Fear and Trembling’s Longevity

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The Rabbis say there are 70 faces of Torah. Fear and Trembling, may not have 70 faces – but almost, and it’s a bit shorter. By endlessly asking new questions, never going stale, Fear and Trembling attains a kind of immortality. It questions and questions -- each question providing a new revelation, a new face.

Immortal books spawn endless reflections in readers and writers, and spawn endless offspring. There are commentaries that beam lights in at least three directions: in on the texts, out on the culture that holds them, and in on the intimate thoughts and fantasies of individual readers, you or me. Beyond spawning commentaries, immortal books like Fear and Trembling spawn endless siblings, innovative pieces like Kafka’s Abraham parable; like Benjamin Britten’s musical settings for Kierkegaard’s prayers; like Chagall’s paintings or Isak Dinesen’s “Babette’s Feast.” Writers like John Updike and Woody Allen have Kierkegaard shticks; the brilliant young novelist Zadie Smith cites Fear and Trembling in her recent essays for The New Yorker and The New York Review of Books. He’s culturally pervasive,
and has a special, if troubling, place in thousands of hearts.

_Fear and Trembling_ was definitely over my head when I tried to read it in the 60s as an undergraduate. Strange to say, it nevertheless _spoke_ -- though I was at a loss to say what it said. Why do we continue to struggle with troubling books or pieces of art that we only half understand – or don’t understand at all. Things can capture us leaving us empty handed when it comes to saying _why_ we are captured – or by _what_ exactly. The strange case of my wrestling with _Fear and Trembling_ began over 50 years ago, and brings me here to Dartmouth today.

I have to digress a moment to say this is sort of a reunion for me.

After my initial utter befuddlement, and managed to write a short essay on _Fear and Trembling_ that I read in San Diego in the mid-80s, where I met Eric. After my talk a clutch of us headed across the street, dodging traffic, asking a question we still haven’t fully answered: _How would you know a knight of faith if you saw one?_ A few years later I read another paper on _Fear and Trembling_ (I still understood very little of it) in Sunderland, England, where I met George Pattison. I remember birds starting to chatter at three in the morning. George identified himself modestly then as _only a country parson_ – time has proved otherwise! A few years later I met our host Ron Green in Portland Oregon. _Fear and_
*Trembling* seems to say that sometimes you can set ethics aside. We wondered together if that were true. Could there be a suspension of ethics today – similar to the suspension of ethics Abraham might have faced as he was jolted by God’s demand for Isaac.

So I am among friends today, in a kind of reunion, decades after first meeting Ron and George and Eric. We’re together for a really simple reason: *Fear and Trembling* has befriended each of us, and we’ve become friends over our common attraction to Kierkegaard’s little book.

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For me, *Fear and Trembling* helps us think about a terrible biblical incident, but more broadly it helps us think about

- **TRUTH** (how we live), *what is a truth I can live and die for*
- **GENRE** (how we write), *what way of writing* – lyrical reverie or dialectical philosophy – is best for pursuing this truth
- **GENDER** (how we are embodied), *why are philosophers blind* to succor and birth and captivated with violence and death?
- **INSCRUTABILITY** (how the inescapable clash of intuitions, loves, and reasons makes reality ambiguous through and through). Why is a book so full of good *questions, troubling questions* – so wanting in *answers* – *answers that would set our troubles aside?*
I. PERSONAL ETHICS: A TRUTH TO LIVE AND DIE FOR

As an unsettled, spiritually restless young man, Kierkegaard travels to the rugged seacoast north of his home in Copenhagen to ponder his future: who will he become? He needs more than textbook facts or theories. He wants something that speaks to him intimately, a truth for which he can live and die.

Truth would be a radiant center that orients life, as when Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth.” It’s common to look for such radiant centers as adolescents or in college, but searching for identity and meaning can linger on. Settling on family and career doesn’t necessarily settle all questions. One’s passion or center or vocation may emerge and reemerge at any age – it might be family or art, world-travel or journalism, serving the poor.

Kierkegaard knew what to avoid -- his calling wasn’t law or medicine or the academic calling of a professor. He flirted with the idea of marriage or the priesthood. But the dominant motif of his search for a personal truth was unremitting search itself – as if what called him as truth was endless writing in pursuit of that never answered question -- what is the truth I can
live and die for. He wondered if image of the wandering Jew fit his condition– someone never finding a settled sense of self and place.

Kierkegaard found a calling that kept him always on the move, never settled, never satisfied -- and endlessly creative. He lives and dies as a writer, presenting endlessly varied possibilities of living and dying -- affirming some, ridiculing others.

So he pursues questions despite finding only temporary resting places. Truth at the radiant (or dark) center of one’s life turns one toward what beckons, prompts the direction of one’s next step, and next question. Philosophical-religious questions called him to the path of questioning the deepest matters a human can face. He was a writer on the outside, living as an outsider, pulled by a Socratic path of living, dying, writing everything from angry polemics to very funny interludes warmly appreciative of human folly.

Socrates questioned, and entertained his friends, but claimed, half tongue in cheek, that he knew nothing. He had no message or doctrine or final truth to pass on – so he said. One interpretation of Socrates’ claim that he knew nothing is that his wisdom is not to pursue a goal of fixed knowledge but to follow beckoning knowledge, a direction ever receding, where questions outlast answers, and leave him half empty-handed, in
ignorance. He does not have knowledge – he does not possess it the way we possess keys that had been lost and then found. The search for directional signs does not yield terminal answers.

Searching for truth in ignorance is like Eros always pulling, now and then subsiding, never finished. A Socratic search for truth models serenity and restlessness – serenity in the conviction that one is on the right path, that one has read the signs correctly – and restless, because reading one sign moves one ahead to discover yet another, worlds without end.¹ Well past middle age, I find myself as alert now to Socratic-religious beckonings as I was at 20. Love and insight, awe and ignorance, shouldn’t diminish with age. Here is George Pattison: Beyond the question of knowledge are poetry, madness, love— but if these are not and cannot be knowledge, they may yet be best of all.

II. FOR A RESTLESS SOUL, WHAT SORT OF WRITING OR GENRE IS BEST?

Writing hews paths of love in the world, its dark sides and its joys. Fear and Trembling is a step toward vocation and salvation. It’s an oxymoronic odd fish, a “dialectical lyric,” he calls it, zigzagging an impossible walk. Kierkegaard quotes Hamman approvingly on zigzagging styles – as if to warn us. [I] express myself in various tongues and speak the language of
sophists, of puns, of Cretans and Arabians, of whites and Moors and Creoles, and babble a confusion of criticism, mythology, rebus, and axioms, and argue now in a human way and now in an extraordinary way.

A dialectical lyric is both philosophy and poetry, both Athens (reason) and Jerusalem (faith). Its philosophy might sketch an everyday good life. A few pages past Abraham, we find a this-worldly burgher strolling home, a merchant who takes delight in everyday. He relishes the thought of the meal his wife has prepared, and notices rats scamper by in the gutters. God is or terror are not looming. Happiness is in the pedestrian.

Fear and Trembling also gives us Greek philosophy in the dialectical problems that dominate the second 3/5ths the book. We see both the Godly horror of Moriah (the biblical unreason of Jerusalem) and the heart of this world (Athens, and philosophy). I think his heart is in Jerusalem, in a struggle between this world and a divine that transcends it, between man and God – a struggle rendered in poetry that’s full of faith’s passion.

Poetry can teach, as Wittgenstein knew. People think nowadays that scientists are there to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc., to entertain them. That the latter have something to teach them -- that never occurs to them. Wittgenstein also says that Faith is a passion; wisdom, cool grey ash. He knows faith is a passion because he’s been reading Kierkegaard. But why
does he add, *Wisdom (Athens) is cool grey ash.* The strolling merchant *is* cool as a cucumber (but not exactly ‘cool grey ash’). Let’s say the book embodies a cold, unwelcome wisdom: the cold truth that *philosophy as explanation* betrays *life*, turns it to *ash*.

It’s both passionate and coldblooded to say we must learn to live with the inscrutable. The passion of faith is fueled by the frustration that we can never stop seeking single truth -- even in the face of endless doubleness. Wisdom says, “You can’t get a straight answer!” -- which is coldblooded. Faith says, “I’ll struggle hopefully, nevertheless,” is hot passion.

Kierkegaard writes toward a beckoning truth he could live and die for. Does this make him a poet or a philosopher? The subtitle to *Fear and Trembling* is “dialectical lyric.” This repeats the friction between Athens and Jerusalem, Bible and philosophy, personal expressiveness, and abstract argument. Do we have a face off between *two* books here? Dialectics, or philosophy is supposed to give answers, but silentio falls short, leaving us hanging with the *cool wisdom* that there are none. The poetry of *Fear and Trembling* disturbs passions and worries imagination. The four Midrashim on Genesis 22 – the scene of Abraham being called to Moriah -- improvise in ways that prompt further tales. They *amplify* obscurity, leaving us no better off that dialectics.
Beyond Moriah, Kierkegaard improvises with conflicting styles for rendering the conflicting claims on his life. He is unsettled between the beckoning of a parson, the beckoning polemics with the church or with a culture of ‘see and be seen’. Simultaneously, he is unsettled about how to write. Is he beckoned by dialectic or lyric, by sermons or treatises, by the epistolary novel or by aphorisms and short essays? He is beckoned by all of these, and invents new genres along the way – say a book containing nothing but prefaces.

It seems that Abraham needs both loyalty to son and loyalty to God, and that Kierkegaard needs both dialectic and lyric. In his life, he needs the aesthetic and ethical, the religious and dialectical. Is there anything redeeming in this mad proliferation of styles of writing and life? Is there any good in courting unsettling multiplicity and inscrutability? Existential crisis can cast us drift, and it can also leave us with faith’s passion -- a mood of hope and welcome rootlessness. Obscurity can teach us to savor submission to a truth -- say Rilke’s truth that “Beauty is just the beginning of terror.” It can instill receptivity and can prompt creative response. Faith lives in trust and hope that despite all, life need not wither, or die like cold ash.


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Joys and anxieties and faith’s trust and hope are to be lived with, beyond explanation. This is also a lesson of comic affection. In *Hannah and her Sisters*, Woody Allen perfectly the limits of explanation with gentle affection. In the movie, he has a soul, and won’t have a religion that whitewashes evil. He think his Jewish faith has no response to evil, to the holocaust -- so naturally he decides to become Catholic! His mother, hysterical, locks herself in the bathroom. She screams: *Stanley YOU tell him!* Her husband throws up his hands: *Explain the Holocaust to him?* I can’t even explain how a *can opener* works!

III. THE INSCRUTABLE: THERE’S NO STRAIGHT ANSWER

From the beginning, in grad school, I knew Kierkegaard was far too smart to be saying, “Everything will be fine – *just obey God.*” But what *was* he saying? -- ‘Just *disobey* God?”

Abraham doesn’t try to justify obedience to God. Perhaps there’s a place for *honorable disobedience*. Imagine that at the last moment Abraham *refuses* the command. In his great faith he trusts that despite this refusal, God won’t abandon him. Instead of the life-and-death risk that he won’t get *Isaac* back, the new risk is that he won’t get *God* back.
Abraham believes he will get Isaac back “on the strength of the absurd.” His anchor, such as it is, grapples on the sands of the absurd, the inscrutable. In this case, the inscrutable is a good thing. We want a world where we have the possibility that God will not be lost (if Abraham refuses), and the possibility that Isaac will not be lost (if Abraham complies). “The absurd” rules in vital possibilities we need. A non-absurd world would eliminate one of these possibilities, and we’d have to lose Isaac or lose God. By not ruling out either of these possibilities, it defuses a helpless despair. It leaves space for a hope and faith to flourish despite inscrutability.

_Fear and Trembling_ displays unfathomable obscurity at the heart of ethics, religion, and personal life. It loosens our grasp on what sanity, reason, religion, ethics, or love, at last amount to. For instance, Abraham early on is paired with the image of a nursing mother, perhaps a mother of faith. Does this mean that for sanity’s sake, Abraham and child sacrifice move back, yielding the stage to weaning mothers? This would downscale terror, and reduce friction between reason and unreason, ethics and religion, between fear and delight. With _de silentio_, we find the sublime on Moriah, but also in the pedestrian, in the everydayness of a weaning mother. In later discourses, Kierkegaard allies faith with the delight of birdsong.
To insist that there’s no lucid or final answer here, is not a cry (or counsel) of despair, nor is it a dark (or flippant) cynicism. Kant puts it plainly: Metaphysical efforts are endeavors “that [we] can never abandon and yet [are] unable to carry to completion.”¹² What counts is sticking with the questions, refusing to abandon the intimate, tangled path! Job is right to ask why he suffers, even though he is denied answers.¹³

A scholastic philosophy obsesses on finding The Answer and fails to venture on the waters of faith. It misses the texture of an experiential faith sung in poetry and staged in biblical narrative, a texture open to inexplicable joy and terror.¹⁴

**IV. IS ETHICS ABSOLUTE – OR IS THERE SOMETHING HIGHER?**

Ethics supplies rationales for our actions. But some instances when we must do something seem inscrutable. Both explanations and rationales seem to run out. Whether Abraham refuses to raise his knife or complies, he would lack decisive rationale. Given his reasonable take on the situation, he is damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t. We crave an orderly moral-religious universe where there are answers, but we are denied this. Johannes de silentio asks whether there can be “A Teleological Suspension of the Ethical.” We hope he can establish that in some cases ethics is
suspended, is put on hold, because a higher good, a divine command, supervenes. Can a command from God override the grip of ethics? Can a teleological suspension make it OK to sacrifice Isaac? If I’m right, nothing would make it OK.

If it’s not OK to obey God, then it must be OK to refuse Him. But refusing God wouldn’t be OK either. There is no reason to trust ethics to give answers – something might be higher, and in any case within ethics there are irresolvable moral conflicts. Why trust God in this case? Earlier in Genesis, Abraham argued with God over his cruelty -- his plan to kill thousands of innocents in Sodom and Gomorrah. He got God to back down. Why can’t he get God to back down here, on Moriah?

Why shouldn’t Abraham remonstrate with God reminding Him of his commandment “Do not Kill!” -- or reminding Him of His promise that Isaac will start a long lineage? Aren’t there many commands to defy? What if God taunted Abraham: “You’re a fool to believe in me! Curse me, and die! “

A suspension of religious duty (in the name of ethics or religion) is as plausible as a suspension of ethical duty (in the name of ethics or religion). But suspensions don’t give us guidance. Going beyond de silentio, I thing we have here a suspension of guidance. It could be a ‘teleological suspension’ because Abraham in the face of a standoff he does not succumb to despair or
indifference. He maintains the ‘absurd’ hope, that he will lose neither God nor Isaac. An absurd hope is not a guide to action but a receptivity toward good when there is no reason to hope.\textsuperscript{15}

V. Gender: The Maternal as a Key to Faith

The maternal and birth are topics philosophers have overlooked, by and large -- until very recently -- yet they are strikingly visible in the first pages of \textit{Fear and Trembling}. Kierkegaard’s longevity rests on his capacity to spawn new and unexpected discussions, and he does it here generations before feminists made gender and the maternal topical and necessary.

Death is a grim reaper -- birth, a seedling, full of hope. Birth is the promise of beginnings and fresh starts. Death is the news that there are no more beginnings or fresh starts. But why are birth, hope, and beginnings so seldom explored philosophically? Are we convinced of Silenus’ bitter warning, “Better to die young, best never to have been born”? Then there is Job’s aching, melancholy, lament, “Man who is born of a women is of few days and full of sorrow: he cometh forth like a flower and is cut down.”\textsuperscript{16} Would it be better to have been born of an angel, or of God – or of man?

To talk of birth and beginnings is to talk of women, wombs, and nursing, and many have thought that these are hardly fit topics for
philosophical discussion. Kierkegaard may be the exception here. Death may seem a more noble topic, yet Kierkegaard, as we will see, can give equal time to mothers, birth and weaning. We are mortal and “of woman born.” Hannah Arendt holds that the condition of being born – natality – is just as much a limit-condition of life as mortality. In Fear and Trembling Kierkegaard brings birth (natality) and the maternal into philosophical focus. Death may be revitalizing, as Kierkegaard noticed. Birth can let us absorb the intimate wonder that I exist, in this body, in this age, in this language, held and released by this mother.

Giving birth is figured as a woman’s provenance; giving death, as a man’s. Mortality and violence are inescapable in Fear and Trembling, with its focus on Abraham raising a knife against his son. Birth and nurturance are no less inescapable in Fear and Trembling, for we find there a mother and child, four mothers, four infants, who are run cheek and jowl against four Abrahams and four Isaacs in the opening pages of the “Attunement” section. This mother-child motif gives us two would-be persons prior to full individuation, in a kind of hybrid unity. Are these in fact cameo appearances of Isaac’s weaning from Sarah? In any case, weaning is a moment when an infant’s love can blossom as more than hunger, and the mother’s love can blossom as more than feeding. The repeated mother-child
motif functions as a counterweight to four appearances of father-son on Moriah. Kierkegaard, or his pseudonym Johannes de silentio, answers each paternal Abraham portrait of trauma with an echo, with a gentle maternal portrait of separation.

These are not just pen-and-ink sketches but capsule parables unfolding around an image, each Abraham parable sketched just above the Mother parable, so that on the page we see a sequence of four pairs. Each single parable is a reading of its pair, its counterpart, which can be read up or down against its couple: the mother can be a parable of the father, or the father, a parable of the mother. And in the background hovers Genesis 22, reminding us that Johannes de silentio gives us, within the compass of three printed pages, eight parables or Midrash on the biblical text. An impending weaning serves as a parable of an impending bloody sacrifice.

We are given what Harold Bloom would call ‘strong misreadings.” They are misreadings because the Ur-text remains always elusive, no matter how brilliant the effort at deciphering. The primal text is an enigmatic image of faith. Johannes de silentio struggles with the apprehension that he can’t really fathom how enigmatic it is. So he tries and tries again to unravel the marvel of faith. Each of his coupled attempts fails (and multiple further attempts in the subsequent one hundred odd
pages of *Fear and Trembling* also fail). The lesson is that faith is always a trial to the understanding, never a resting spot with all questions comfortably answered. Each paired account in the early pages of the “Attunement” section is not quite a faithful rendering of faith. Faith pleads for understanding, but the plea is only half-answered. Perhaps a partial understanding is all a faithful response to faith can hope for. We cannot quite understand either the faith of Abraham or the faith of the mother.

From another angle, we have sketches of apophatic events, events that can be sketched only as a ‘negative theology,’ only to reveal what faith is not, Neti, Neti.\(^{22}\) We are given an infinitely alluring image that infinitely repels mastery through explanation or lucid exposition. We are given glimpses of what faith isn’t, yet we don’t abandon the struggle, or take cognitive failure lying down. As we’ve seen, Kant says that we’re doomed to ask questions, knowing answers will not appear.\(^ {23}\) If the master questions produce stalemates, we might slide to related, more tractable areas. Abraham and mothers prompt questions of faith, and also of love and individuation, of birth and natality. They let us probe the periphery of faith. If the father threatens a cut that *separates* the child from life, the mother promises a loving release *into* life.
Interpreting the binding of Isaac (the Akedah) is as old as the first telling and continues unabated today in accounts that still come up short when it comes to closure. And we can face new and unanticipated challenges, for instance the enigma of how readers can have said so little – next to nothing -- about a brilliant innovation: Kierkegaard shows the binding of Isaac, as expected, and then shocks us with the weaning of Isaac. Why is it that no one notices? Recent feminist commentators sometimes ask about Sarah. Only one or two notice the mother. Could the horror of Abraham’s knife blind us, making everything else impossible to see? Could repulsion be fixed, not on the knife, but at the sight of weaning? Is the horror of a breast greater than a raised knife? In any case, by inserting the mother and infant, cheek to cheek with Abraham and Isaac, Johannes de silentio throws us a double disruption.

The first layer of disruption occurs in inserting a mother weaning at all -- anywhere. The bare presence of this image can hardly be a casual afterthought or bizarre aside. It registers, surely, an unwelcome intrusion. The second layer is an untoward juxtaposition or even union of two images, each, for different reasons, upsetting or terrifying. If Abraham mounting Moriah delivers a bundle of cross-purposes and colliding imperatives, and a weaning mother with blackened breast delivers a perplexing or even
repulsive package, juxtaposing or uniting these becomes more wildly untoward than either taken separately. The Akedah is already billed as one of the most terrifying and uncanny events in the Hebrew Bible. Why increase the pitch of cacophony by putting violent paternal sacrifice in such immediate proximity to tender weaning?

Note that this pairing lets one scenario temper or intensify its other. If a father’s near-sacrifice of his son fixes a benchmark of faith’s intensity, by osmosis the intensity of a maternal weaning is correspondingly inflated. The scene on Moriah horrifies us, so a degree of that horror will leak down to the weaning. The scene on Moriah is momentous, so a degree of that momentousness will leak down to the weaning. On the other hand, if a mother’s compassionate weaning fixes a benchmark of faith’s tenderness, then by osmosis the intensity of a moment on Moriah is tempered, decreased. Tenderness can suffuse the scene. Each faith-scenario can be read as an improvisation on the other.

Of course the conclusion is not that the Moriah event is ‘really’ as banal as breastfeeding, or that the weaning-event is ‘really’ as horrific as near child-sacrifice. It is rather that the Moriah event might be less horrific than we thought, or not only horrific, and that the weaning event might be more horrific than we thought, or not only tender. Furthermore, it reminds
us that images can be parables of one another, and that grappling with, and
dancing with, the enigmas of faith is best accomplished by imaginative,
hermeneutical improvisation rather than by the philosopher’s preferred
sure-grip argumentation (which in any case, is unavailable).

It is a measure of de silentio’s brilliance that he does not try to answer
what level of horror, tenderness, or momentousness, ought to prevail.
Faithfulness can deliver a horror than which no greater can be conceived.
Faithfulness can intimate an unassuming tenderness than which no more
pedestrian can be conceived – a shopkeeper strolling across town, a mother
weaning her child. De silentio teases. He keeps silence on the proper
degree of faith’s momentousness. Later, he teases by staying silent on
whether there can be a teleological suspension of the ethical, and even with
silence on whether it is really faith that grabs his attention: to an outsider,
his excitement and fascination seem to be focused not by faith but by a
blood-curdling side show.

Johannes de silentio seems to be thrilled by a world-class spectacle and
melodrama. He wants to watch Abraham climb up Moriah, peeking from a
safe distance. Can that get silentio closer to faith than if he stayed quietly
at home? He pictures a would-be ‘knight of infinite resignation’ through the
melodrama of a young man in love with an unattainable princess. Can that
sentimental story get him a step closer to resignation (as a step toward faith)? Kierkegaard raises questions of infinite existential interest. But if his model faith-seeker wants only to be a curious or astounded onlooker, then faith is downgraded two levels – to gawking at spectacles, and gawking at dialectical knots.

VI. Broken Time: Repetition as Inspiration and Rebirth

Over the years I’ve come to see this little book in new ways – several new ways. Its legacy is not static but alive. It won’t just retire and fade away. It keeps performing what Kierkegaard calls repetitions. What exactly is repetition? Kierkegaard does not mean by ‘repetition” a monotonous drone of the “same old-same old” -- boring and maddening. Nor does he mean I should try, mightily, to repeat something (getting stronger by doing more laps, or by playing a musical passage over and over until I get it right). He means a joyous “déjà vu,” as in “I’ve been here before – and wow, I’m glad to be here -- it’s all fresh and I’m young again.” That’s an inspiring moment, a moment of birth, or rebirth, that can strike me as I read a familiar book, once again, or hear familiar music, once again, or find myself greeted by a child’s smile – once again. It’s the start of the world and the first breath of the soul lucky enough to be present in the moment of creation -- a creative
moment. This text is reborn, over and over, always beginning from scratch (though “I’ve been there before”).

So where does *Fear and Trembling* stand, now, in the 21st century, 200 years after Kierkegaard’s birth? Of course, it’s very much alive, harking to themes of vocation and self-discovery, of existential crisis and the wonders of birth and death, of a religious sensibility not chained down by doctrine or dogma, and of the wonder and terror that is humankind. It stands tall in any number of global, cultural settings, literary, philosophical, theological.

In my own case, it’s a loyal, resourceful, and provocative companion as I live through layers of more or less inscrutable yet inescapable questions: *what is a truth I can live and die for; what sort of genre, or way of writing – lyrical or dialectical – is best for pursuing living truths; why does gender move reason away from birth and toward death; how can I understand the shifting elasticity and amorphousness of reason and unreason; faith and unfaith; loves in collision; the sublime and the pedestrian. This is an amorphousness that makes reality escape single focus, leaving our human condition in so many poignant ways intractable.*

Kierkegaard enjoys impressive longevity because he knows, and can teach us, with Kafka, that “*One tries to imprison life in a book, like a songbird in a cage, but it’s no good.*”
Note to Dartmouth readers: I can provide citations for some of the quotes left hanging here. Email me for updates at efmooney@syr.edu.

NOTES  [Very Incomplete]

1 To be unable to provide clear answers in the sense of metaphysical justifications is not a defect. As Howard Wettstein says, “My attitude to religion and religious practice has similarities to the case of mathematics. I’m entirely confident about them. This is not to say that religion is for everyone, or that I cannot understand those to whom it does not speak. And my confidence is in part predicated on my leaving open the foundations, if that’s what they are.” (My emphasis). He goes on “the usual supernaturalist religious metaphysics provides a misleading picture of what the game is all about.” It is that game that Kierkegaard calls into question by leaving ‘metaphysical questions’ unanswered.

2 Fear and Trembling’s passionate faith and cool wisdom throw human and divine wisdom into question. Are we taught the wisdom of God’s ways – how to trust that we are in good hands? Perhaps the book is philosophical in denying we can grasp the wisdom of God’s ways. Wettstein comments on the Hebrew God’s questionable morality: “. . . God seems to mandate all manner of ethical evils, the killing of the inhabitants of the Promised Land, including women, children and animals. The “taking,” i.e. rape, of some of the women. Wettstein Many of the papers by Christian philosophers proposed some form of theodicy— explaining, justifying God’s mandates. This was roundly rejected by atheists. Such moves, the latter argued, are both altogether expected from religious advocates and altogether unacceptable, a good reason (among others) to reject religion. [In contrast] My talk reflected my distance from both perspectives. I began by introducing a related but even more devastating challenge to God’s justice: God’s treatment not of His/Israel’s enemies but of his beloved. Two heartbreaking cases are that of Job, already mentioned, and Abraham in the Akedah, Abraham’s response in Genesis 22 to God’s command to sacrifice his beloved Isaac. My approach to these issues is first and foremost to insist on, not to fudge on, what is morally plain. God’s motivation for these things is unfathomable.”

3 Wettstein: “In the beginning—in Tanakh—the dominant forms of talk about God were poetry, poetically infused narrative, parable, and the like. When talk of God undergoes something of a genre-transformation, from literary to philosophical, what take center stage are God’s properties, His perfections (omniscience, omnipotence, ethical perfection...) along with doctrinal propositions.”

4 The lyrical outpourings are responsive to the heavenly demand and belong with the poetry of German romantics and the poetry and dreams of the Hebrew Bible. The dialectical ‘problemata’ are responsive to the same inscrutable demand remain strangely inconclusive.

5 the aesthetic and ethical and religious and dialectical are cited in CUP as all relevant to the shaping of the personality of the subjective thinker.

6 de silentio passes on the secret that like lyric, it preserves the intractable as an inescapable in human reality Howard Wettstein has this to say: “Biblical narrative, parable, and the like, along with Midrash/Aggadah are in the Jewish context as close as one gets to theology—until the Middle Ages with its full-blown philosophical theology. And this earlier “theology” is largely literary in genre, much closer to the arts than to the doctrinal theology of the medievals. The stark contrast between the earlier and later modes of theology came as a shock to me; they represent very different approaches to their project. Indeed I’m inclined to think that they fail to engage a single project. They appear to emerge from distinct religious sensibilities.” (My emphasis.) See The Significance of Religious Experience, and Other Essays, 2012. And here are his reflections on ‘theology’: “If one uses the term “theology” for the earlier reflections on divinity, theology becomes a literary frame for religious practice, a way to emphasize and enhance the moral and spiritual significance of religious life, a way to add to the power of that life to edify and transform. This is dramatically different enterprise than philosophical theology with its theoretical aim of providing a metaphysical underpinning. What emerges (and persists to this day) are what have always seemed to me heroic epistemological constructions, these by way of shoring up, justifying, rationalizing the metaphysical commitments.”

7 ! Wittgenstein says explanations come to an end. Stanley can’t even get explanations started.

8 In my earliest essay on F&T I suggested this.

9 Skepticism finds inscrutability in our ordinary relations to things in the world. Since most of us don’t worry about the stability of our ordinary relations to things in the world, global philosophical skepticism can seem idle play. Kierkegaard shifts attention to inscrutability in our relation to values and persons in moments of supreme importance and urgency. Johannes blocks the answer that the return of Isaac could justify obeying God, and blocks the answer that it must always be right to obey God. (In the attunement section he gives us several Abrahams who obey yet are not of faith.) There is no lucid answer to the question what was going on in Abraham’s mind. There is no lucid answer to the question what could absolve
Abraham from a charge of murder, or what could absolve God from the charge of inflicting cruel and unusual punishment. There is no lucid answer to the question how Abraham managed to have faith that Isaac would be returned, or how he could love Abraham even as he drew the knife.

10 This would mean looking at fine-grained aspects of momentous experience rather than at argument about sin or ethics or salvation pitched at a high level of abstraction. 20th and 21st century philosophy has not attended to awe, love, and gratitude, yet these are the keys to religious sensibility that, in my view, rather than doctrine, is fundamental. Wettstein characterizes the false picture as seeing “religious life as living atop a system of refined doctrine.”


Metaphysics becomes a tragic passion, born as a youthful yearning for explanatory system, then coming to grief, foundering, as an unrequited love, an aching, unanswered desire to know why. A biblical stance, installs passion for God (rather than for systematic explanation). A passionate “Why?” is met by a revelation that “comes out of No-where” and utterly fails the requirements of metaphysical explanation. For a yearning youth, the advent of love might relieve some metaphysical angst, and for a woeful Job the advent of a world stocked with wonders and terrors might relieve angst – but in neither case is the relief in virtue of gaining an explanation.

13 In the Hebrew bible, sometimes even God is perplexed at what he does. For Socrates, limits on knowledge reflect temporary ignorance that can be cured under proper tutelage. We are innately fitted out to make progress toward infinite knowledge. Inverting this position gives us the biblical position. We are not up to the task of acquiring infinite knowledge. Our basic design is flawed. We are in Error (or sin). Nevertheless, we yearn for the infinite.

14 Testing the validity of a command theory of ethics as a helpful response to Abraham’s crisis is an example of how to transform an existential darkness in experience into scholastic philosophical chess moves.

15 V. CONTEMPORARY WRESTLING: A QUESTION.

For a story about the teleological suspension of the ethical, let me start in an unlikely place. Danielle Coughlin is a North Andover High School senior who lives not far from here. This past winter she took first place in the 106-pound class in the state wrestling championship at Marshfield.15 It wasn’t her winning that defied all expectation – say, as Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son defies all expectation. It was her winning in an exclusively male competition. She defied the convention that disagreed that boy’s sports were for boys. She was successful in suspending that convention – breaking what seemed like an iron-clad rule. What could be more obligatory that the rule that boys sports are for boys?

Johannes de silentio, the pseudonym Kierkegaard picks as the author of *Fear and Trembling*, asks whether there can be a teleological suspension of the ethical. If Abraham climbing Mt Moriah to sacrifice his son is putting normal ethics on hold, suspending them, then the answer is that Abraham does suspend the ethical – he defies it by putting it on hold. If we think of ethics as iron-clad rules that lie behind conventional expectations, then Danielle violates ethics in defying the rule, “Boys sports are for boys,” just as Abraham violates ethics in defying the rule “Fathers don’t kill their sons.”

Now of course in philosophical and ordinary discourse ‘the ethical’ can mean several things. Is the rule “follow your heart” an ethical rule? Is the rule “don’t be disgusting” an ethical rule? We might say that Danielle is not violating an ethical rule because she isn’t harming anyone, and at most is violating a taboo, like a gender taboo against cross dressing – disgusting things don’t necessarily violate ethics. On the other hand, “follow your heart” might seem to be an ethical rule – like “Be true to yourself” – but if Danielle is following her passion, her heart, in wrestling, then she is being ethical – not suspending ethics.

Let’s leave it at this. Danielle and Abraham both violate enshrined social convention, and in that, put ethics on hold. Now if we want to expand the circle of ethics to include following your passion, or your heart, regardless of conventional expectation, then Danielle and Abraham are NOT suspending ethics as a whole, but only suspending ethics-as-convention.

At this point, you might want to know whether Abraham violates ethics. What does Kierkegaard take to be the scope of ethics? Does it include following your passion? If Abraham suspends ethics, does that mean that religion overrules ethics – normal expectations about good and evil?

In my view, to his credit, Kierkegaard leaves all these questions open – he raises problems without solving them, he does not simplify but complicates our understanding of religion, ethics, and so forth. Against the philosophical grain, and the grain of common sense, Kierkegaard attention to the fine-grain complexity of experience leads him to shun premature closure of complexity, and to preserve it to the end. This urge to complicate our reality, to combat our rage for order and explicit systematic finality is his virtue. Ethics just happens to overlap religion and etiquette and that strange region of singular attractions and disgusts that figure into the good and the bad, the better life and the worse. Unambiguous lucidity is not always a virtue in a world that is dark and difficult.

I could pursue any one of these issues, and still fall short of a definitive resolution to them. So let me just make some negative points. Kierkegaard doesn’t say that Abraham is ready to violate ethics. He doesn’t say ethics must exclude one’s deepest passions, or following one’s heart, nor must it exclude that deepest passion, the passion of faith. He doesn’t endorse the dictum “always obey God,” nor say straightforwardly that God is a source of value higher than ethics. If the sublime can be found in the pedestrian, then the divine can be found in ordinary good-heartedness.
Let me say one last thing about this last. We like to rank things, and Kierkegaard is often read as ranking religion over ethics, and both over aesthetics, and so it is assumed that there is a teleological suspension of ethics (which merely means that ethics can be put on hold if there is a higher religious demand in play, and that we are justified in violating ethics when this is the case).

But this assumes that Kierkegaard is interested in justifying Abraham, which he isn’t – any more than he’s interested in justifying the shopkeeper knight of faith, or the mother knight of faith. To say the suspension is teleological is not to say it is justified by a higher good. A good-to-be-attained shadows the knight’s sense that ethics, at least common convention, must be put on hold to be true to oneself or one’s passion. But the content of that passion can be given as a rule – say ‘obey the religious, obey god, or even always follow your passion. That would start a process of codification and hierarchical ordering of urgencies (the religious over the ethical) which opens the door to the sort of rational systematization Kierkegaard wants to resist and escape.

Kierkegaard raises questions we can find irresistible, even as their answers retreat in the fog. The point is to seek; to find is a hope, sometimes fulfilled, as often not. And fulfillment in seeking occurs when the questioning ceases, the seeking slacks in the enjoyment of a fulfillment bequeathed – not when conceptual seeking is answered by conceptual solutions.

Danielle Coughlin decided on a course of action that others would find shockingly inappropriate, in bad taste, and morally perverse, taboo – like walking naked to church: too obviously wrong to require an explicit rule forbidding it. She decided to pursue her childhood talent for wrestling on into high school competition, in an all-male, all boy sport. She thereby sacrificed more ‘feminine’ pursuits; she sacrificed being true to herself. She was plain and simple a girl, and turned against that bald fact. She ought to have been true to her gender and biology and become a cheerleader rather than a girl among boy-wrestlers. But was she untrue to herself? In fact, she followed her passion for wrestling, and so was true to herself.

Yet as she climbed toward that decision, we can imagine a conflict. It’s easy to imagine that she would be judged immoral, almost violating a sexual taboo. Danielle had to be aware that she would seem to be holding ordinary good sense and propriety in abeyance, in suspension. Now maybe ‘ethics’ is a narrower field of demands than the demands Danielle challenges – Abraham is ready to deny the demand not to kill; Danielle only denies the demand not to wrestle with boys. But let’s assume a broad sense of ethics that includes labeling taboos and things in bad taste. Ethics is that sphere of ‘doing what one does’ as a member of a community on pain of severing one’s connection with that community. At her moment of choice, Danielle had to put on hold – suspend – a broad sense of ethics that included suspending what are taken as taboos and things in bad taste, that included suspending ‘doing what one does’ as a member of a community.

I leave things there: an incomplete contemporary suspension of ‘ethics’ perhaps.

16 Job 14:1-15: Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. /He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not. /... For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, /... But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? Think, too, of Nietzsche’s version of the wisdom of Silenus: “better to die early; best never to have been born.”

17 This will do as a sweeping generalization. It needs to be modified if we take into account feminist philosophical criticism since, let us say, 1970. But see note 11, below.

18 A mothers holding a child is prominent in Fear and Trembling, and occurs elsewhere, as well. He broaches birth, weaning, and natality, before these become themes for philosophy in the late 20th century. A) In “The Diary of the Seducer,” Either Or I: “A married woman. . . has a moment. . . when she is even more charming than a young girl, inspires even more respect. . . I imagine her as healthy, blooming, luxuriantly developed; in her arms she is holding a child, on whom all her attention is turned, in whose the contemplation she is lost. It is a picture one might call the most charming human life has to offer; it is a nature myth, which therefore may be seen only in art, not in reality.” Hannay trans, p.73. (my emphasis). Kierkegaard is thinking of a Madonna and child, but also of his own mother. This image cannot be seen directly, but only through imagination and art. Kierkegaard’s mother-child portraits are surely works of art, as is his invention of the shopkeeper knight of faith. Hence they are ‘hidden’ to ordinary empirical observation, and accessed by imagination only. B) There are nursing mothers in Either Or II: “I have seen a poor woman . . . standing there in the rain and wind with a little one in her arms” Hong’s, 74, Hannay 421. C) Nursing (and weaning?) is also a prerogative of males: “... when the child has rested long enough at the mother’s breast it is laid at the father’s, and he too nourishes it with his flesh and blood. Hannay, 420, Hong’s 72. (my emphasis).

19 See Adrianne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, Norton, 1995

20 See Mooney, Excursions with Kierkegaard, ch 9, 10.

21 Johannes de silentio gives a ‘free interpretation’ of those aspects of the Genesis account that strike him as crucial. He is telling tales on a tale, or on part of a tale – in the style of Midrash. He is not giving a scholarly exegesis of the Genesis account committed to the entire story of the binding, including lead-in verses and follow-ups. Thus we should live with the segment he attends to – the journey up Moriah to the point of the impending sacrifice. From silentio’s point of view, whatever the outcome at the destination or the consolidation of the event as Abraham returns down the mountain, is beside the point. Silentio wants to know what Abraham was thinking on the way up, and leaves it at that.

22 Apophasis can be given a summary, formulaic definition. Or it can be a Midrashic illumination. Note the entirely apposite Wikipedia entry on ‘neti, neti’: “Adi Shankara [reports]: ‘The form of that person is like a cloth dyed with turmeric, or like
grey sheep’s wool, or like the scarlet insect called Indragopa, or like a tongue of fire, or like a white lotus, or like a flash of lightning. He who knows this—his splendor is like a flash of lightning. Now, therefore, the description of Brahman: “Not this, not this” (Neti, Neti).”

23 Metaphysical efforts are endeavors “that we can never abandon and yet are unable to carry to completion.” Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, London: St Martin’s Press, 1965, p. 295 [A 235-36; B 294-5].

24 The literature on Fear and Trembling is immense (though there are only two or three book-length treatments of this seminal work. Two helpful overviews are Gerome Gellman, Abraham, Abraham !: The Binding of Isaac, Ashgate, 2003, and John Lippitt, Routledge Guide to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling, Routledge, 2003. See also, Mooney, Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, SUNY, 1991.

25 But how startling? Readers with Genesis 21 and 22 in mind would not be utterly surprised at a weaning Sarah: “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast.” Claire Katz gives a thorough development of the feminine and maternal as a critical lens bringing Fear and Trembling into focus. Her meticulous Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca (Indiana, 2003), devotes more time to Fear and Trembling from a feminist standpoint than any essay or chapter I know, and is wonderfully helpful. Yet it relegates the figures of nursing mothers to a single footnote. If Kierkegaard-de silentio places weaning mothers so prominently as an obvious counterpoint to Abraham virtually at the beginning of his reflections, why are these mothers with blackened breasts so easy to censor? Critics, feminist or otherwise, and even the most meticulous ones, black out their news. See the text marked by note 16. The essays in Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard, ed. Celine Leon and Sylvia Walsh, Penn State 1997, make no mention of the mothers. The blindness is not just male.


27 The philosopher-psychotherapist Julia Kristeva will call this avoidance “abjection,” by which she means a nauseous revulsion at the viscous, s, and ill-defined. See Mooney, “Julia Kristeva: Tales of Love and Horror,” in Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, Vol 13, Kierkegaard’s Influence on the Social Sciences. Ed Jon Stewart, Ashgate, 2011.

28 Awe is a surprising constellation of humility and elevation, transcendence and immanence, we might say, and both the shopkeeper and Abraham know how to keep these alive together, neither negating the other. This two-way directionality is crucial to religious sensibility. See Wettstein.