

# What makes Johannes *de Silentio* sleepless?

## —An universal prescriptivist reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*\*

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### Abstract

This paper will examine Kierkegaard's concept of teleological suspension of the ethical, and argue that his insistence that Abraham cannot be ethically justified is unsuccessful and resulted from his narrow conception of “the ethical”. Next, I argue from the universal prescriptivist perspective in history of ethical theory, that the main purpose of his writing the book was to keep his contemporaries aware of what it means to praise Abraham. Lastly, I will suggest a more relevant alternative of the source of the book title.

**Key Words:** Kierkegaard, Teleological Suspension of the ethical, Fear and Trembling

### 1 Teleological suspension of the ethical?

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling (FT)*<sup>1</sup> is a controversial book. In order to “perceive the prodigious paradox of faith”, Johannes *de silentio*, the pseudonymous writer of *FT*, presents three problems: (1) “Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical”, (2) “Is there an Absolute Duty to God?”, and (3) “Was It Ethically Defensible for Abraham to Conceal his Undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac?” He answered yes to the first two problems, and no to the last. In a popular reading of Kierkegaard, this book is said to suggest that faith is higher than morality, and Abraham cannot be justified by any rational ethics<sup>2</sup>.

First, we have to identify what Johannes calls “the ethical”, but it is not an easy task. Through-

out *FT*, We have only one example directly referred as “ethical duty”, that is, “one must protect one's children”. We have to interpret what he calls “the ethical” in his assertion that Abraham do not belong to the sphere of the ethical.

Johannes' simple and direct definition of the ethical is posed in the first paragraph of each “problemata”. In the beginning of “Problema I”, he says:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all time. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its telos but it is itself the telos for everything outside itself, and when the ethical

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<sup>1</sup>*Fear and Trembling*, tr. by Howard H. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, 1983. References to Kierkegaard's works are by the sigla *FT*.

<sup>2</sup>A famous example is Brand Blanshard's “Kierkegaard on Faith”, *The Personalist*, 49, 1968, p. 5-22.

has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further. The single individual, sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy, is the individual who has his telos in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal. (*FT* 54)

Let's begin with interpreting this vague and difficult passage.

Johannes contrasts Abraham with Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus, who also sacrificed their children but, in contrast to Abraham, remained in the ethical sphere. Take Agamemnon's case. He sacrificed his daughter for the benefit of his community.

Abraham's rightness seems too obvious to Johannes, but we may hesitate to approve Agamemnon's decision unconditionally. For example, D. D. Raphael, an English moral philosopher, pointed out that it was not because his act was right but because it was wrong and cruel that his story had a strong impression to his contemporaries<sup>3</sup>. Why is Johannes so convinced of Agamemnon's rightness?

This definition of the ethical is Hegelian. Roughly speaking, in Hegelian system, an action is seen to be ethical if it promotes the welfare and value of the community. Agamemnon was a leader of the community and let public interest take precedence over private interest, or let his duty as a leader override his duty as a father. Johannes says that he sacrificed his daughter and himself in order to protect what is higher than the individual, that is, community, nation, or state.

In contrast to Agamemnon, Abraham is said to be willing to sacrifice Isaac for his faith (and for God), not for community and nation. Therefore, Johannes insists, he cannot be ethically justified.

Then, why is the duty "one should always obey God" not an universal duty? If "always obey God" is taken as an ethical duty, the story of Abraham will

not contain "suspension of the ethical".

An universal duty, like "one ought not to steal", applies to anyone. Such duties will sometimes be authorized as God's commands. In this sense, "God's precepts" are used abstractly as authority of morality. If this is God's precept, it is a precept to *all* human beings. In Abraham's case, however, the precept "sacrifice Isaac" is given *only* to Abraham, not as a patriarch or a head of a family, but as a particular individual. It was given because Abraham was Abraham, and only once at one time.

Ordinary morality does not include a guidance to such particular, special case, since God's commands are highly unlikely to be given directly. If we take the scriptural phrase "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26), God's commands cannot be reduced to duties that will promote public welfare, or rather, it may or must conflict ordinary morality and duty. Therefore, Johannes insists, if Abraham is right, there are absolute duties to God.

But cannot we imagine that, if the command to Abraham was really from God, people living with Abraham can understand his undertaking? Just as Iphigeneia understood his father's plight and accepted his undertaking, might Isaac accept his father? The command to Abraham, "sacrifice your son", was indeed given to Abraham as a particular individual. But can the precept "if God really commands you to do something directly, obey his words" not be one of the cardinal duties of a knight of faith? At least, those who have faith like Abraham's may admit and want to justify his action.

For Johannes, however, such a justification is impossible, because Abraham cannot communicate his intention to other people. In this way, the problem about an absolute duty to God is related to Problema III, that is, whether one is to be ethically blamed when one doesn't tell his intention to others.

It is certain that the Abraham's silence was the

<sup>3</sup>D. D. Raphael, *Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 51

main theme of *FT*. Johannes contends that “Abraham could not speak.” But I think it is a bit hard for us to take this insistence at face value. Abraham was in fact required to kill his son, and as a knight of faith, he was willing to do it. He overrode a general duty to protect his child with God’s particular command. In this, in one sense, I find no *logical* problems, as Johannes alludes. Indeed, even if Abraham had told his intention to his people, he would not have been understood. People would have seen him as somewhat tempted or corrupted by a demon, or of a evil character. But it is because God’s direct revelation rarely occurs and that God requires people to sacrifice one’s son is really hard to believe. But this is a practical difficulty and not a logical one. If, as Johannes suggests, Abraham cannot communicate to other people because his situation is “particular”, not universal, we cannot understand the whole story or Johannes’s speculation itself. Then, if Abraham cannot speak, it is because he cannot explain his situation *practically, not theoretically or logically*. At least, another knight of faith can understand Abraham’s situation and would want to admit he was right.

If one believes his action or decision is ethically justified, he must somehow *be able to* explain reasons to do it. This is the logic of justification, which most of us will accept. However, it is hard to see even in a very special situation like Abraham’s, one cannot be justified only because one cannot *in practice* tell his reason to others. Suppose Agamemnon had not told of his will to sacrifice his daughter because of some practical difficulty, for example, because of lack of time. It would not make his decision wrong or unjustified. He would have said, “I might be misunderstood, and, in practice, some surely will blame me, but after deliberation, I believe I ought to do it, and I will be justified in the most important sense.” If so, from my point of view, we have to say that the analysis Johannes gives us misses the point of ethical justification.

## 2 Johannes’s Sleeplessness

If we take these lines of reading, we are faced with the problems of what is it that Johannes cannot understand. What render him sleepless?

Then, we might wonder whether Johannes’s main point in this book is really to evaluate or to justify Abraham. In the end of each “Problema”, Johannes repeats the “either-or”. Either Hegelian theory of ethics is implausible, or else Abraham is lost. We can guess from these passages that Johannes’s definition of “the ethical” was his contemporary Hegelian, not his own. Then, the main arguments of *FT* are *modus tollens*, that is  $P \supset Q$  and  $\sim Q$ , therefore  $\sim P$ . To demonstrate this, Johannes needs to show somehow that Abraham was right, or can be ethically justified in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, but he didn’t. Then, we cannot see his demonstration successful. He can at most say that the an extreme type of faith can conflict with Hegelian morality.

Careful readers who read the book in Danish should have noticed that in *FT* such words as “Nød”, “Qval”, “Angst” are frequently used, but the very keywords “Frygt” and “Bæven” seldom occur<sup>4</sup>. Do we go too far if we say that in this lies Johannes *de silentio*’s silence?

Then, who is it that feels fear and trembling? Is it Abraham? Perhaps so. And Johannes himself, of course. He says, “There were countless generations who knew the story of Abraham by heart, word for word, but how many did it render sleepless?” (*FT* 28) But why? Could Johannes not sleep for fear that he should be put in Abraham’s situation? Did he identify himself with the father of faith? Did he expect one day God himself would start to talk to him? Some may want to say to him, “Well, Johannes, don’t take too seriously what will never happen to you. That was Abraham’s story and none of your business. In this civilized age, even terrible gods won’t require such a cruel thing. If God should really require you to do it, you can

<sup>4</sup>*Frygt* is used only two times and *Bæven* is never, except the title.

think about it afterwards. Why not take sleeping pills?"

### 3 An universal prescriptivist interpretation

Here I suggest that we reread *FT* against background of the theory of meta-ethics of the 20th century, especially universal prescriptivism.

In the "Preliminary Expectoration", Johannes speaks about a story of a preacher and a man who is suffering from sleeplessness (*FT* 28). A preacher who doesn't really understand Abraham's story can give a lecture on it. Abraham was great in that he was willing to sacrifice his son, and therefore he is to be praised. But if a sleepless man listens to the story, he might go home and want to do just as Abraham did. If the preacher knows it, he surely will stop the man. What if the man answers, "that was what you yourself preached about on Sunday?" Johannes continues:

How is a contradiction such as that of the speaker to be explained? It is because Abraham has gained a prescriptive right to be a great man, so that what he does is great and when another man does the same thing it is a sin, an atrocious sin? In that case, I do not wish to participate in such empty praise. (*FT* 30)

If Abraham is great, it cannot be because Abraham is Abraham. If we judge he is great, we must judge in the same way whoever is willing to do the same thing in the same situation. If we don't admit this, we are in linguistic contradiction. Moral judgment must be universalizable if it has full meaning. This is one of the main points that universal prescriptivism points out. The other point that universal prescriptivism take to be characteristic of moral judgment is prescriptivity. If I tell you that I ought not to smoke in this room, and nevertheless I smoke in this room, you will doubt I am not talking

to you sincerely, or suspect I do not know the meaning of the words.

Let us return to the story. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. In contrast, that sleepless man was given no command of God. So the story sounds comical. We ordinary people are never likely to be given His command. In addition, some insist that it is logically impossible that we be put in exactly the same situation as Abraham. But, if we say that Abraham ought to do what he did, we must, at least, *now* be ready to do exactly what he did *if* we should be in his position. Whether I have a child or not, this may be dreadful. What we say about Abraham may require us now to have readiness to commit homicide *now*. Moreover, because of universalizability of moral judgment, we are required to be ready now to be sacrificed if we are put in Isaac's position. It is really hard for us to put ourselves in Abraham's situation, who, without any sympathetic assistance from others and without any guidelines, as required to sacrifice his son, or in Isaac's situation, who, without being informed, as to be sacrificed, and to take it seriously, and nevertheless judge that Abraham did what he ought to do, and to admit, if we were in his position, to do what he did.

These are the very essentials that universal prescriptivists like R. M. Hare emphasis about logic of moral judgment<sup>5</sup>.

If we give more attention to this point of Johannes, we can see now that his repeated claims that "I can't understand Abraham" or "faith is paradox" are not concerned with logical or epistemological difficulties. It is not even a problem in ethical theory, either. By such phrases, he confesses that, if he were in Abraham's situation, he could not do what Abraham did. Johannes, who is not a knight of faith, is not ready to sacrifice his son. It is psychological or motivational difficulty.

Those who lightly say that Abraham was great only approve of Abraham because they are blindly following some authority. Their ethical judgments

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<sup>5</sup>R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, Oxford, 1952. *Moral Thinking*, Oxford, 1981.

have lost their proper force.

If we take this interpretation, I think we can see more clearly the main point of Johannes, that is, to analyze “speech” in ethical context and make people aware of its proper requirement.

This affinity of Johannes’s thought and universal prescriptivism is not a coincidence. I think there might be textual justification for my allegation.

We are afraid to let people loose; we are afraid that the worst will happen as soon as the single individual feels like behaving as the single individual. .... I can share neither that fear (Frygt) nor that opinion, and for the same reason. Anyone who has learned that to exist as the single individual is the most terrible (det Forfældige) of all will not be afraid to say that it is the greatest of all .... It may well be that there are those who need coercion, who, if they were given free rein, would abandon themselves like unmanageable animals to selfish appetites. But a person will demonstrate that he does not belong to them precisely by showing that he knows how to speak in fear and trembling (Angst og Bævelse), and speak he must out of fear (Frygt) of harm, which certainly will not come if he speaks out of a knowledge of greatness, a knowledge of its terrors, and if one does not know the terrors, one does not know the greatness, either. (*FT* pp. 74-5.)

Surprisingly, this passage is the *only* one that contains the word “Frygt” in the book. Johannes stresses here that we *should* speak in “Angst og Bævelse”, and this will help us to prevent ourselves from ethical confusion. We know we need sincerity, seriousness, fear and trembling whenever we pass any proper ethical judgment, but we always forget it in our daily life. In “Preface”, Johannes talks

about Descartes, “he did what he said and said what he did. Alas! Alas! Alas! That is a great rarity in our day.” (*FT* 5) In the “Epilogue”, he talks about the episode that the merchants of Holland had a few cargoes sunk in the sea in order to jack up the price. One of Johannes’ hidden intention is clearly to make us recall the importance of sincerity of utterance in ethical theory. He wants to make us recall the extremely high cost of faith. Then, his target is not only Hegelian thinkers but also those who constantly make the price fall by lip worship, that is, us ourselves.

This course of interpretation lets us understand why Kierkegaard had to express his idea indirectly in the name of Johannes *de silentio*. Knowledge about the fact is directly communicable. But one’s moral principles or moral judgments cannot be communicated fully by simply mentioning them. As R. M. Hare pointed out, the best way to know one’s moral principle is not to hear what he says but to see what he does<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4 The alternative source of *Fear and Trembling*

I have pointed out that fear in *Fear and Trembling* is not only fear for God, but also fear which one must feel whenever one is to pass any ethical judgment. But this interpretation may seem not to correspond to the title of the book, since *Fear and Trembling* is said to have come from Paul’s words, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling .” (Phil. 2:12)

I admit it is somehow hard to find a link between this sentence and my interpretation. But in reality, as I have mentioned above, there’s no phrases “fear (Frygt) for God” in *FT*. I want to suggest an alternative source, that is, also Paul’s words, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey

<sup>6</sup>R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, p. 1

Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.” (“Tjenerre! lyder Cders Herrer efter Kiødet, med Frygt og Bæven, i Cders Hiertes Eenfordighed, som Christo.”) (Eph. 6:5-6. Emphasis added.) This passage surely requires us our sincerity and consistency in our speech, deed, and heart. It is indeed needless to say that, since Kierkegaard was very familiar with the Bible and its inner relations, we don’t have to single out the source of “fear and trembling” from the candidates. But I think this

passage is more relevant and close to Johannes’s point.

If we could interpret *FT* in this way, Johannes’s concern in this book was not whether Abraham can be ethically justified, or how we can justify him. Rather, his main concern was to point out the required relation between our ethical discourse and our action and readiness. In this respect, his position was much closer to modern philosophers who are engaging in meta-ethics, and should be given more attention in the history of ethics.