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KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR AND TREMBLING*  
MICHELLE KOSCH AND JOHN LIPPITT

I — MICHELLE KOSCH

WHAT ABRAHAM COULDN'T SAY

The explicit topic of *Fear and Trembling's* third Problema (the longest single section, accounting for a third of the book's total length), the theme of Abraham's silence stands not far in the background in every other section, and its importance is flagged by the pseudonym—Johannes *de silentio*—under which Kierkegaard had the book published. Here I aim to defend an interpretation of the meaning of the third Problema's central claim—that Abraham cannot explain himself, 'cannot speak'—and to argue on its basis for an interpretation of the work as a whole.

*Fear and Trembling* is Kierkegaard's most read, and most elusive, work. It is far from obvious how its various threads are to be drawn together into a coherent picture of the work as a whole.<sup>1</sup> The difficulty of the text is compounded by the fact that Kierkegaard published it under a pseudonym, and with an epigraph suggesting that its intended message to the reader is distinct from its manifest content, something his 'messenger' (the pseudonymous author, perhaps) does not understand.

What seems to be the most common way of reading the book is both philosophically weak and poorly grounded in the text. On this interpretation, it aims to defend the superiority of a religious over an ethical outlook (or over some specific ethical outlook), using the example of Abraham both to point up the difference between these and to identify the limits of ethics (or ethics on a particular account). Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God's command must be justified in some sense, if Abraham is the sort of exemplary figure he is taken to be. Yet it is indefensible on available accounts of ethical duties (as well as on the basis of Abraham's presumed desires). Therefore either (a) the traditional or going interpretation of ethics is

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<sup>1</sup> The most prominent recent interpretations concede from the start that there is no single meaning or picture, no single (or single most important) thing that the work aims to do. See Green (1998), Lippitt (2003).

inadequate and must be revised so that it accommodates Abraham's case, or (b) ethics must be 'teleologically suspended' altogether in favour of a religious account of normativity. There are variations on both alternatives. (a1) Ethics on the wrong account focuses on the moral quality of actions or outcomes and ignores the importance of virtues of character (trust, commitment, courage), and Abraham can show us why that is a mistake.<sup>2</sup> (a2) Ethics on the wrong account focuses on universal rules, whereas in fact many ethically relevant features of any situation will be unique to it (e.g. the personal relationships in which the agent is involved or the particular commitments he has taken up).<sup>3</sup> (b1) Ethics on *any* non-religious account is deficient because of its inability to make sense of individualized duties, without which our practical lives can be neither coherent nor satisfying, and which only a divine source of norms would make possible.<sup>4</sup> (b2) A religious standpoint is superior because it can offer, in addition to normative guidance, both divine assistance and forgiveness of past mistakes, and no secular ethical outlook can make sense of the possibility of (one or both of) these things.<sup>5</sup>

On any such reading, if the book is to avoid assuming what it sets out to prove it must provide an alternative (non-ethical, or non-standard ethical, but also non-religious) justification of Abraham's conduct. But no such justification is ever offered.<sup>6</sup> Abraham's right-

<sup>2</sup> See Evans (1981, pp. 145ff.), Cross (1999, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See Evans (1981, pp. 148ff.).

<sup>4</sup> Adams (1987, p. 448) argues that the individual is in danger of being 'morally fragmented, crushed or immobilized' in cases in which general ethical principles plus non-normative facts about his situation fail 'to write [his] name legibly on any particular task', and that this is a major concern of Kierkegaard's and a major impetus behind his endorsement of religious as opposed to philosophical ethics. Adams acknowledges, though, that the instances of overriding religious duties Kierkegaard discusses (including Abraham's) are cases in which 'universalist' ethics has indeed written the individual's name perfectly legibly on a particular task (e.g. refraining from murdering one's son) and that it is a religious commitment that excuses the individual from what would otherwise unambiguously be required of him.

<sup>5</sup> Quinn (1998, pp. 349–50) invokes R. M. Hare's 'moral gap' ('the gap between the moral demand on us and our natural capacities to live by it') as the motive behind what he sees as Kierkegaard's criticism of secular ethics (in *Fear and Trembling* as well as other works). Arendt (1989, pp. 236–43) argues that in the absence of any possibility of absolution—which ethics on its own cannot provide—guilt for past wrongdoing must become a debilitating psychological burden, leading to a sort of ethical paralysis. For readings along similar lines (some focusing on *Fear and Trembling*, some on other works, but all assuming a unitary account of the limitations of the ethical in Kierkegaard's works), see also Fahrenbach (1968, 1979), Hannay (1982), and Whittaker (1988).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to fitting poorly with the text, all require us to read the book as being almost comically unsuccessful at what it attempts. For a discussion of how such an argument inevitably fails, see Kosch (2006a, pp. 156–60).

eousness is not even categorically asserted; instead we are told that *if* there is no teleological suspension of the ethical, no absolute duty to God, etc., *then* Abraham is lost, we must give him up as an example, must regard him as an ordinary murderer, etc. (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:115–16, 165, and *passim*; 1997–, 4:159, 207, and *passim*).<sup>7</sup>

Taken literally, that conditional states only what a religious believer would have to commit himself to *in order* to take Abraham as a model. This suggests that the intended audience consists of people who already embrace a religious point of view and are already tacitly committed to regarding conduct like Abraham's as religiously justified. It suggests an interpretation on which the book's aim is to show exactly how terrifying the situation of someone who believes he has overriding individual obligations to God can be. The price of faith is renunciation of one's most deeply held desires, violation of moral duty, alienation from family and society, inability to explain oneself to others. The opening passages of the preface and the epilogue support this way of looking at the project. The preface opens with the observation that the present age is one in which, in the world of ideas as in the business world, everything is being sold at 'a bargain price' (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:57; 1997–, 4:101). The epilogue opens with a story in which Dutch spice merchants sink a few cargoes in order to drive up the price of their wares and then asks 'Do we need something similar in the world of the spirit?' (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:166; 1997–, 4:208). The aim of driving up the price of faith—convincing Sunday morning Christians who believe that a religious life is compatible with the bourgeois values they otherwise endorse that faith is not to be had as cheaply as that—is certainly in line with one of Kierkegaard's most urgent and continuing concerns.

I am not alone in thinking that the manifest content of *Fear and Trembling* is essentially this.<sup>8</sup> But that cannot be the whole story, as we can see if we ask why Kierkegaard's audience ought to *accept* that this is what they sign on for when they sign on for a religious life. There are alternative accounts to be found in Kant,<sup>9</sup> Schleiermacher,

<sup>7</sup> In quoting Kierkegaard's works I usually follow the Hong translation (sometimes with minor changes); translations of quotations from journals and papers are my own.

<sup>8</sup> Green (1998, pp. 258ff.) takes this to be the most plausible preliminary reading; see also Evans (1981, p. 143).

<sup>9</sup> Kant, for instance, judged Abraham's action to be irreligious because immoral. See *Conflict of the Faculties* (Kant 1968, 7:63, 7:63n.) and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (Kant 1968, 6:87).

Hegel,<sup>10</sup> and the many other Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment theologians current in the Copenhagen of the time, accounts on which Abraham's sacrifice is *not* a good indicator of the price of faith, but instead an aberration.<sup>11</sup> The account in *Fear and Trembling* is as much an argument for this alternative as its opposite, and so as likely to drive the bourgeois Christian into the arms of Kant et al. as to succeed in driving up the price of faith. In the absence of an overriding antecedent commitment to taking Abraham (indeed, Abraham on this rather idiosyncratic portrayal) as a model of faith, the reader cannot be convinced in this way that its price is higher than he thought.

The epigraph, of course, suggests that whatever the message to the reader is meant to be, it will not be explicit in the book's manifest content, but only suggested by it. In this paper I will offer, as a clue to understanding the underlying message, an interpretation of one of the book's most puzzling claims—that Abraham cannot explain himself, 'cannot speak'. The explicit topic of the third Problema (which is the longest single section, accounting for a third of the book's total length), the theme of Abraham's silence stands not far in the background in every other section, and its importance is flagged by the pseudonym—Johannes *de silentio*—under which the book was published. The importance of this theme has not been overlooked, though the third Problema has received less attention than the first two. In §I, I will reject two candidate interpretations of Abraham's silence; in §II, I will propose and defend a third interpretation. This will provide the basis for an argument, given in §III, that the hidden message is that we must indeed give up Abraham—though not for the reasons that Kant, Hegel, or the typical enlightened Copenhagener would offer.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel argued for limitations on the rights of religious conscience in his *Philosophy of Right* (Hegel 1986, 7:418), suggested in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* that Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac was motivated by a desire to prove to himself the limits of his love for Isaac (Hegel 1986, 1:279), and claimed in the Berlin introduction to his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that the command to sacrifice Isaac cannot be understood by us as the possible command of anything we would recognize as God (Hegel 1986, 20:503). For further discussion of Kant's and Hegel's views on Abraham and their relevance for *Fear and Trembling*, see Kosch (2006b).

<sup>11</sup> Johannes's apparent answer to this challenge—that life would be despair if there were no heroes to admire and no poets to celebrate them—is so bad that it is perhaps uncharitable to take it as intended to provide an answer (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:68–9; 1997–, 4:112–13).

## I

*Silence.*

The knight of faith is assigned solely to himself; he feels the pain of being unable to make himself understandable to others ... (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:128; 1997–, 4:171)

Abraham remains silent—but he cannot speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking. This is the case with Abraham. (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:159; 1997–, 4:201)

Speak he cannot; he speaks no human language ... he speaks a divine language, he speaks in tongues. (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:160; 1997–, 4:202)

Abraham cannot speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything (that is, so it is understandable) ... (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:160; 1997–, 4:202)

Johannes *de silentio* is gripped by the thought that there is something that Abraham cannot say—that there is something determinate that would be an adequate characterization of Abraham's situation, that is specific to his situation (or a very narrow range of situations), that would play some role in justifying his behaviour to others, and that he nonetheless cannot convey. What are we to make of this claim? Two broad lines of interpretation have suggested themselves: either what Abraham cannot say is unsayable by anyone, or it is sayable in principle, but not by him.<sup>12</sup>

On the first interpretation, appeal is made to:

(1) *The inexpressibility of Abraham's situation.* There is something that would make his situation understandable to oth-

<sup>12</sup> I put aside here a third possible line of interpretation, suggested in Taylor (1981, pp. 183 ff.). Although it occurs alongside suggestions that Abraham cannot speak because his personal relation to God is literally inarticulable (an interpretation I will consider—and reject—below), which leaves me uncertain about whether I am correct in attributing it to him, Taylor seems to suggest that explaining himself would be a defilement of the privacy of Abraham's relation with God. In this case it would be strictly untrue that Abraham *cannot* explain himself (i.e., Johannes's characterization would be false), and I do not see any textual evidence for such an interpretation, in *Fear and Trembling* or in the Genesis account (though the Adler manuscript does suggest that the recipient of a revelation might have an ethical (but *not* religious) obligation to keep silent). For these reasons I set this possible interpretation aside.

ers that Abraham cannot communicate because it is not linguistically expressible.

Taking this first option would appear to have brought an interpreter to the end of his task, since if what Abraham cannot say is unsayable, then the interpreter cannot say it either. This is true even if the unsayable thing is some feeling or some practical attitude. These are either in principle describable or they are not. If they are, then Abraham has something to say after all; and if they are not, then the interpreter must remain as mute with respect to them as Abraham himself. (More than that, if what Abraham cannot say is unsayable, then there *can be* nothing—nothing *determinate*—that he cannot say; successfully individuating the specific thing he cannot say would amount to saying it.<sup>13</sup>) In this, its only consistent form, the first alternative has not been popular—though more loquacious forms have been.

The temptation to say what it is that Abraham could not has been quite strong. Curiously, Johannes *de silentio* himself succumbs to it; some of the passages in the third Problema that describe Abraham's inability to convey his situation end with a concise description of that very situation: that it is an ordeal, an ordeal in which both his love for Isaac and his sense of his ethical duty toward Isaac act as temptations to fail in a divinely set task.

He can say everything, but one thing he cannot say, and if he cannot say that—that is, say it in such a way that the other understands it—then he is not speaking. ... Abraham can describe his love for Isaac in the most beautiful words to be found in any language. But this is not what is on his mind; it is something deeper, that he is going to sacrifice him because it is an ordeal. No one can understand the latter, and thus everyone can only misunderstand the former. (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:159; 1997-, 4:201)

Abraham cannot speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything (that is, so it is understandable): that it is an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation. (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:160; 1997-, 4:202)

<sup>13</sup> Some interpreters have claimed that there is some content that cannot be said but can be shown and that this showing is the aim of Kierkegaard's 'indirect communication'. Conant (1989, 1993) has argued (convincingly, in my view) that the distinction they rely on between 'deep' nonsense and ordinary nonsense cannot be maintained.

Nor does Johannes stop with this brief description. His Abraham is surrounded by a set of meticulously drawn characters meant to mark out the boundaries between faith and resignation (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:89-100; 1997-, 4:133-45), between faith and aesthetic and ethical heroism (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:107-11, 123-9, 158-65; 1997-, 4:151-5, 166-71, 200-7), between faith and sin (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:145-6, 158; 1997-, 4:187-9, 200), between the 'second' immediacy of faith and the 'first' or aesthetic immediacy (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:130; 1997-, 4:172). Abraham is a knight of faith rather than resignation because in renouncing what is most important to him he simultaneously retains his original desire for it, and can receive it back light-heartedly should he have the opportunity. He makes the movement of faith, in which he expects at the same time to get Isaac back, 'by virtue of the absurd' (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:161; 1997-, 4:203). He is a knight of faith rather than a tragic hero because his willingness to sacrifice Isaac is motivated not by a higher ethical demand (e.g. a publicly recognizable collective good), but rather by a purely personal commitment. His silence is that of a knight of faith rather than that of a sinner because it is not motivated by any desire to make things easier on himself or others, nor by pride, contempt, or fear of blame (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:134-5, 146, 151-7, 158; 1997-, 4:176-7, 188, 193-9, 200). It is not the silence of aesthetic immediacy but that of a higher or 'later' immediacy,<sup>14</sup> since Abraham has passed through the ethical stage and so is, presumably, committed to acting for reflectively endorsable reasons.

Johannes displays sufficient confidence in his insight into the structure of Abraham's beliefs and motivations that he is even able to translate them into a sketch of a modern-day version of the knight of faith (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:89-91; 1997-, 4:133-5). He confesses that in years of looking he has 'not found a single authentic instance' of a knight of faith, though for all he knows 'every second person may be such an instance'. But he is able to *imagine* one, and the imagined knight of faith is indistinguishable from the

<sup>14</sup> An 'immediate' individual, for Kierkegaard, is one who fails to order his desires according to (sufficiently) higher-order principles. (Either he does not reflect on which of his desires he would like to be moved by and which he would prefer to suppress, but acts on the strongest occurrent desire, or else he orders his desires according to norms that are taken up unreflectively from his surroundings or his sensible nature.) In claiming that the knight of faith must exemplify a sort of immediacy other than aesthetic immediacy, Johannes claims at least that he has taken on a commitment to acting for reasons he can reflectively endorse.

crowd both in his external appearance and in his desires for worldly things. His figure betrays no 'crack through which the infinite would peek'; he 'belongs entirely to finitude'. He finds pleasure in everything, takes part in everything with an assiduity to be expected in a worldly man who is attached to such things. What distinguishes him is nothing beyond a certain irrationality in the structure of his expectations: he writes nothing off as impossible, and when some desired outcome fails to materialize, he is unperturbed. Like the knight of resignation, he has made the 'movement of infinity' and renounced all finite goods—but then he has 'grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd'.

This account of the inner life of the knight of faith leaves much unclarified, but it does not leave the basics unsaid. Johannes declares himself at several points perfectly able to describe the 'movements' of the knight of faith, simply unable to make them (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III: 87-9; 1997-, 4: 131-3). So it seems that if Abraham cannot explain himself, that is not because he cannot be explained. This suggests that the second line of interpretation—on which what Abraham cannot say is sayable in principle, just not by him—is the one worth pursuing. Note that this second line requires an account of why Johannes (and the interpreter) can say what Abraham could not. There seem to be two ways such an account could go. Appeal could be made to:

- (2) *Abraham's privileged knowledge.* Abraham understands something about his situation that he cannot communicate to his contemporaries (Sarah et al.) because *they* would not be able to understand it (though Johannes, and therefore the reader, can).

Or appeal could be made to:

- (3) *Abraham's ignorance.* There is something about Abraham's situation that Abraham *himself* cannot understand and so cannot explain (though Johannes, and therefore the reader, can).

In both, there is something that we (readers/interpreters) are in a position to understand, but that nevertheless cannot be communicated to those around him by Abraham himself.

Many passages suggest option (2). Abraham knows that his situa-

tion is an ordeal, and that the ethical is a temptation. He has reason to sacrifice Isaac, and he has reason to believe he will get Isaac back, but the force of these reasons is not communicable to those around him. Care must be taken to construe this second option in a way that makes it a genuine alternative to the first. This means that a plausible account must be given of why Abraham's reasons, *while genuine*, are not shared by those around him.

One strategy that will not work involves an appeal to reasons he might have that would be intrinsically private. If something is a reason for an agent with given antecedent beliefs (or beliefs and desires) in given circumstances, then it is a reason for any other agent relevantly similarly situated; any intelligible account of Abraham's reasons must admit this. This is not the only constraint on such an account. By 'reason' what we must have in mind is a justifying reason. We may assume that (for the agent at issue) a justifying reason is also a *pro tanto* motivating reason,<sup>15</sup> but a merely motivating (and not justifying) reason presumably will not do, for then Abraham's actions would be, from the standpoint of the reader, indistinguishable from those of a sinner or a lunatic. We must also assume that commands from God provide justifying reasons that override or always outweigh other reasons for acting—a large assumption, not one Kierkegaard or Johannes anywhere in fact defends, but one that is apparently made, and in any case one that is needed to fill out this interpretation.<sup>16</sup> What we would need, then, is something recognizable by Abraham and by us, but not by Sarah et al., as a reason to think he had in fact received a command from God.

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard's account of religious motivation can be spelled out in ways that put it on either side of the internalism debate. I am inclined to read him as an externalist (receipt of the 'condition' leaves the motivational question open without leaving the normative question open for an individual), but no part of the argument in this paper hangs on that. We need assume only the disjunction of internalism and externalism coupled with the assumption that the agent at issue is motivated to act in accordance with the justifying reasons he has.

<sup>16</sup> How they provide them is not an issue on which an explicit stand seems to me to affect the outcome here, so I will leave the assumption in that very preliminary formulation. Actually, the assumption in this strong form is not strictly required; we could begin instead from the weaker assumption that divine commands provide only *pro tanto* reasons. This would complicate the story, but not in any interesting way. Abraham would in that case need to have sufficient reasons both for thinking he had in fact received a command from God and for taking such commands to outweigh or override other practical reasons (at least in this case). But since one or the other of these (sets of) reasons would then have to be mysterious to those around him in just the way I describe his reason for believing the command to come from God as being, the more complicated account would not introduce any new considerations.

There seem to be two options. Abraham might have long experience with similar apparently divine communications, and be convinced on the basis of this experience of the veridicality of this one (or at least of the prudence of obeying it).<sup>17</sup> This would be an inductively-based confidence that certain types of event (viz., apparent divine communications) are reason-giving, a confidence that others without the relevant background beliefs might not share. Alternatively, there might be something about the phenomenology of revelation that seems to provide a direct justification for action, but whose precise character cannot be conveyed except to those who have had similar experiences. In both scenarios, Abraham is left not with nothing to say, but instead with something that would be fully comprehensible only to a limited number of individuals, perhaps to no one in his immediate environment (in fact perhaps to no one at all—though this would be a contingent rather than, as in option (I) above, a necessary fact).

Note that the experiences in question are not such that Abraham cannot convey to others their approximate content or their place in his motivational structure. Rather, they are such that they cannot pass muster *as reasons* for anyone else around him. Since what Abraham needs in order to make himself understood is not a mere statement of his actual motivation but something that approximates a justification of his action—at least, something that makes his having the motivation he does comprehensible—either of these would constitute a description of a scenario in which Abraham cannot explain himself.

Would an Abraham so situated have *reasons* to begin with? We might suspect that their unacceptability to others would itself cast doubt on their legitimacy as reasons for Abraham. What is more, Abraham himself might suspect this. That Abraham is uncertain of his own justification is suggested at several points in the text. An Abraham fully confident in his religious justification would not be unable to sleep (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:126; 1997-, 4:169), unable to reassure himself that he is legitimate (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:112ff.; 1997-, 4:155ff.), and while he might find his love for Isaac or his own self-interest a source of temptation, it is difficult to see how he would find *the ethical* a temptation (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:109, 119-20, 160; 1997-, 4:153, 162-3, 202)—unless it pro-

<sup>17</sup> Evans (1981) advances a view something like this—and concludes (correctly, as I will argue) that on it there is nothing Abraham cannot say.

vided some normative security his religious justification lacked. This is precisely the basis for Johannes's contrast between the knight of faith and the tragic hero:

The tragic hero is soon finished ... The knight of faith, however, is kept in a state of sleeplessness, for he is constantly being tested, and at every moment there is the possibility of his returning penitently to the universal, and this possibility may be a spiritual trial as well as the truth. He cannot get any information on that from any man ... (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:126; 1997-, 4:169)

Not even another knight of faith could reassure him, Johannes tells us (Kierkegaard 1901-06, III:120; 1997-, 4:163). These passages suggest that Abraham's inability to make himself understandable to others is itself a source of uncertainty for him.

That is as it should be. In fact both sorts of reason—inductive and phenomenological—for believing that one has received a command from God are dismissed by Kierkegaard himself in other works, on the basis of familiar philosophical arguments. Kierkegaard seems to have agreed with Kant that there can be no immediately recognizable marks of divinity or divine manifestation.<sup>18</sup> This emerges most clearly in the discussion in chapter five of *Philosophical Fragments* of the follower at second hand, in which we are told that historical contemporaneity is no advantage to the believer, since 'divinity is not an immediate qualification' and even the miraculousness of a divine individual's acts 'is not immediately but is only for faith, inasmuch as the person who does not believe does not see' (Kierkegaard 1901-06, IV:256; 1997-, 4:290-1).<sup>19</sup> He also seems to have agreed with Hume that no inductive case for religious belief can be mounted—since even were one to admit that certain sorts of events (miracles, prodigies) might constitute evidence for a revelation, one could have no convincing evidence for the actual occurrence of such events. (Hume focuses on the evidence of testimony to miracles, arguing that since miracles are, by their nature, maximally improbable, any report of a miracle is intrinsically incredible. But an analogous argument applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to evidence of the senses. Experi-

<sup>18</sup> See Kant (1968, 7:63, 6:87).

<sup>19</sup> We may confidently attribute the view in *Fragments* to Kierkegaard rather than solely to his pseudonym Johannes Climacus. Its occurrence in a book intended until the last moment to be published under Kierkegaard's own name suffices for that, but we find it elsewhere—e.g. in the journals and the Adler manuscript—as well.



ence of anything seeming to be a miracle is, because of the intrinsic improbability of miracles, far more likely to have been a sensory hallucination.) Again this emerges most clearly in *Fragments*, with the ridicule of the project of giving a 'probability proof' of the correctness of religious belief (in terms remarkably similar to Hume's): 'wanting to link a probability proof to the improbable (in order to demonstrate: that it is probable?—but then the concept is changed; or in order to demonstrate: that it is improbable?—but to use probability for that is a contradiction)...' (Kierkegaard 1901–06, IV:257n.; 1997–, 4:292n.).<sup>20</sup>

If neither type of experience counts as a reason for believing that something is a command from God, then *a fortiori* neither provides a reason for his actions that Abraham could have but be unable to convey. Unless we can come up with another strategy for filling it out, then, alternative (2) is in trouble as well.

## II

*Hume, Hamann, and Religious Justification in Philosophical Fragments.* *Fragments* offers what looks to be what today would be called an externalist account of the justification of religious belief: if the belief has the right sort of aetiology (having its source in a granting by a god of a 'condition'), then it is justified; if not, then it isn't.<sup>21</sup> On this view, a believer can be justified in his belief without himself having access to the grounds of his justification. The account differs from other forms of epistemological externalism in that these grounds of justification are never accessible to anyone else either; whether or not a belief has its source in an encounter with the divine is not transparent to human inspection. Thus having a religious justification for one's actions is in practice indistinguishable from having no justification at all. (There is in fact a distinction, but

<sup>20</sup> In Hume's words, 'Upon the whole, then, it appears, that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof; and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof; derived from the very nature of the fact, which it would endeavour to establish' (Hume 1999, p. 183).

<sup>21</sup> 'Only the person who personally receives the condition from the god ... only that person believes' (Kierkegaard 1901–06, IV:265; 1997–, 4:299); 'How, then, does the learner become a believer or a follower? When the understanding is discharged and he receives the condition' (Kierkegaard 1901–06, IV:228; 1997–, 4:265). See also Kierkegaard (1901–06, IV:228, 265; 1997–, 4:265, 299).

it is one only God is in a position to draw.)

The account of the justification of non-religious belief in the Interlude of *Fragments* relies transparently on Hume.<sup>22</sup> The division of knowledge claims into matters-of-fact claims and relations-of-ideas claims (Kierkegaard 1901–06, IV:227; 1997–, 4:263–4); the restriction in the scope of the latter sort of claim and the rejection of most of traditional metaphysics (e.g. denial that the existence of God can be proved a priori: Kierkegaard 1901–06, IV:207–11, 236–9; 1997–, 4:245–9, 273–5, denial that a past sequence of events can be understood as having occurred of necessity: Kierkegaard 1901–06, IV:239–47; 1997–, 4:275–83); the endorsement of epistemic scepticism (most of our beliefs about matters of fact cannot be rationally justified, because most of them rely on forms of inference that themselves rely on the unjustifiable assumptions that nature is uniform or that causal necessitation is detectable: Kierkegaard 1901–06, IV:247–8; 1997–, 4:283); and finally, the rejection of the idea that this epistemic scepticism should have some direct practical consequences (we go on holding all sorts of beliefs that cannot be rationally justified, we could not get on without doing so, and we should not feel particularly bad about that: Kierkegaard 1901–06, IV:247–8; 1997–, 4:283)—all echo similar themes in Hume.

Hume's account of specifically religious beliefs stands in the background of the *Fragments* account as well. Although all of our rationally unjustifiable beliefs are produced by mechanisms not under our direct control, Hume thought, not all of the mechanisms are equal. Some are more rather than less likely to produce beliefs that keep us safe and happy—'beliefs in accordance with custom and experience' or 'natural' or 'inevitable' beliefs. Religious beliefs do not belong in that category; instead, Hume seems to have thought them produced by psychological mechanisms we are foolish to rely on.<sup>23</sup> This is what he had in mind when he concluded the chapter on miracles in the *Enquiry* with this observation:

[W]e may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any rea-

<sup>22</sup> For a more comprehensive treatment of the role of Hume in the Climacus works, see Popkin (1951).

<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard follows him in drawing a distinction between the sort of ungroundedness beliefs about matters of fact have and the sort of ungroundedness religious beliefs have, in the Appendix to the Interlude. See Kierkegaard (1901–06, IV:250; 1997–, 4:285).

sonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience. (Hume 1999, p. 186)

Kierkegaard's acquaintance with Hume seems to have been entirely second-hand.<sup>24</sup> He found these lines while reading Hamann,<sup>25</sup> who remarks that while Hume intends it as criticism, in fact what he says is just orthodoxy, the truth from the mouth of one of its enemies. Kierkegaard cites that remark with apparent approval in a journal entry of 10 September 1836, commenting: 'One sees the complete misunderstanding between the Christian and the non-Christian in the fact that Hamann responds to Hume's objection: "Yes, that's just the way it is"' (Kierkegaard 1909-78, IA: 100; 1997-, AA: 14.1).<sup>26</sup> In a journal entry of 12 September, he cites another passage from Hamann's correspondence: 'Haven't you often heard me say: incredible but true. Lies and novels, hypotheses and fables must be plausible, but not the truths and fundamental doctrines of our faith' (Kierkegaard 1909-78, IA 237).<sup>27</sup>

It is uncontroversial that Kierkegaard's view of the relation of Christianity to reason was definitively shaped by his early encounter with Hamann.<sup>28</sup> That he took a sustained course in Hamann be-

<sup>24</sup> Apart from university lectures, major sources seem to have been J. G. Hamann (whom I will discuss) and F. H. Jacobi.

<sup>25</sup> The quotation is from a letter to Lindner from July 1759 (Hamann 1821-43, I:406).

<sup>26</sup> Compare Kierkegaard (1901-06, VI:103; 1997-, 6:101).

<sup>27</sup> The quotation is taken from a letter to Hamann's brother, also of July 1759 (Hamann 1821-43, I:425). In this 12 September journal entry, Kierkegaard remarks on another passage in the above-cited letter to Lindner of July 1759, 'a very interesting parallel Hamann draws between the law (of Moses) and reason. He begins from Hume's proposition: "the observation of human blindness and weakness is the result of all philosophy"—"Our reason," remarks Hamann, "is therefore just what Paul called the law—and reason's prohibition is holy, right and good; but is it given in order to make us wise? Just as little as the law of the Jews [was given] in order to make them righteous, but instead to convict us of the opposite, how irrational our reason is, and that our errors are multiplied by it, just as sins were multiplied by the law"' (quoted in Kierkegaard 1909-78, IA 237). Compare Hamann (1821-43, I:405). I have quoted the Hume from *Enquiry*, Part I, §4 (Hume 1999, p. 112). Hamann's quotation is an inexact German translation, but this seems to be the passage he has in mind.

<sup>28</sup> See Lowrie (1938, esp. pp. 164 ff.) and Pojman (1983). Lowrie: 'I am inclined to say that [Hamann] is the only author by whom Kierkegaard was profoundly influenced' (p. 164). And Pojman (perhaps following Lowrie) tells us that Kierkegaard's decision that Christianity and speculation are opposed was cemented through his reading of Hamann in the fall of 1836.

tween September 1836 and May 1839 is suggested both by his journals from that period (which show him reading through Hamann's collected works, volume by volume, in order<sup>29</sup>) and by a later (1848) remark about a passage from his 1839 journal that it dated 'from the Hamann-reading time' (Kierkegaard 1909-78, IX B 33.3) —as if reading Hamann partially defined a period of his life.<sup>30</sup> Following Hamann, Kierkegaard took the Humean story about religious belief literally rather than with Hume's intended irony: the only way for a believer to explain his belief is as a miracle, a 'wonder' (Kierkegaard 1901-06, IV:230; 1997-, 4:267). Part of his reason for accepting it has to be that he found it to conform to the phenomenological facts of religious belief—not only the epistemic inadequacy of the reasons that can be offered for holding it, but also the moral tenuousness of the situation of a believer who has every reason to think the 'condition' a delusion.

These are the themes of *Fear and Trembling*, because this is precisely Abraham's situation.<sup>31</sup> Interpreters interested in providing an account of Abraham's justification have typically sought a reason to which Abraham would have access. If we apply the view of religious justification offered by *Fragments* to Abraham's case, however, we can see that his justification would be one to which he could *not* in principle have access. He would believe (at least to some degree)

<sup>29</sup> In September 1836 one sees several citations from the first volume (Kierkegaard 1909-78, IA 100, IA 233; 1997-, AA: 14.1). One sees some undated entries in 1837 from the second volume (Kierkegaard 1909-78, II A 12, p. 15, II A 75, II A 78, II A 102; 1997-, BB:37, DD:3, DD:6, DD:18); then in July 1837 some from the third volume (Kierkegaard 1909-78, II A 118; 1997-, DD:28, 28.a). Sometime in 1836-7 he writes the long entry on Hamann (Kierkegaard 1909-78, IA 340; 1997-, CC: 25). Later in 1837 (Kierkegaard 1909-78, II A 139; 1997-, DD:37a), he is quoting from the fifth volume, and by May of 1839 from the sixth volume (Kierkegaard 1909-78, II A 438; 1997-, EE:78.a). In fact there are numerous entries about Hamann from May 1839. The later volumes of Hamann's collected works came out after Kierkegaard's period of greatest Hamann-infatuation, but he still purchased them and read them promptly. For instance, the eighth and final volume came out in 1843, Kierkegaard bought it (the second part) at Philipson on 12.2.1843, and there is an 1843 journal entry on that eighth volume (Kierkegaard 1909-78, IV A 39; 1997-, JJ:50).

<sup>30</sup> Compare Kierkegaard (1909-78, II A 420; 1997-, EE:64).

<sup>31</sup> It is also Adler's, and we could further fill out the account here by taking a cue from obvious parallels between *Fear and Trembling* and the Adler manuscript. In fact, the language used to describe Adler's situation seems calculated to call Abraham to the reader's mind. 'The extraordinary individual must be vigilant 'in fear and trembling' lest anyone be harmed by exposure to his extraordinariness (Kierkegaard 1909-78, VIII, 2 B 13, p. 62); he must 'in fear and trembling' prevent his example from leading others astray, in part by making his position as repugnant as possible to them (Kierkegaard 1909-78, VII, 2 B 235, p. 54); he must keep silent, in so far as this is compatible with exercising authority, in order to minimize the damage to the established order; etc.

that he has received a command from God,<sup>32</sup> but he would not be able to say why he believes that, or to say anything to distinguish his situation from the obvious contrast case (namely, the one in which he is in the grip of a delusion). As Johannes describes it, the individual occupying a higher immediacy would have to combine the characteristics of acting for objectively sufficient reasons and acting for reasons that he clearly sees to be insufficient by every measure he is in a position to apply. Again, this would not mean that he has no justification in thinking what he does—only that he is not in a position to *appeal* to that justification. In other words, (3) above would be the correct interpretation of Abraham's silence: Johannes knows (and so we readers also know) that Abraham has a command from God and is therefore justified—but Abraham himself does not.

### III

*The Messenger and the Message.* The obvious question at this point is, how does Johannes know? If the account I have given of the reason for Abraham's ignorance is correct, the same account applies to us readers as well, and to Johannes himself. It is no accident that for all he knows he has never encountered 'a single authentic instance' of a knight of faith, even though 'every second person may be such an instance' (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:89; 1997–, 4:133). The etiology of the knight of faith's belief is not something any human being is in a position to inspect, from which it follows that being a knight of faith—rather than a lunatic—is no more discernible to others than it is to the individual.

On what grounds can Johannes assume what, on his own account, he cannot see? Johannes knows that the Abraham he describes is a knight of faith because, and only because, that Abraham is as much a work of his imagination as the knight of faith who

<sup>32</sup> Cross (2003) argues that Abraham does not even *believe* he has received a command of God—that he believes the opposite. What makes Abraham a paradigm of faith is rather his *trust* in God, which is to be taken as a 'practical' rather than a cognitive attitude. Like others who emphasize the importance of Abraham's trust over the propositional content of his beliefs, Cross fails to notice that this description of Abraham's conduct relies on the assumption that it is God (and not, for example, his own mental illness) that Abraham is trusting—and that is impossible in the absence of a belief on Abraham's part that the command comes from God. Of course an account of (the virtue of) Abraham's trust as a practical attitude becomes possible once one has an account of (the reason for) Abraham's belief—but it cannot *replace* such an account, as Cross contends.

'looks just like a tax collector'. *Fear and Trembling* is a poetic construction, and one of the ways in which the poetic constructor's standpoint is privileged is that it allows him to stipulate of Abraham what it is impossible for any human being to know or even to reasonably believe: that it was a command from God, that it was an ordeal in which the ethical was a temptation, that Abraham was a knight of faith. Likewise, we readers know that the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling* is a knight of faith because, and only because, his creator has told us so.

This interpretation of Abraham's silence, and the recognition it requires that the Abraham at issue is a fictional character, throws up an obvious obstacle to the success of what we have taken to be Johannes's project.<sup>33</sup> How can the portrayal of a fictional character, a 'poetic construction', drive up the price of faith? It can do so only if, and to the extent that, the character is identified with the historical Abraham of the biblical account—the Abraham to whose exemplary status believers are at least tacitly committed. But note that this identification is illegitimate, precisely because about *that* Abraham, Johannes is in no position to stipulate anything, and *a fortiori* in no position to stipulate that he was a knight of faith. The identification must fail at precisely the critical point. The biblical Abraham cannot serve an example of faith because we can have such examples only in fiction.<sup>34</sup>

Let me return to the question of what we are to make of the epigraph, a quotation from Hamann: 'What Tarquinius Superbus said in his garden [by striking off] the heads of the poppies, his son understood but the messenger did not' (Kierkegaard 1901–06, III:56; 1997, 4:100). What Tarquin's message conveyed was that his son should eliminate the leading citizens of Gabii as a way of consolidating his power in the city. The reference is to a story found in Livy among other classical sources, a story with which Kierkegaard would have been acquainted already as a schoolboy. If there was a reason to quote Hamann in particular, it did not lie in the aesthetic

<sup>33</sup> Readings on which the project is to argue for a religious over a secular ethical standpoint face the same obstacle, by the way. See Kosch (2006a, pp. 156–60).

<sup>34</sup> Just in case we missed this, Kierkegaard tells us in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that *Fear and Trembling's* portrayal of the knight of faith was 'only a rash anticipation', that 'the beginning was made by ignoring the contradiction—how an observer could become at all *aware* of him in such a way that he could place himself, admiring, outside and admire that there is nothing, nothing whatever, to *notice* ...' (Kierkegaard 1901–06, VII:435n.; 1997–, 7:453n.).

quality of Hamann's prose, which is here unexceptional. It must rather have had to do either with the context from which the quotation is taken (it appears in one of Hamann's letters as part of a reflection on his own style of communication<sup>35</sup>) or with something else Kierkegaard thought he owed Hamann.

The epigraph in the penultimate draft of *Fear and Trembling* was considerably more complicated. Before sending the manuscript to the printer, Kierkegaard deleted three other passages.<sup>36</sup> The first of these, which he labels 'an old saying' (Kierkegaard 1909-78, III A 203), he had copied from Herder into his journal in 1842.<sup>37</sup> ('Write'—'For whom?'—'Write for the dead, for those in the past, whom you love'—'Will they read me?'—'Yes, for they will return as posterity.') The second, 'an old saying, slightly altered', is the same passage with the final response changed ('Yes, for they will return as posterity' becomes 'No!'). The third, like the Tarquin reference, comes from a passage in Hamann's correspondence in which he reflects on his own style of communication. It is an extract ('matters of fact and first principles all mixed up') from a longer passage which, in this same penultimate draft of *Fear and Trembling*, was to serve as the epigraph of the Problemata section, but which was also deleted from the version sent to the printer:

A layman and an unbeliever must declare my style of writing nothing but nonsense, for I express myself with many tongues, speak the language of sophists, of wordplay, of Cretes and Arabs, Whites and Moors and Creoles, babble criticism, mythology, matters of fact and first principles all mixed up, and argue now *κατ' ἀνθρωπων*, now *κατ' ἐξοχῆν*. (Kierkegaard 1909-78, IV B 96 IC 4)<sup>38</sup>

All these passages deal with communication—its aim and strategies for achieving it—but the last has to do with the specific problem of communication of religious content to non-believers. Recall Kierkegaard's journal entry of 10 September 1836, on the encounter between Hamann and Hume and the 'complete misunderstanding between the Christian and the non-Christian'—and recall that this

<sup>35</sup> Compare Hamann (1821-43, 3:190), from a letter to Lindner, March 1763—Hamann quoting from a letter he has composed or is composing to his publisher Nicolai.

<sup>36</sup> See Kierkegaard (1909-78, IV B 96, 1A-1C).

<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard's citation is to Herder zur *Litteratur und Kunst* (xvi:114). A source more readily available is Herder (1985, 7:530), from the 7th fragment of the 8th collection of the *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*—on the topic of 'Schrift und Buchdrückerei'.

<sup>38</sup> Compare Hamann (1821-43, 1:467)—from a letter to Lindner, August 1759.

misunderstanding is premised on the very account of religious belief that Hamann and Hume share. The epigraph tells us to look for a hidden message; it also tells us *where* to look: to Hamann. What the account of the source of religious belief that Kierkegaard will give in *Philosophical Fragments* entails, that faith cannot be learned from another human being (Kierkegaard 1901-06, IV:189, 230, 264; 1997-, 4:227-8, 267, 298), is just the conclusion that Johannes fails to draw from his own account: that taking the biblical Abraham as a model of faith is impossible in principle. Abraham is taken to be faith's most eminent representative, and Johannes has (unwittingly) conveyed the message that in order to survive in the terrain of faith the reader must eliminate him, along with every other example.

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