 'poetic construction'; a purely fictional artifice. But we can recognise – as does Kierkegaard, on Kosch's account (and here I have no desire to quarrel) – that this reliance on biblical authority provides no reasons for holding it that are epistemically acceptable to a sceptic. That is as it should be, for this uncertainty – 'out on 70,000 fathoms'¹⁷, as Climacus famously puts it – is part of the very nature of Kierkegaardian faith.

We should not lose sight of the first objection raised against Johannes de Silentio in the paragraph above, and I shall return to this in section IV. But first, given the importance of Climacus' *Fragments* to Kosch's conclusion, let me propose two reasons to doubt that Kosch's conclusion is in fact Climacus' ultimate view.

III - Climacus as a key to interpreting *Fear and Trembling*: from the *Fragments* to the *Postscript*

First, note that in the *Postscript* to the *Fragments*, Climacus himself uses exemplars to illustrate faith. There is a sense in which arguably that text's central character, Socrates, himself illustrates some essential points about faith. Second, also in the *Postscript*, Climacus draws an important distinction between understanding what Christianity *is* and understanding what it is to *be* a Christian. Applying this distinction to faith more generally (so as to encompass the Abraham case), a question for Kosch is what exactly it is that exemplars of faith are supposed to be unable to teach us: what faith *is*, or what it is like to *have* faith? Could they do the former, even if not the latter? Let me flesh out these points in turn.

IIIa - Socrates and faith

The *Postscript* makes considerable use of exemplars to make its points, none more so than Socrates. I have argued elsewhere that we can look to Socrates as presented in the *Postscript* for illumination on what it is to be both an ironist and a humorist (irony and humour being two crucial 'boundary zones' between the aesthetic, ethical and religious existence-spheres).¹⁸ But this is so because of a more fundamental role that Socrates plays in the *Postscript*: as Climacus' paradigm

¹⁶ Keep in mind also Kierkegaard's determination, contra Hegel, not to subordinate religious to philosophical categories.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 195.

¹⁸ Lippitt 2000.

exemplar of the ‘subjective thinker’ and indirect communicator.¹⁹ As Jacob Howland notes, in emphasising this aspect of Socrates in the *Postscript*, Climacus ‘correct[s] the misleading impression of Socrates left by the *Fragments*’.²⁰ What matters most for our current purposes is that Socrates *qua* subjective thinker embodies a certain sort of faith – which causes a difficulty for Kosch’s conclusion.

How so? The *Postscript* describes faith as ‘the highest passion of subjectivity’.²¹ Obviously, Socrates does not embody the *Postscript*’s ostensible central topic: specifically *Christian* faith. But as every reader of the *Postscript* notes, Climacus’ explicit treatment of Christian faith arrives rather late on the scene of that text, prefigured by a much lengthier discussion of ‘subjective thinking’ and Religiousness A that Climacus treats as an essential prerequisite to his comparatively brief discussion of Religiousness B (Christianity).²² As noted, Socrates is central to the discussion of subjective thinking. Howland observes how Climacus argues that ‘the Socratic or philosophical appropriation of the truth – like Socrates’ ascent to the truth, which could not proceed without the help of the god – involves a kind of faith’.²³ Let us elaborate on this claim.

In a famous passage, Climacus claims that there is ‘more truth’ in the person who prays ‘with all the passion of infinity’ to an idol than in the person who ‘prays in untruth’ (that is, half-heartedly, insincerely or ‘objectively’) in ‘the house of the true God’.²⁴ This valorizing of the inner subjective state of the worshipper over and above ‘objectively’ correct doctrine is immediately followed by a discussion of Socrates, specifically his attitude towards the immortality of the soul. Climacus’ point is that although Socrates ‘poses the question objectively’, what matters is that: ‘He stakes his whole life on this “if”; he dares to die, and with the passion of the infinite he has so ordered his whole life that it might be acceptable – *if* there is an immortality’.²⁵ In other words, Socrates lives his life on the basis of his *faith* that the soul is immortal.

In his *Postscript* discussion, then, Climacus seems to be doing precisely what Kosch infers from the *Fragments* as illegitimate: illustrating faith by the example of one who possessed it. Of course, this is not Christian faith - but then neither is Abraham’s. The question then is this: why should we take the *Fragments* as key to determining *Fear and Trembling*’s message when its *Postscript* does not practice what Kosch takes the *Fragments* (and, indirectly, *Fear and Trembling*) to preach?

¹⁹ Though the *Postscript* discusses other ‘subjective thinkers’ (Lessing, for instance), it has been noted that even in the chapter ostensibly devoted to Lessing, Climacus refers more often to Socrates. See Rubenstein 2001: 442, cited in Howland 2006: 193.

²⁰ Howland 2006: 192.

²¹ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 107.

²² Religiousness A is, in brief, a worldview characterised by resignation, suffering and guilt in which nevertheless the ‘absolute paradox’ of the incarnation plays no role.

²³ Howland 2006: 198.

²⁴ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 168.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

IIIb - There's understanding and there's understanding

Second, let us turn to Climacus' distinction between understanding 'what Christianity is' and understanding 'what it is to be a Christian'.²⁶ Climacus raises this in the context of his concern about the dangers of turning Christianity into 'a kind of philosophical theory'.²⁷ Since Christianity is an 'existence-communication'²⁸ and 'becoming a Christian is what is difficult'²⁹ then (beyond a certain point) 'wanting to understand it is a cunning evasion that wants to shirk the task'.³⁰ The context makes clear that the kind of understanding Climacus is here criticizing is the kind of detached intellectual reflection in which the thinker, rather than relating the 'existence-communication' to his own life, endlessly defers and thus evades the demand Christianity makes on him. But Climacus is quite clear that one can understand 'what Christianity is' on an intellectual level ('the objective question about the truth of Christianity'³¹) without being existentially committed to its claims: indeed, Kierkegaard's repeated contrast between faith and 'offence' would only seem to make sense on the assumption that one must be able to have some understanding of what Christianity claims in order to be able to reject it. Hence Climacus' conclusion that 'one can know what Christianity is without being a Christian'³² but that one cannot 'know what it is to be a Christian without being one'.³³

What is said here of Christianity in particular, I suggest, applies also to faith in general. Here we clearly see another sense in which Kosch's claim that 'faith cannot be learned from another human being' is ambiguous. Is she claiming that 'what faith is' cannot be learned from another human being, or that 'what it is to have faith' cannot be so learned? The distinction in *Postscript* suggests that a person could gain a provisional, outsider's understanding of faith (perhaps, after the fashion of Hegelianism, on a conceptual level) while yet falling short of understanding on a phenomenological level what it is to have faith. In the Preface to *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes claims: 'Even if someone were able to transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that he has comprehended faith, comprehended how he entered into it or how it entered into him.'³⁴ What then is Johannes ultimately claiming when he says that he cannot 'understand' Abraham? There seems good reason to read him as denying just the phenomenological understanding: his repeated attempts to think himself inside Abraham's head seem ultimately to end up in a failure to grasp the phenomenology of Abraham's specific position. Yet this failure is not inconsistent with the relative confidence he seems to have in drawing such conceptual distinctions as that between faith and infinite

²⁶ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 322.

²⁷ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 321.

²⁸ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 322n.

²⁹ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 322, my emphasis.

³⁰ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 322n.

³¹ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 321.

³² Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 322.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kierkegaard 1901-6: III 59.

resignation; faith and tragic heroism; and so on. Once we consider Climacus' distinction between these two levels of understanding, we can see that there is no performative contradiction here.

When we pay attention to his *Postscript* as well as his *Fragments*, then, we see that Climacus is committed to a view according to which there are limits to the degree of understanding of a 'higher' existence-sphere possible from outside it. And Johannes de Silentio, as every reader notes, claims to be 'outside' faith. But exemplars or examples of faith can still have a distinct, legitimate purpose even to such a person: a person who lacks 'the condition' but who is conscientiously trying to understand faith. According to Martha Nussbaum and others, imaginative engagement with literary characters can play a distinctive role in a person's ethical development.³⁵ For someone like Johannes, a similar role is played by imaginative engagement with figures, such as Abraham, in biblical narratives. I shall elaborate on this claim in the next section.

IV – Exemplars without 'the condition': a partial defence of Johannes de Silentio

At the end of section II above, I noted a tradition of interpretation (with which Kosch's overlaps) in which Johannes is accused of misrepresenting the biblical Abraham, of creating a fictional character of his own invention some way removed from the biblical figure. Several critics have suggested that it is in this respect that we are supposed to find Johannes an unreliable narrator; that his fixation upon Abraham's inaccessible interiority, in Daniel Conway's words, 'diverts our attention (and his own) from the pressing question of *his own* interiority'.³⁶ In other words, Johannes embodies with respect to faith precisely the kind of evasion discussed in section IIIb above. I have argued elsewhere that this charge against him is unfair.³⁷ Since Kosch too seems to consider Johannes' confusion to be crucial to the hidden message of *Fear and Trembling*, let me briefly outline that argument here.

One of the most forceful statements of this charge is made by Andrew Cross, who draws on a distinction made by Anti-Climacus in *Practice in Christianity* concerning the difference between ethically impotent 'admiration' of an exemplar (think of 'hero-worship' that does not issue in action) and the mode of 'imitation' in which the exemplar is 'assimilated into' one or taken 'as one takes medicine'.³⁸ On Anti-Climacus' view, it seems that anything less than immediate emulation of an exemplar should be condemned as merely ethically impotent 'admiration'. And Cross charges Johannes with embodying precisely this sort of impotent admiration.

But this charge is unfair. In his continual telling and retelling of the Abraham story in order better to understand his paradigmatic exemplar of faith, Johannes is not merely a detached admirer, but a highly *engaged* observer, who has what Kierkegaard himself describes and commends as a

³⁵ See especially Nussbaum 1990.

³⁶ Conway 2002: 101.

³⁷ See Lippitt 2003: chapter 7.

³⁸ Kierkegaard 1901-6: XII 222.

‘passionate concentration’.³⁹ I suggest that it is crucial to note that there is an important middle ground between admiration and imitation: something like the Aristotelian ‘perception’ and attention discussed by Nussbaum in her work on the ethical salience of literature. If Nussbaum is right that an essential element of ethics is developing the right kind of highly attuned perception available to us through sustained attention to great literature, then (transferring this thought to a religious context) the kind of imaginative engagement with a biblical narrative in which Johannes engages can have an ethical and religious value even if it falls short of direct ‘imitation’. Note that this exercise of imagination can legitimately take the form that Johannes’ investigation takes: detailed attention to the particularities of Abraham’s situation. A significant aspect of Johannes’ method throughout *Fear and Trembling* involves contrasting Abraham’s apparently forthcoming loss of his son with superficially similar instances of such loss (for instance, the fact that Abraham is – unlike Agamemnon, for example - called upon to make the sacrifice himself.⁴⁰) This results from Johannes’ commitment to the idea that it is rare to find someone who ‘can tell what happened as it deserves to be told’.⁴¹ ‘Telling it as it deserves to be told’, I take it, includes not conflating it with superficially similar stories. This ‘attention to the particular’ continues throughout the book, and underpins Johannes’ repeated attempts to get closer to understanding Abraham by comparisons with figures who might at first sight be analogous, but according to Johannes turn out on closer inspection not to be: the knight of infinite resignation; the tragic hero; and the instances of aesthetic rather than religious concealment. We might even suggest that, on Kierkegaard’s view, Johannes’ exercise of the imagination brings one as close as one can get to understanding faith without ‘the condition’.

What supports this view? Jamie Ferreira’s much admired work on imagination and will in Kierkegaardian faith⁴² offers a clue, I suggest, as to what useful work Johannes’ grappling with Abraham might be doing. Ferreira argues that though Kierkegaard does not believe that religious beliefs can be directly willed, the will does play an important role in his thought; Kierkegaard’s is not a position according to which ‘the condition’ is given by an utterly mysterious, ‘magical’ grace. Ferreira presents religious transitions on the model of *Gestalt* shifts, but she compares such transitions to an explosive which does not explode gradually by degrees, but only once a critical threshold has been reached. Though the explosion then occurs suddenly, this is only because of the gradual increase of heat.⁴³ Similarly, on Ferreira’s view, the qualitative shift of a person’s ‘transforming vision’ (such as a religious conversion) may come about as a result of years of reflection, deliberation, prayer, etc. The point here is that the kind of imaginative engagement with a paradigmatic exemplar of faith in which Johannes engages is a perfectly legitimate part of such reflection.

³⁹ Kierkegaard, JP 3: 3130.

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard 1901-6: III 74.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ferreira 1991.

⁴³ Ferreira 1991: 35-6.

However, that reflection need not take the immediately ‘self-concentrated’ form of Anti-Climacian ‘imitation’, in which I ‘think about myself, simply and solely ... think about myself’.⁴⁴ It is significant for Nussbaum that the engagement of our emotional and imaginative faculties with great narratives takes place outside our practical engagement in our own lives. This is significant because such practical engagement can give rise to certain major ‘sources of distortion that frequently impede our personal jealousies or angers or ... the sometimes blinding violence of our loves’.⁴⁵ Such sources of distortion are ‘obstacles to correct vision’.⁴⁶ Engagement with great literature enables us to avoid them, and thus we find and experience ‘love without possessiveness, attention without bias, involvement without panic’.⁴⁷ And this, for Nussbaum, is itself an ethically valuable form of experience.

Note that Kierkegaard himself expresses a similar view in *Two Ages*. For literary ‘persuasion’ to be possible, he claims, we need ‘the inviting intimacy of the cozy inner sanctum from which heated emotions and critical, dangerous decisions and extreme exertions are excluded’.⁴⁸ David Gouwens, citing Martin Thust, glosses this as follows: ‘Kierkegaard understands the virtue of literature to be that it operates first to lead one away from oneself: the aesthetic distancing functions positively as a mirror of possibilities ... And this objectivity is preparatory to a possible return to concrete actuality in subjective passion’.⁴⁹ In other words, for Kierkegaard, not all engaged reflection short of immediate ‘imitation’ is culpable evasion.

Johannes’ ultimate failure fully to ‘understand’ Abraham shows that the will alone cannot provide ‘the condition’: cannot bring about faith. But this does not show that reflection on exemplars of faith of the kind in which Johannes engages is either illegitimate or totally fruitless.

V – *Fear and Trembling*’s hidden Christianity

Yet what justifies taking Abraham in particular as exemplary? Kosch questions why Kierkegaard’s audience ought to accept that commitment to a religious (she presumably here means Christian-religious) life commits them to taking faith as more demanding than ‘Sunday-morning Christians’ (p. 3) take it to be in the light of the alternative accounts of Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher and so on, according to which Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac is ‘an aberration’. This, I have argued, is less of a puzzle than she makes it. If Kierkegaard’s project is to explicate what Climacus calls ‘old-fashioned orthodoxy in its rightful severity’,⁵⁰ then Johannes is taking Abraham as

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard 1901-6: XII 221.

⁴⁵ Nussbaum 1990: 48.

⁴⁶ Nussbaum 1990: 162.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VIII 18.

⁴⁹ Gouwens 1982: 358-9, citing Thust (1931) *Søren Kierkegaard: Der Dichter des Religioesen*, Munchen: CH Beckshe Verlagsbuchhandlung.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 234n.

exemplary simply because this is what scripture, which he takes to be authoritative, does. This assumption generates precisely the puzzle that Johannes faces up to: *given* that Abraham is an exemplar of faith, what does Abraham show us about that faith? And what he shows us is, *prima facie*, far more troubling than the ‘Sunday-morning Christians’ like to admit to themselves. Unless, that is, the Abraham story has a different message entirely. What, then, is the book’s hidden message, if it is not the one for which Kosch has argued?

In the book already cited, I have offered an overview of various alternative attempts to explain the ‘hidden message’ of the text.⁵¹ In the space that remains, let me give a brief account of what strikes me as the most likely intended meaning of this message, given the Pauline and Lutheran tradition to which Kierkegaard belonged. As noted, Abraham holds a special status within the Christian tradition as the paradigm of righteousness as well as faith. Allied with Kierkegaard’s own Christian commitments, it is therefore no surprise that several commentators – amongst them Louis Mackey, Ronald M. Green and Stephen Mulhall - have seen in *Fear and Trembling* a distinctly Christian message.⁵² On this view, the book is really about Christian teachings on sin, grace, forgiveness and salvation. This claim, which is made in slightly different ways and in very varying degrees of detail by different commentators, belongs within the anagogical tradition of seeing the Old Testament as foreshadowing themes in the New. It takes seriously the explicit use of the phrase ‘fear and trembling’ in the context of a discussion of Christian salvation in Philippians 2: 12-13. In terms of Kosch’s divisions, such a reading could be classified as:

Option 3b. Abraham’s and Johannes’ ignorance. There is something about Abraham’s situation that Abraham *himself* cannot understand and so cannot explain. Neither can Johannes, but the reader sufficiently clued into the anagogical tradition of reading (and to Kierkegaardian devices of indirect communication) can.⁵³

(Note that on this reading, the problem of Kosch’s section 3 – How does Johannes know what Abraham doesn’t? – does not emerge.)

Though there is no space to go into the full details of such readings here, we can draw out certain key features.⁵⁴ The first and most obvious point on this reading is the significance of the fact that Isaac is Abraham’s *son*. This foreshadows the Christian atonement, in which God the Father is prepared to sacrifice God the Son to redeem humanity. Hence according to this reading the central indirect message of *Fear and Trembling* is as follows. God transcends the ordinary standards of the

⁵¹ Lippitt 2003: especially chapter 6.

⁵² See Mackey 1972; Green 1998; Mulhall 2001.

⁵³ Not all commentators in this interpretative tradition would endorse this claim. Stephen Mulhall, for instance, holds that Johannes is in on the game. Notwithstanding my use of Mulhall in what follows below, I am unconvinced on this point: for the disagreement, see Lippitt 2003: 202-205.

⁵⁴ The following paragraphs draw on my earlier discussion of this in Lippitt 2003.

ethical - what, as sinners, we *deserve* - and through making both a 'teleological suspension of the ethical' and a sacrifice of God the Son, redeems humanity. A 'natural' sense of justice would suggest that, if humanity is in a state of sin, then we do not *deserve* redemption. But just as on a more straightforward reading Abraham teleologically suspends the ethical, so by this analogy God can teleologically suspend a natural sense of justice (read: 'the ethical') in service of a higher *telos*: his love for humanity.

Note that on such an interpretation, the teleological suspension of the ethical that troubles Johannes and most readers – Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac – is not the teleological suspension of the ethical that really matters. This is the 'hidden message' that Johannes misses.

The above has an important implication for the believer's relation to the demands of the ethical, since living up to the demands of the moral law is no longer the primary criterion for self-acceptance. C. Stephen Evans describes this as 'morality in a new key', in which one is motivated by 'grateful expression of a self that has been received as a gift'.⁵⁵ (In this sense, it fits with a central theme in *Fear and Trembling*, that of 'getting Isaac back' under a new mode of valuation.) One obvious objection might be that on such a reading the 'anguish' of Abraham that Johannes repeatedly stresses drops out of the picture. But this is too hasty. If Abraham stands for God the Father, yet Abraham's anguish is central to the story, this actually highlights a second key feature of the Christian reading. Abraham's (read: God the Father's) anguish draws attention to the Christian claim that God the Father *suffers* along with his creation: a view thought by many to be part of any adequate answer to the problem of evil.

Proponents of a Christian reading of *Fear and Trembling* have also made much of the gnomic mention of sin in Problema III's discussion of Agnete and the merman.⁵⁶ Such commentators take this – rather than the question of 'what Abraham couldn't say' – as the key to the riddle of the text. Kosch doesn't discuss this, and though she mentions one of Climacus' criticisms of *Fear and Trembling* in the *Postscript*, she does not add the following important aspect of Climacus' review of the earlier text:

'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 continued endeavour to attain 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.'⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Evans 1993: 26.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard 1901-6: III 145-6.

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 226.

The echoes of the Christian reading's focus are clear. This 'state exactly opposite to what the ethical requires' is sin, which Climacus claims to be 'the crucial point of departure for the religious existence'.⁵⁸ Moreover, sin 'is not a factor within another order of things, but is itself the beginning of the religious order of things'.⁵⁹ This echoes the central Kierkegaardian idea that an ethic with sin (and forgiveness) at its heart is a radical break with ethics as otherwise conceived.

Stephen Mulhall provides a particularly intriguing case for a Christian reading.⁶⁰ Mulhall argues that Abraham's words, when he says 'God will provide a lamb for the burnt offering', have 'a prophetic dimension ... of which he is oblivious'.⁶¹ Since God actually provides a ram rather than a lamb, Abraham's prediction turns out to be literally false, but prophetically true, since on the Christian reading, God eventually provides Christ, the 'Lamb of God'.⁶² Relatedly,

'Isaac's unquestioning submission to his father's will (his carrying of the wood of his own immolation to the place of sacrifice) prefigures Christ's submission to his own Father. In this sense, Isaac's receptive passivity represents the maturation of Abraham's activist conception of faith – a transition from an understanding of God as demanding the sacrifice of what is ours to an understanding of God as demanding the sacrifice of the self'.⁶³

Mulhall also has an interesting gloss on how the Christian reading affects the question of what the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' means:

'If the allegorical or analogical reading of Abraham's ordeal as a prefiguration of Christ's Atonement is correct, then we must reject the idea that God could conceivably require a form of worship that involves murder; for the maturation of faith that the ordeal symbolizes is precisely a shift towards a conception of God as willing to shed his own blood rather than eager to spill the blood of others – as concerned not only to transcend the primitive idea of human sacrifice by substituting a ram for Isaac, but also to transcend the idea of sacrificing one's possessions to God in favour of an idea of sacrificing oneself (the act and attitude by means of which one incarnates God by imitating his essential self-sacrificial nature).'⁶⁴

Thus faith requires not so much the *violation* of ethical duty but – as we have been suggesting - its *transformation*. Mulhall roots this in the text by noting Johannes' remarks on the importance of the

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard 1901-6: VII 227.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Mulhall 2001: 354-88.

⁶¹ Mulhall 2001: 379.

⁶² John 1: 29.

⁶³ Mulhall 2001: 379-80. Tertullian makes this point about the significance of Isaac's carrying the wood: 'Isaac when delivered up by his father for sacrifice, himself carried the wood ... and did at that early date set forth the death of Christ, who when surrendered as a victim by his Father carried the wood of his own passion' (Tertullian 1972: 3.18, 225, cited in Lee 2000: 383).

⁶⁴ Mulhall 2001: 383.

claim that Abraham *loves* Isaac ‘with his whole soul’. Johannes claims that if at the point of sacrifice Abraham hates Isaac, then

‘he can rest assured that God does not demand this of him; for Cain and Abraham are not identical. He must love Isaac with his whole soul. Since God claims Isaac, he [Abraham] must if possible love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him’.⁶⁵

That is, he can only genuinely give Isaac up – sacrifice him – if he genuinely considers him to be the most terrible loss. Mulhall reads this passage as saying that ‘a voice in one’s head inciting one to kill one’s son can only be the voice of God if one’s love for one’s son is perfect’.⁶⁶ Any impurity in ‘one’s attachment to the Isaac in one’s life’⁶⁷ make one a Cain rather than an Abraham, ‘revealing the voice in one’s head as an evil demon’.⁶⁸ All this means that if Isaac represents the demands of the ethical, then ‘only an ethically perfect being ... could ever be in a position to judge that an impulse to suspend the demands of the ethical might be the manifestation of a divine command’.⁶⁹ But who meets this criterion? This question leads Mulhall into his own discussion of Agnete and the merman and the sin passage, in which he points out that if we think of ourselves in terms of sin, then ‘the idea of ethical perfection is utterly lost’: repentance for our sin cannot ‘entirely eradica[t]e the stain of past wrongdoing because even the smallest past misdemeanour reveals our absolute difference from Absolute Goodness, and hence our inability to save ourselves by our own powers’.⁷⁰ For salvation to be possible at all, then, divine grace is necessary. And the ‘ethically perfect being’ who alone is able suspend the ethical is God himself.

So we see here in more detail how, on this reading, the real ‘hidden message’ of the teleological suspension of the ethical is to make space for a conception of the ethical that includes grace:

‘Acknowledging our sinfulness means acknowledging our inability to live up to the demands of the ethical realm; acknowledging Christ means acknowledging that those demands must nevertheless be met, with help from a power greater than our own’.⁷¹

Finally, note one especially important feature of Mulhall’s version of the Christian reading. One criticism of readings of *Fear and Trembling* that see it simply as endorsing a divine command ethics is that if what matters is that God’s word should take precedence over ‘the ethical’, there seems no obvious reason why Abraham should not have to go through with sacrificing Isaac. In other words,

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard 1901-6: III 122.

⁶⁶ Mulhall 2001: 384.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Mulhall 2001: 384-5.

⁷⁰ Mulhall 2001: 386.

⁷¹ Ibid.

such readings leave mysterious the significance of God's substituting the ram and 'calling off' the sacrifice. But Mulhall's version of the Christian reading (unlike some others) clearly explains the significance of this. As we saw, Mulhall claims that essential to the Christian vision is a move away from one picture of sacrifice and towards an alternative. Gone is the idea that one could legitimately view another human being as a possession that one could sacrifice to God. And this is replaced with the idea that the sacrifice God requires is a sacrifice of one's self: the idea of 'dying to the self' that plays so central a role in Kierkegaard's religious thought.⁷² The 'calling off' the 'blood' sacrifice of Isaac, allied to Abraham's realisation that he 'gets Isaac back' under a new mode of valuation - not as his property, but as a 'gift' that is not to be viewed as a possession - is meant, on this view, to draw the astute reader's attention to this crucial shift. The 'hidden message' of *Fear and Trembling* is another manifestation of the 'old fashioned orthodoxy' so close to Kierkegaard's heart.

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⁷² Consider, for example, the centrality of the notion of 'self-denial' in Kierkegaard's religious writings. For a detailed recent treatment of this part of the authorship, see Walsh 2004.

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