

THE NEW KNIGHT OF FAITH: PACIFYING RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR & TREMBLING*

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In Soren Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work, *Fear and Trembling*, the poet Johannes de Silentio recalls the story of Abraham, which, as he observes "is remarkable in that it is always glorious no matter however poorly it is understood"²¹ That philosophers and theologians alike have written about and struggled with this story is a testament to the truth of de Silentio's claim, as he adds, "there is no dearth of keen minds and careful scholars who have found analogies to it."²² The story of Abraham and Isaac continues to raise a multitude of philosophical, religious and ethical questions. One of these questions is: Had Abraham been unethical? In this paper, I will first delineate Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author's response to this question in *Fear & Trembling*. In the second and final section I will then delineate my own view, which I have labeled The New Knight of Faith.

I. JOHANNES DE SILENTIO IN *FEAR AND TREMBLING*

Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling* is Johannes de Silentio, a poet who found the object of his heart's desire in the story of Abraham, and "roams about to every man's door with his song and speech so that all may admire the hero as he does"²³ The poet, de Silentio admits, cannot do what the hero has done, but instead can only admire, love and delight in him. In his *Eulogy on Abraham*, de Silentio claims that Abraham is the greatest of all, for "he who struggled with God was the greatest of all."²⁴ And yet as de Silentio exalts Abraham as the greatest of all, he confesses that he does not understand him. When thinking about the content of Abraham's life he becomes paralyzed, repelled, and shattered by the paradox therein.

In this section I will outline de Silentio's perspective on that paradox, giving attention to his notions of infinite resignation, faith, and finally the knight of faith. In the final analysis I will maintain that de Silentio's response would be: Yes, Abraham had been unethical, and yet, at the same time, Abraham had also not been unethical.

If after receiving God's command Abraham had counted Isaac as lost, and simply

resigned himself to his task without joy or belief that he might get Isaac back, then, de Silentio claims, Abraham would have remained in the stage of infinite resignation. Abraham might still have acknowledged that God is love, and in fact, continued to love God faithfully. But in this world of time, during that journey to Mount Moriah with “sorrow before him and Isaac beside him.”⁷⁵ there would have been silence between Abraham and God, for though Abraham was being obedient he would have, at the same time, lacked faith. Abraham might have placed his hope for some blessing in the future life, but on the tedious, dusty journey up the mountain, there was no hope, for Isaac was already dead. Abraham would have been alone in silence, for communication with God was no longer possible. Abraham would have been reflecting upon his own loss, and for this reason, would not have had faith. For as de Silentio notes, “he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself; [but] he who loves God in faith reflects upon God.”⁷⁶ In this manner, infinite resignation is a substitute for faith, for there is peace and rest, even in the pain of infinite resignation. That peace and rest is gained by leaning inward upon oneself in order to embrace the possibility of the spiritual. “Spiritually speaking, everything is possible, but in the finite world there is much that is not possible.”⁷⁷ Infinite resignation, then, is a turning inward away from the external world, and in doing so, being sufficient to oneself. Rather than rely upon God to reconcile the impossible with the possible within the three-day journey to Moriah, in this stage Abraham would have relied upon himself, turning inward towards a reconciliation of the impossible with the possible within the spiritual realm of eternity. In this manner the impossible becomes possible only when divorced from this world of time.

In this stage Abraham would not have entertained the possibility of the impossible, that is, that he might get Isaac back in *this* world of time. And in doing so Abraham would renounce Isaac, for “the knight [of infinite resignation] . . . makes this impossibility possible by expressing it spiritually, but he expresses it spiritually by renouncing it.”⁷⁸ And if Isaac, or the world of time is renounced and lost, what is it that is gained by the movement of infinite resignation? What is gained by the act of resignation is eternal consciousness, which is love for God. Recall that love for God does not require faith. “This movement I make all by myself, and what I gain thereby is my eternal consciousness in harmony with my love for the eternal being.”⁷⁹ And yet in the process of infinite resignation where Abraham would have gained his eternal consciousness, he would have renounced Isaac and lost his son before the youth was even dead. If Abraham had remained in the stage of infinite resignation, de Silentio confesses that he would have no use for the venerable patriarch. But de Silentio claims that Abraham goes further than infinite resignation, and comes to faith.

In the stage of infinite resignation Abraham would have lost Isaac even before his son was dead. However, by faith Abraham does not renounce Isaac, but instead gets his son back. Nothing is renounced by faith but everything is received, including the possibility of the impossible. Here de Silentio reminds his reader of the parable of the mustard seed, for even if one has faith as small as a mustard seed one can move mountains, or perhaps more appropriately, if one is Abraham, one can move towards a certain mountain with obedience and joy.

In contrast to the movement of infinite resignation, faith is a turning outward to

God and the possibility *within* the world of time, rather than self. Faith is a reliance upon God's sufficiency versus the sufficiency of my eternal consciousness. For Abraham, faith is at once giving up his son and getting him back. And therein lies the paradox of faith—that by faith Abraham will get Isaac back, by virtue of the paradox. In this manner Abraham is the heir to the finite, on a happy pilgrimage to Moriah, rather than feeling like a stranger in a foreign land. Faith, then, according to de Silentio is the paradox of existence.¹⁰ It is a paradox that makes a murder into a holy act. It is a paradox that gives Isaac back to Abraham. It is a paradox that escapes the grasp of mortal thoughts, for faith begins precisely where thought stops.¹¹

The paradox of faith for Abraham was that he became higher than the universal ethic “do not kill,” and was justified before it, as superior to it, in absolute relation to God. In obedience to God's command, that is, in relation to the absolute, Abraham suspended the ethical principle “do not kill” and in that moment became isolated from and superior to it. He did this for the sake of God, who demanded proof of his faith, and he did it for his own sake, to provide that proof. In this unmediated isolation Abraham is unique from others who sacrificed their children for the sake of the gods, like Agamemnon. For Agamemnon offered his sacrifice in the face of a nation, heroically overcoming his agony and thus remaining within the ethical. Abraham, however, offered Isaac in the face of no admiration, not to save a nation or satiate angry gods, in fact, he offered Isaac in secrecy and silence. Agamemnon achieved greatness by moral virtue, while Abraham achieved greatness by a personal virtue, that is, by virtue of the absurd, or paradoxical. Abraham transgressed the ethical altogether, and yet, by virtue of the absurd, or paradox of faith, got it back, just like Isaac. What is absurd about the paradox of faith is that Abraham believes that the impossible is possible, that is, by losing Isaac he will gain Isaac. In this manner “that which is suspended is not relinquished but is preserved in the higher, which is its *telos*.”¹² The ethical, then, like Isaac, is suspended but not relinquished or lost, but instead preserved and gotten back.

How then would de Silentio respond to the question whether Abraham had been unethical? First, recall that the suspension of the ethical is itself an unethical act. Now, consider de Silentio's words, “The story of Abraham contains, then, a teleological suspension of the ethical.”¹³ From this it is apparent that de Silentio's response would be: Yes, Abraham had been unethical. And yet, there is more to his response. For in that same moment de Silentio would claim that Abraham had *not* been unethical, which seems an immediate contradiction. Hence the paradox of faith—by faith Abraham became higher than the ethical, transgressing the ethical. For one to assert that de Silentio would respond otherwise is to deny the paradox of faith. If de Silentio's only response would have been: No, Abraham had not been unethical, then the paradox of faith is no longer a paradox. The absurdity of the paradox of faith relies upon de Silentio's simultaneous claim that Abraham had and had not been unethical.

Can Abraham be praised for his faith in spite of the fact that he had been unethical? Could there have been some overriding reason for Abraham to ignore his paternal duty to Isaac? Recall that de Silentio claimed that Abraham, who had struggled with God, was the greatest of all. And yet Abraham has been judged unethical. How can de Silentio reconcile these opposing points without destroying the paradox of faith? He writes, “The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder

Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless.”¹⁴ Recall that Abraham became higher than the universal, not by his own strength, but by his absolute relation to the absolute. This relation to the absolute is, according to de Silentio, Abraham’s duty to God, for “every duty is essentially duty to God.”¹⁵ For example, the ethical duty to love one’s neighbor is a duty by its being traced back to its origin, God, and yet it is the neighbor with whom one enters into relationship.

Similarly, Abraham’s duty, or ethical relation to Isaac can be traced back to his duty, or ethical relation to God, even though his paternal relationship is with Isaac. What makes the story of Abraham unique in de Silentio’s mind is that “this ethical relation [the universal] is reduced to the relative [or particular] in contradistinction to the absolute relation to God.”¹⁶ Abraham obeyed God’s command for God’s sake and for his own sake. Thus, Abraham is the knight of faith. His absolute duty led him to do what ethics forbid. He was praised for this and yet, “the reality of his act is that by which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer.”¹⁷ Here is the paradox of faith.

Here stands the knight of faith on his lonesome trail, steep and narrow, like Abraham standing over Isaac, knife and fire in hand, at once a saint and sinner. Here is the tension, the anxiety of paradoxical faith that characterizes de Silentio’s knight of faith. Here is the solitary, single individual without any connections or complications, sleepless in his ordeal, his test. The knight of faith is being tested, simply and solely by himself, and therein lies the dreadfulness, the fear and trembling. This solitary pain is assurance to the knight of faith, for if he were able to instruct others in it, or be consoled by an understanding neighbor then his would not be paradoxical faith. Here stands the sleepless knight of faith, tested every moment, ever in danger of returning to the solace of universal. Here stands the knight of faith—here stands Abraham.

II. THE NEW KNIGHT OF FAITH

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, to consider and examine possible responses to the question of whether Abraham had been unethical. Second, to apply that examination to modern ethical, religious questions. To this end I am in agreement with Johannes de Silentio when he insisted, “...What is the value of going to the trouble of remembering the past [the story of Abraham] which cannot become a present.”¹⁸

This modern world produces cases similar to the story of Abraham. For example, one thinks of the Islamic terrorists who crashed planes into the World Trade Center on 9/11, killing themselves and a multitude of innocent people. They claimed to be doing the will of God and believed they would be rewarded for obedience to the divine will. Or, consider the man who shot and killed a doctor that regularly performed abortions. He claimed God told him to do it, to protect the innocent who could not protect themselves, thus preventing more abortions. Or consider Andrea Yates, who killed her three young children. Before actually killing them she claims to have struggled with what she believed were God’s repeated commands to kill her children. She admits to having finally submitted to what she perceived as the divine will of God. In each of these sample cases religious faith plays an integral role; though what role exactly remains

to be seen.

If one cares about the integrity of religious faith, these sample cases will not easily be dismissed, if at all. And yet many who would claim to care about the integrity of religious faith too often, and too easily dismiss sample cases like these. It is easier somehow to blame these sample cases on fanaticism, delusion, or mental illness. Many who claim to care about the integrity of religious faith refuse to seriously entertain the possibility that God actually told Andrea Yates to kill her children. And, yet these same people take seriously the story of Abraham.

In their defense one might point out that a difference between the sample cases and the story of Abraham is that Abraham was prevented from killing Isaac, whereas the others were not. Here is a key difference, and valid reason enough to dismiss the sample cases while still taking seriously the story of Abraham. Recall, however, that within a the wider biblical context outlined earlier in the paper, there were instances of God commanding people to kill and not preventing them from committing the act. If this be the case, then whether or not Abraham or Andrea Yates actually killed their children is irrelevant in discerning whether God told them to or not. And yet even if this be the case, why do so many people who claim to care about the integrity of religious faith recoil at the sample cases and not the story of Abraham? This appeal to a wider biblical context, then, will not serve the greater purpose of reconciling our *desire* on the one hand, to dismiss the sample cases, and on the other, to take the story of Abraham seriously.

Here one might point out another difference between the sample cases and the story of Abraham. In the story of Abraham it is taken for granted, with the exception of the Kantian Response, that *it was indeed God* who commanded Abraham to kill Isaac. But there is no such context governing the sample cases, and therefore no certainty as to whether Yates and the others were telling the truth. One simply cannot know that God actually commanded anyone to kill in those sample cases. While this point reveals a key difference between them, it fails to address the central question at the heart of both the sample cases and the story of Abraham. The question raised by all of them is: What should my response be if asked by God to do something unethical? Here is what transports Abraham into the present, and makes his story important. For if one answers, yes then the killers in the sample cases are knights of faith. And if one answers, no, what then can be said for the virtue and integrity of religious faith?

Those who care for the integrity of religious faith, myself included, can no longer say from one side of the mouth, "Abraham's yes, in response to God's command to kill Isaac is praiseworthy" while saying from the other side of the mouth "I cannot believe that God would ask Yates and the others to kill." There is a conflict in saying both. And the latter makes even clearer the contradictory nature of these statements. Most often the response given when considering Andrea Yates is not: I believe God told Yates to kill her children but I cannot believe that God did not prevent her at the last moment. But, why is this not our natural response? Why are we much more likely to say: "I cannot believe God told Yates to kill her children"? Perhaps this conflict of responses reveals our natural moral inclinations, even in lieu of the story of Abraham. How then does the story of Abraham find a practical place in modern religious consciousness, particularly with those who care for the integrity of religious faith? The story of

Abraham is the key to finding an adequate response to the question: What should my response be if asked by God to do something unethical: yes or no?

I reject the response of Johannes de Silentio that praises Abraham as a knight of faith for answering “Yes” to God’s command to kill Isaac. I instead offer another response, where a new knight of faith answers “No.” And in doing so the new knight of faith becomes obedient to the divine will through disobedience, that is, obedience by virtue of disobedience. I will use de Silentio’s knight of faith as a model, while marrying the respective strengths of both the Kantian and Ivan Karamazovian responses. This will, I believe, resolve the conflict between the sample cases and the story of Abraham.

Recall briefly that according to de Silentio, there is an absolute duty to God, and essentially every duty, including those to our fellow humans, are traceable to God, and thus ultimately a duty to God. Furthermore, his model of the knight of faith is that “the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal in absolute relation to the absolute.”¹⁹ And like Abraham, the knight of faith replies “yes” when God commands the unethical, suspending the ethical, and by virtue of the absurd, getting it back.

Now imagine Abraham as the new knight of faith. God commands Abraham to kill Isaac. He thinks to himself, it is unethical to kill Isaac. He loves Isaac, but does not deliberate killing him for this reason, that is, he does not refuse because he loves Isaac more than God. Yet he wonders why God would command something unethical, since what is ethical is traceable back to God. He then entertains the possibility that this might be a test. Perhaps God wants me to refuse to commit an unethical act, Abraham thinks, because it is my absolute duty to God to honor the ethical. But how can I be sure this is a test, and that God wants me to respond in the way I’ve imagined? He decides he cannot be sure of either. He then takes a quick inventory of what he does know. He knows that killing Isaac is unethical. And he knows that he has an absolute duty to God. But in this particular instance, Abraham thinks, God commanded me to kill Isaac and so these two things I know to be true seem to be in paradoxical opposition. He recalls the possibility that this might be a test. And further, he realizes that if he were to refuse God’s command, God could and might reveal that that was what was expected of him all along. If this happened, Abraham thinks, my disobedience in refusing to kill Isaac would be counted as obedience. He realizes that he could suspend his obedience without relinquishing it, and if this ordeal turned out to be a test, he would get back his obedience. And yet, he reminded himself, I cannot be sure this is a test. I cannot be sure my refusal will not be judged a sin, and God punish me accordingly. He then realizes that the only way he will find out is by faith to say “no” to God. The only way to resolve the tension is to refuse the divine will by faith. I will have faith, he reassures himself, that God will make the impossible possible, that God will give back my obedience through my disobedience. He resolves to have faith, rises up and refuses to kill Isaac.

Here stands the new knight of faith on his lonesome trail, steep and narrow, at once a saint and sinner. Here is a passionate tension characterized by paradoxical faith. Here is another solitary, single individual without any connections or complications, sleepless in his ordeal, his temptation. The new knight of faith is being tested too,

simply and solely by himself, and therein lies the dreadfulness, the fear and trembling. This solitary pain is assurance to the new knight of faith, for if he were able to instruct others in it, or be consoled by an understanding neighbor then his would not be paradoxical faith. Here stands the sleepless, new knight of faith, tested every moment, ever in danger of returning to the solace of universal. Here stands the new knight of faith—here stands Abraham again.

What is the difference between de Silentio's knight of faith and the new knight of faith? In many ways they are exactly alike, and in many ways it is as if de Silentio's knight of faith is standing before a mirror. What then is the difference? What enables the new knight of faith to resolve the conflict between the sample cases and the story of Abraham?

Recall that according to de Silentio, there was a teleological suspension of the ethical in the Abraham story, and thus Abraham had been unethical. Even though he was prevented from actually killing Isaac, even though no innocent blood was shed, Abraham had been unethical. Similarly, in the sample cases, Yates and the others claimed God told them to kill, and whether or not they had been prevented, each would have been unethical. Now consider the new knight of faith. His refusal of God's command does not suspend the ethical, and therefore the new knight of faith cannot be judged unethical at any time, because the suspension of the spiritual is not unethical.

Why does the new knight of faith refuse the divine will? The new knight of faith refuses the command of the divine will in favor of the command of the divine will. Here is a new paradox of faith. The new knight of faith is higher than the universal in absolute relation to the absolute. But unlike before, the new knight of faith does not become higher than the universal as ethic, but rather becomes higher than the universal as divine will. And, he becomes higher than the divine will only in relation to the divine will. The knight of faith believes by faith that he should refuse God's unethical command, in order to honor God's ethical command. Here again is the new paradox of faith.

This refusal can only be by faith, for the new knight of faith cannot know he is being tested. By faith he suspends the spiritual, not the ethical, and in doing so, becomes a sinner for a brief time. Recall that one can suspend without relinquishment. The new knight of faith does not refuse in the spirit of Ivan, protesting God's design, but rather refuses in ultimate duty to God's design. Once this is done, two things can happen. Either God can reveal that his ordeal was only a test and praise the knight of faith for his obedience or God can reveal that there was no test, and judge him accordingly. The new knight of faith cannot know the outcome, therein lies the fear and trembling. Yet he has faith that God will make the impossible possible, and that by his disobedience he will be praised for obedience. Make no mistake—the new knight of faith must be judged a sinner. For to judge otherwise would destroy the new paradox of faith. The new knight of faith is at once a sinner and at once a saint, by virtue of the paradox.

The new knight of faith can be, and should be judged a sinner. But he cannot be judged a criminal. Whatever the outcome of his ordeal, whether he is praised and gets his obedience back, or whether he finds that God was not testing him, there will never have been a suspension of the ethical. And if there is no suspension of the ethical, then there will never be a threat of harm to others. In the story of Abraham and in the

sample cases, because there has been a suspension of the ethical, there is the threat of harm to others. Isaac, Yates's children, the doctor, and those in New York on 9/11 were all placed in jeopardy by the suspension of the ethical. However, the only person put in jeopardy by the refusal of the new knight of faith is the new knight of faith himself. If the new knight of faith is wrong, and God was not testing him, he alone will suffer harm. He has put himself in spiritual and possibly physical peril, without endangering others. However, it is vital to note that he does not do this because he would rather see himself sacrificed. He is not saying to God, "take my life instead." As de Silentio observes, Abraham could *not* have offered himself instead of Isaac. The only reason, the absolute reason the new knight of faith refuses the divine will is in relation to the divine will. It is for God's sake that the new knight of faith refuses God. It is to honor God that he dishonors God. It must be clear, that his anxiety, his fear and trembling are his assurance, not his sacrifice.

Abraham was not a new knight of faith. He acted unethically and there appears to be no way in which to reconcile his story fully with a modern moral consciousness. Where does this leave us? One cannot praise Abraham without praising those men who crashed the planes on 9/11. And few seem to be comfortable with this kind of praise. The conflict is between praising knights of faith like Abraham, Yates and the others, and finding some other way to preserve religious faith without being unethical. Hence, the new knight of faith. He is a model for the modern moral consciousness. He preserves the integrity of religious faith by preserving the ethical. He is not a character you find in the Bible, but, I believe he is a character in whom God would be well pleased.

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NOTES

1. De Silentio, Johannes. *Fear and Trembling*, Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983. 28.
2. Ibid. 56.
3. Ibid. 15.
4. Ibid. 16.
5. Ibid. 9.
6. Ibid., 37.
7. Ibid.44.
8. Ibid. 44.
9. Ibid. 48.
10. Ibid. 47.
11. Ibid. 53.
12. Ibid. 54.
13. Ibid. 66.
14. Ibid. 30.
15. Ibid. 68.
16. Ibid. 71.
17. Ibid. 74.