

---

## *Masks and Commitment: An Introduction*

People think the world needs a republic, and they think it needs a new social order, and a new religion, but it never occurs to anyone that what the world really needs, confused as it is by much learning, is a Socrates.

—Anti-Climacus<sup>1</sup>

a modern Dante, who narrates a complex, at least in part Kantian-inspired journey through the self.

—R. Z. Friedman<sup>2</sup>

Should philosophy, amongst its other conceits, imagine that someone might actually want to follow its precepts in practice, a curious comedy would emerge.

—Johannes de silentio<sup>3</sup>

ALTHOUGH IT WAS hardly more than a backward provincial capital among the cultural centers of Europe, mid-nineteenth century Copenhagen was the hub of Denmark's "Golden Age" of literature and art. It was a time of creative ferment in which Kierkegaard played a leading if vastly unappreciated part.<sup>4</sup> He was eccentric, unpredictable and eclectic in his creative invention: writer

and critic, moralist and psychologist, preacher and gadfly—a poet against poetic life, a Christian against Christendom, a thinker against Philosophy.

In the seven years between 1843 and 1850, Kierkegaard published more than two dozen books. On October 16, 1843, *Fear and Trembling* appeared, produced by Johannes de silentio. On the same day, *Repetition* was printed under a different pseudonym. These two books were accompanied by a small volume of character-building “uplifting” or “edifying” discourses, printed under Kierkegaard’s own name. A scant eight months earlier, his authorship had begun in earnest with the publication in two hefty volumes of *Either/Or*. There he presented his readers with what would become recognized as a classic “existential choice”: *either* an ironic, aesthetic, and relatively rootless life, marked by alienation from self; *or* a more grounded ethical existence, which required choosing to *become* a self. In the next two and a half years he published an early “psychological” work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, the more dialectical *Philosophical Fragments*, the literary *Stages on Life’s Way*, and finally the massive *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, an unconcluding satirical deflation of bourgeois-Hegelian moral and intellectual pretenses. By any standard, this is a phenomenal explosion of literary and intellectual activity.

A relatively short book, *Fear and Trembling* is nevertheless a crucial volume in this production. Ostensibly, it is Kierkegaard’s commentary on the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, the story of God’s demand that Abraham bring his son to be sacrificed on Mt. Moriah. In fact, Kierkegaard takes this occasion to range widely beyond the biblical text—to raise doubts about his countrymen’s understanding of ethics and faith, to awaken them from spiritual complacency, to probe the possibilities for individual life in an age that threatens to level all to a sleepy collective mediocrity. His “knight of faith” and “knight of infinite resignation” are gallant heroes ready to battle for a worthy self, a self properly related to itself, to its social and personal context, and to God.

Kierkegaard subtitles this evocation of moral and religious consciousness *Dialectical Lyric*, which I take to mean “philosophical lyric.” Kierkegaard himself would resist. For him, *philosophy* is a pejorative he reserved for bankrupt intellectual system-building. Unfortunately, others have adopted this equation of philosophy with abstract, detached and impersonal theorizing. Nearly twenty years ago, Louis Mackey presented Kierkegaard as “a kind of poet,” and since then, a debate has continued over whether to characterize this author as lyrical or dialectical, poet or philosopher.<sup>5</sup> But why *choose*?

A hallowed tradition places poetry and philosophy sharply at odds, a tradition begun, but also first challenged, by Plato. Failing to question this radical bifurcation, however, only impoverishes philosophy, especially our moral philosophies. As Martha Nussbaum has reminded us,

Very few moral philosophers, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, have welcomed stories, particulars, and images into their writing on value. Most have regarded these elements of discourse with suspicion. As a result, contrasts between the mixed and the pure, between story and argument, the literary and the philosophical are . . . sharply drawn . . .<sup>6</sup>

A major part of her literary and philosophical effort has been to soften the lines between literature and philosophy, thus enriching our moral discernments. And Kierkegaard's (or Johannes's) aim in this "dialectical lyric" is to soften these borders, thus awakening our capacities for moral self-reflection. The depth and scope of a Dante or Plato, a Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, is surely sufficient to earn the accolade "Poet and Philosopher." Hume's Philo reflects that in considering human pain or misery, it is "[t]he poets, who speak from sentiment, without a system, . . . whose testimony has therefore the more authority."<sup>7</sup> Yet the display of human vulnerability and the articulation of aesthetic, moral, and religious realities that engage it, is an aim not just of poets, but—despite Philo—of Hume, as well. If nothing else is said on behalf of Kierkegaard as a *philosopher*, we should acknowledge the avowedly dialectical works he writes with Socrates as their hero.<sup>8</sup> He may be anti-systematic, and in pursuit of a paradoxical wisdom that is ignorance, but Socrates is hardly antiphilosophical. At some level, Kierkegaard's love of Socrates is a love of philosophy.

A first-time reader of *Fear and Trembling*, especially a reader of philosophical bent, will be struck by this enigma of a hybrid lyrical-dialectical text. But there are other enigmas, as well. There is Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms, each with a distinct perspective on the issues at hand. Why adopt this technique? Why *disguise* one's moral position? Then there is this writer's fascination with "the absurd," his apparent irrationalism. Should a prudent intellectual even *open* such a book? Finally, by self-description, Kierkegaard is a Christian author, through and through. How can this commitment *not* prejudice his accounts?

### The Writer and His Masks

Along with the slogan "truth is subjectivity" and the idea of a "leap of faith," Kierkegaard's three-stage scheme of personal development retains a secure position in his legacy. The aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres of life are given striking portrayals in his pseudonymous works. Somewhat surprisingly, however, *Stages on Life's Way* is the only book to identify *exactly* these three as the crucial stages.

*Either/Or* describes a divide between two stages, the ethical and the aes-

thetic, with the latter ornately subdivided. "The crowd" of *Two Ages* seems to represent a preaesthetic stage. And in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus divides the third, religious stage in half, contrasting "Religiousness A," a Socratic religious consciousness, from "Religiousness B," a more recognizably Christian consciousness. As if this were not enough, he then introduces the further intermediate stages of irony and humor.

There are even more twists to the idea of a simple three-rung ladder of personal development. For example, Abraham seems to represent a religious stage somewhere between Religiousness A and Religiousness B. Richard Schacht suggests the sequence *Socrates, Abraham, Christ*, as representing the major shifts in religiosity.<sup>9</sup> And Merold Westphal has suggested that there is a religious stage *beyond* the *Postscript's* Religiousness B. In his view, this stage is articulated in the late religious works, often called the *attack literature*.<sup>10</sup> Thus we might have as many as four religious stages, and overall upwards of a dozen distinct life-views. Granting these complications, however, *Fear and Trembling* can still be placed in a rough way both within the corpus of Kierkegaard's authorship and within the scheme of his "stages."

In *Either/Or* a paradigmatic ethical personality, a certain Judge William, tries to coax a nameless figure identified only as "A" out of his aesthetic perdition. Whether his momentary whim is pleasure or idle reflection, the aesthete fails at realizing a self; and as the judge addresses him, this young man seems already to dimly sense his failure. He fails, so the Judge declares, because he fails to *choose* himself—a formula the judge prefers to the Socratic dictum, "*know* thyself." The first stage of self-formation is to accept the *task* or *project* of self-formation. One strives to become the very self one is. Even as Kierkegaard refines the details of later stages and marks their discontinuities, he maintains this early view, that one's fundamental responsibility in life is to become oneself.<sup>11</sup>

If a rough contrast between aesthetic and ethical life-views is established in *Either/Or*, a subsequent transition from the ethical toward the religious is explored in *Fear and Trembling*. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac presents an apparently intractable conflict between ethics and faith. The security and comforts of respectable civic virtue and conventional ethics are put at risk. In fact, reason and sanity themselves seem at stake. As a paragon of the religious sphere, Abraham seems to believe not only that it is fit to sacrifice one's son on God's demand, but also that the very God who requires Isaac will also provide for his safe return. How can one count on a God who gives and takes at whim? What could be more irrational—at least from the standpoint of a modern "enlightened" age?

If Johannes puts ethics and reason to the test, our task will be to show that they *survive* this ordeal. Kierkegaardian faith is *not* simply *blind obedience* held "by virtue of the absurd."

Our present focus, however, is the question of masks or pseudonyms. We can begin with Johannes de silentio himself, a writer who characterizes himself as a *freelancer*. He confesses a weakness for poetic expression, and suggests that his standpoint is aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> What *is* an aesthetic standpoint?

Unfortunately, the answer is not simple. The pseudonymous literature as a whole might be considered an "aesthetic production," given Kierkegaard's clearly aesthetic technique of speaking through pseudonyms, rather than in his own voice. But there is a second, narrower sense of the term. Here an aesthetic pseudonym is not just *any* Kierkegaardian pseudonym. He would be one with a particular style, a particular "aesthetic" passion: one who reveled in his command of story-telling, dramatic evocation, poetic description, and satire, to the *exclusion* of more dialectical, analytical, or psychological techniques. An "aesthetic standpoint" would refer to a kind of writing or invention rather than the standpoint of a pseudonym generally. Finally, an aesthetic standpoint might refer to a way of life rather than a kind of writing or the fact of pseudonymity. A person, fictive or otherwise, can *live* in the aesthetic sphere, conduct a life under *its* categories of appraisal, rather than under moral or spiritual ones. On this complex threefold measure, the author "A," whose papers are collected in *Either/Or*, would be an aesthetic author on *all* counts: He *lives* in the aesthetic life-sphere, presents his work as a literary experiment, and does not have the name *Kierkegaard*. Johannes Climacus of the *Postscript*, however, would satisfy only one of the three criteria: He is a pseudonym. Otherwise, he uses mainly *dialectical* techniques and seems to occupy a stage in life *higher* than the aesthetic.

Johannes de silentio defies easy categorization. He is a pseudonym, but a pseudonym who writes not *simply* lyric, but *dialectical* lyric. Although he often describes himself as one who speaks poetically, who will adopt an aesthetic manner or approach, he also unequivocally *denies* that he is a poet. He complicates matters further by calling himself a *tragic hero*, and a knight of *resignation*. So perhaps he *lives* under ethical or even quasi-religious categories.<sup>13</sup> But however we decide the issue of Johannes's standpoint, it is clear that he does not occupy the *religious* sphere of life. Yet this is the sphere he attempts to fathom.

Should we credit an account of religious life from a writer who admits that he does not fully understand the categories he works to articulate? Kierkegaard castigates the burghers of Copenhagen for covering over a chasm between their apparent moral and religious beliefs and the actual conduct of their lives, careers lived at the farthest remove from the hard demands of ethics or Christianity. But why should Johannes de silentio be better equipped than his neighbors to report on the state of spiritual life in Denmark, or to suggest appropriate corrections? Perhaps, his scathing critique and his purported "discovery" of a "teleological suspension of ethics"

—that is, a sphere *higher* than ethics—merely demonstrate his *ignorance*, show that he is an untrustworthy guide.

What could be the rationale for Kierkegaardian pseudonyms? In this fictive gallery, in addition to Johannes de silentio, we encounter Victor Eremita (editing the papers of “B,” addressed to “A” in *Either/Or*), Nicolaus Notabene, author of some *Literary Prefaces*, Johannes Climacus, author of the *Fragments* and *Postscript*, and later even Anti-Climacus, author of *Sickness Unto Death*. Surely it was no secret in Copenhagen whose pen worked behind the masks! This odd convention is not an author’s doomed attempt to hide himself from his public.<sup>14</sup> Rather, Kierkegaard sees its pedagogical resources for the task at hand, its capacity to bring light to a benighted age.

How can he correct the moral confusions he finds rife in his time? How does he teach a town or an age that it radically misunderstands existence, that it fails to grasp the *true* import of those virtues, ideals, convictions, and stories that *should*—but do *not*—round out and enrich the substance of its daily life? What can possibly *persuade*, when misunderstanding runs so deep?

Throughout his authorship, Kierkegaard wrote short collections of “edifying” discourses, quasi-sermons meant to explore spiritual issues and biblical texts in a way that would transform, build up, and inspire his readers.<sup>15</sup> These were direct religious appeals. But the homiletic format, by its very *familiarity*, limited the desired impact. Of *course*, a sermon, pep-talk, or graduation address, will inspire! And with this recognition, we drowse off. Toward the end of his life, Kierkegaard confronted his public more directly in a series of vitriolic attacks on the Danish Church hierarchy. Like the discourses, this polemical “attack literature” was signed in his own name. But his most original creation was a stable of fictive authors whose confessions, letters, disquisitions, parodies, and polemics define the multiple perspectives of the “stages on life’s way.”

The aim is to expose radical and widespread misunderstanding. But it may be ineffective to launch a broad frontal attack on the public at large, or on a local congregation. An indirect method focused on the *individual* may be less liable to backfire. The use of pseudonyms is a pedagogical strategy. It works by first drawing readers one by one into a life-view. The view is meant to appeal inwardly, as if in fact it could be one’s *own*. Having established a sympathetic bond with the reader, the pseudonym can then expose, from *within* that intimate relationship, its limitations and inadequacies.

When successfully deployed, this technique corrects and transforms by insuring that one becomes fully identified—intellectually and emotionally—with the perspective that is developed. Then, when inevitable instabilities emerge, the underlying critique is experienced as *self-critique*, rather than as presumptuous judgmental attack. And the corresponding motivation to seek some sort of resolution, through further emotional, imaginative, and decisional labor, is experienced as *self-motivation*.

Because individual choice, responsible freedom, plays so large a part in the transformations Kierkegaard encourages, many critics see the conversion to a new framework, the choice of a new stage, as arbitrary.<sup>16</sup> In *After Virtue*, Alastair MacIntyre accords Kierkegaard a considerable honor. He sees him as a penetrating philosophical critic, along with Hume and others, of the suspect "Enlightenment Project" in ethics—the search for a single, omniscient, and rational guide to moral action. But MacIntyre also depicts Kierkegaard—mistakenly—as endorsing a thoroughgoing subjectivism. When it comes to moving between life-spheres, the individual purportedly faces a "groundless choice." At the theoretical level, this creates a dizzying kind of stage-relativism. Those wonderful catchphrases, "the leap of faith" and "truth is subjectivity," lend credence to these views.<sup>17</sup>

If Kierkegaard fails to give an explicit *objective standard* for assessing better from worse stage-shifts, this failure is taken, by MacIntyre and others, as evidence of fundamental irrationality. But Kierkegaard's moralistic and dialectical critiques are *not* irrationalist. Neither are the shifts from one life-sphere to another. His much advertised "irrationalism" is less a critique of reason or deliberation than an exasperated reaction to the bloated intellectualism, hyperrationalism, and antiindividualism of his time.

### Reason in Transformations

In moments of personal crisis, the structure of one's situation and its internal conflicts are experienced as a conflict of *reasons*. In addition, reason sheds some light on ways to resolve—or not to resolve—the crisis. Our situation may be vastly *underdetermined* by reason. There will be risk, obscurity, and doubt in any crucial transition. However, in the midst of a shift from one life-view or scheme to another, we are not *utterly* at a loss for rationales. Though reason may lack sufficient force to settle issues *decisively*, it is far from weightless in the reflective, deliberative process.

As instabilities within a given life-sphere emerge, the sense of anxiety, constraint, and *need* for change will increase. And as the source of frustration becomes focused, there will emerge a specific reason for altering the particular circumstances that create this frustration. Other things being equal, it cannot be irrational to act in the hope of diminishing conflict and pain. In addition, the richer one's personal history, the more one will have undergone in the way of suffering, imaginative reflection, and self-transformation. This means that the futility of *some* strategies or options will be apparent. One's failures in previous stages will provide reasons to *avoid* aspects of those frameworks or orientations.

Finally, portraits of new ideals, new spheres of existence, display rea-

sons as *options* to the individual in transitional crisis. Although they are not self-authenticating proofs of the superiority of the possibilities they propose, neither are these portraits, on that score alone, *irrational* proposals. They provide maps of possible escape and fulfillment, of refuge from alienation and suffering. Of course, the major philosophical tradition from Descartes through Kant identifies reason largely with Pure or Theoretical Reason and describes its goal as providing *demonstrations* meant to persuade "any rational being." But why assume that this allegiance to Pure Reason, commendable in itself, *exhausts* the domain of reason?

Imaginative, narrative portrayal can play a number of crucial roles in reflective deliberation. It can provide diverse models of the good life and of the several ways we can fail in its pursuit. As Hilary Putnam has it, philosophers provide "moral images" of the world, pictures of how virtues and rules "hang together" in a moral life.<sup>18</sup> We need narrative images rich enough to *inspire* worthy action. Philosophical narratives play a central role in the practical moral task of imagining another person's reality or perceptions and in imagining development in one's *own* moral sensibilities and sensitivities. And they speak in the reflective exploration and articulation of human experience generally.<sup>19</sup>

When sensitively addressed to the specific needs and capacities of a listener, Kierkegaard's literary and dialectical excursions provide an ample reservoir of reasons for change. In fact, we can think of the overall project of his authorship as a *passionate exercise in rational critique*.<sup>20</sup>

Presupposing central requirements of rationality like respect for consistency and truth, Kierkegaard argues, for example, that a bloated Hegelian intellectualism is absurd, for it neglects our true condition. His critique of various foolish or incomplete forms of life appeals to our sense of what is fitting for a human being. And despite the formidable difficulties, it is *reason* that will finally pry real from fake devotion, better from worse religiosity.

Take the transition from aesthetic to ethical existence. The judge in *Either/Or* says to the aesthete, in effect, "*Look! Your life need not be lost. It could be like this!*" And in pointing to a different and better life, he provides appropriate and potentially compelling reasons for change, reasons which provide a *critique* of the aesthete's present situation, an *analysis* of its intolerability, and a *model* for conversion, for its happy resolution. If later we challenge the *Judge's* authority or standing to recommend, that will be because we have come upon a concrete reason to doubt the sufficiency of *his* perspective. And so forth. Standards of evaluation may be plural and shifting in import, enriched or depleted as dialogue continues over time. And in matters of personal change, it is surely vain to hope for a single argument-stopping standard to remove all uncertainties. But this by no means entails that moral or spiritual change is arbitrary or based on groundless choice.



Some argue that Kierkegaard's final "stage on life's way," the life-view of the *Postscript's* "Religiousness B," provides a compelling, overarching standard. This standard is purportedly adequate to rationally evaluate and rank stage-shifts. McKinnon, for example, seems to hold this view: "The early pseudonymous works can be seen as a carefully orchestrated justification of Christian belief which, taken together, show that it is only Christianity which properly accentuates existence and guards against the 'forgetfulness' of philosophy."<sup>21</sup> I think it is unlikely that the pseudonyms attempt or accomplish this task. Exploring this proposed larger Kierkegaardian strategy, however, is something to set aside. It would mean considering the pseudonymous authorship as a whole, and would take us too deeply into the subtleties of Johannes Climacus's skepticism about traditional justifications of faith. In the *Postscript* he advances a skepticism that seems at odds with any philosophical attempt to justify Christian belief.

One can take the critique of reason that we find in the *Postscript* or in *Fear and Trembling* to be overstated, as both McKinnon and I do. And one can take this critique to be part of a larger but nonetheless *rational* strategy. For example, one could see Kierkegaard's aim as the rational illumination of the *need* for religion, and the neglect and distortion of that need by the complacency and self-deceptive devices of his contemporaries. Either of these rational critiques would fall short of a *justification* of Christian faith. In any case, Kierkegaard's project is clearly not a philosophical defense in the traditional mode.

I think Johannes de silentio provides a reflective and persuasive account of faith. But this project is not pursued through straightforward appeal to universal abstract standards or principles meant to recommend themselves to "any rational mind." Though *some* of his aims and conclusions may resemble those of Mill, Aristotle, or Kant, Johannes does not argue in their style. Instead, his justifications—or better, his *explications*—are advanced through imaginative, narrative portrayal, through *lyrical* dialectic.

Kierkegaard may forego the search for a single universally persuasive standard for moral or spiritual advance. But this abdication does not taint the search for *individually* persuasive, locally addressed reasons for change. These reasons could be called subjective or personal in several senses. Their mode of delivery is intimate, personal. They are not addressed to a public at large, or meant to convince "any rational person," but are directed sensitively to a very specific individual, geared to respond to *her* needs. And with regard to the content as well as the manner of delivery, these reasons concern the life-project, the individual identity, of a particular person—not what might be required universally for a public at large, or for "any rational being." Later, I will argue that such "subjective reasons" are in no sense inferior or second best citizens in the world of rational discourse. When

appropriately deployed, they are persuasive, and rightly so.<sup>22</sup>

Kierkegaard's method respects the responsibility and autonomy of the reader, who must struggle through a process of assimilation and disharmony on the way to final acceptance of a saving resolution. This deliberative process is bypassed if one is merely the passive target of a hectoring moralistic appeal or if one is given reasons that fail to "get through" for lack of sensitivity to the particular person addressed—however attractive such reasons might seem to "any rational mind."

This may seem too "subjective" an approach. But then, perhaps in such matters we retain an exorbitant expectation. Traditionally, ethics has hoped for a single, universally persuasive standard for the evaluation of human existence, one that bypasses any consideration of "merely contingent" individual need, character, or psychology and is not in conflict with other persuasive universal standards. But is reliance on concrete, familiar, and more particular "subjective" appeals *less* rational than the (so far unfulfilled) hope for a single abstract and omniscient moral standard?

Discussing Hume, Annette Baier characterizes a view of the function of moral reflection that might be Kierkegaard's:

[He reserves] the title of really moral response [to the reflexive turning of [our] capacities for sympathy, for self-definition and for conflict recognition on themselves, leading to sympathetic comparative evaluation of different styles of self-definition, styles of watching for and managing conflicts, of inhibiting or cultivating sympathy. The Humean concept of 'reflexion' performs the same sort of job as Kantian reason—it separates the mature and morally critical from the mere conformers.<sup>23</sup>

Rational reflection can be self-corrective leading to improved standpoints without reliance on an articulated universal standard of Reason.

The strength of Kierkegaard's pedagogic device—producing multiple perspectives addressed to particular individuals—has liabilities. If one relativizes the critique of a given way of life to the standpoint of a particular pseudonym, then it becomes risky either to generalize the scope of that critique or to identify a view advanced by a pseudonymous writer as *Kierkegaard's* opinion. Some proposals are set out only provisionally, later to be revised or rejected. Others clearly belong to a pseudonym and simultaneously belong to a central cluster of unwavering Kierkegaardian convictions. Thus the fact that an opinion is voiced by a pseudonym is not evidence that Kierkegaard *disavows* that opinion.

Real though it is, this difficulty is somewhat offset by the fact that later pseudonyms comment on earlier ones. In addition, Kierkegaard himself eval-

uates their specific contributions and describes the overall strategy of his authorship. We can find such maps to his productions in *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, in the "First and Last Declaration" found in the *Postscript*, and in the *Journals*. Unfortunately, even the remarks made in his own voice cannot always be trusted.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, on many issues, there is enough continuity of theme across pseudonyms and between pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous works to allow us to make provisional claims, not just about Johannes de silentio's views, say, but also about Kierkegaard's views in *Fear and Trembling*. And we can often leave the matter open. In any case, the difficulty is neither accidental nor perverse. In the interest of reflective autonomy, we are made to work through this interpretative maze, gathering clues as we go. There are no secret maps or shortcuts.

When we place the pseudonymous authorship against the background of those works that Kierkegaard signs with his own name, unsettling worries about attribution can fade. The cumulative effect of these critiques sinks in. Their richness, variety and scope ensure a standing with the roughly contemporaneous achievements of Marx or Nietzsche, of Hegel, Dostoevsky, or Freud.<sup>25</sup> They form one of the great diagnostic critiques of our age, of our collective misperceptions, mistaken aspirations, and pervasive malaise. But as important as this social critique of his "disenchanted" times is his relentless *self*-examination.

There is a personal, confessional path in his works. His broad moral and spiritual psychology is also *self*-revelatory. And in this we find a parallel with Dante. At the opening of the *Divine Comedy* we find the poet-narrator midway in the journey of his life. He finds himself anxiously lost in a dark forest, searching his way. His ensuing travels through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise trace the wanderings of a soul that both judges its world and is in search of itself, the path depicted as a gradual ascent from darkness to light. Perhaps we have in our poetic, philosophical Dane a modern Dante, narrating "a complex journey through the self," tracing a search for substance amidst emptiness, light amidst dark.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Christian Assumption**

His curious menagerie of pseudonyms raises one sort of stumbling block for readers. Kierkegaard's Christian commitment can raise another. To what extent can he speak to those who fail to share his fervent devotion? Can he be taken seriously in a secular, or at best religiously pluralistic, age?

The chapters that follow mark my own try at tracking the value in Kierkegaard's vision, especially in *Fear and Trembling*. These several stud-

ies, rather than any summary pronouncements, must serve as my best answer to a general skepticism about religious matters. Nevertheless, let me make one or two preliminary, cautionary observations.

The complex critique of Christendom and simultaneous affirmation of a more authentic religiosity that we find in Kierkegaard has an interesting parallel in the mixture of critique and commitment found in the novels of Dostoevsky. On first reading *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, one is moved by Ivan's account of the brutal suffering of children and convinced that this suffering presents insurmountable obstacles for belief in a benign and all-powerful God. The novel seems to present a devastating critique of Christian assumption. The devoutly religious figures, Alyosha and Zossima, can seem ghostly at first, little more than convenient foils for Ivan's impassioned accusations. The subtlety of their spiritual stance and the shallowness of Ivan's is likely to appear only on later readings. The cruelty of his voyeuristic fascination with evil is not likely to register early. *Fear and Trembling* likewise appears differently in different lights, the apparent horror of faith being more vivid initially than any more subtle account that might emerge with time.

Whatever his final agenda, Kierkegaard *starts* with largely secular, even preethical perspectives. Johannes de silentio is not a Christian author, and stops short of discussion of specifically Christian faith. Only gradually, and by discrete degrees, does Kierkegaard move toward an analysis of religious consciousness and the proposal, finally, of a *specific* mode of faith.

His writing spans psychological, moral, and aesthetic themes that are explored independent of their possible ramifications for a religious way of life. In *Fear and Trembling* and the *Postscript*, for example, we have conceptual-experiential clarifications of anxiety, love, commitment, and despair; vivid portraits of aesthetic and moral lives; critiques of life in a soulless, "disenchanted" market society; sketches of life within the categories of irony or humor or within a kind of Socratic religious humanism; and portrayals of Abraham's Old Testament faith. It should be easy enough to recognize ourselves in, and learn from, many of these portraits and critiques, none of which presupposes a narrowly Christian framework.

And we should not rush to judge what "Christianity" might *mean*, either in general or for Kierkegaard. Evaluations need time to take their appropriate shape. It is too easy to know in advance that Marx would make us Communist, that Hegel is an Idealist, that Dostoevsky sides with the Russian Church, that Nietzsche proclaims "God is Dead." To take early comfort from these "facts" distracts us from what lies beneath these easy words: critiques meant to unsettle our ruling presumptions, disturb our categorical schemes.

We "know" that Kierkegaard is Christian, writes as a Christian, and wishes fiercely to disabuse his countrymen of the illusion that they are already

Christian—precisely that they might *become* Christian. But to “know” all this in advance, presumptively, is to make Kierkegaard dispensable, both for those who endorse and for those who reject his agenda. *Why read on?*

As a good student of Socrates, Kierkegaard begins with a skeptical challenge: We only *think* we know what ethics, or faith, or Christianity mean. The world of Christendom is *not* a world of faith. But as the language of ethics and faith is common coin, the Socratic task is to strip us of the *illusion* that we know what this language purports. How easy—yet how absurd—to take from this prodigious writer an evening’s entertainment, perhaps, some tidbit to add to our conversational repertoire! In the bargain, we can leave our convictions comfortably intact!

The idea that we are already familiar with the meaning and importance of ethics or faith must be “teleologically suspended”—suspended in the light of a higher goal. We are asked instead to start skeptically, to unfreeze our settled views. This gives some hope that whatever insight may gradually emerge will be built up properly, in a piecemeal, dialectical way, as the stagewise progressions that Kierkegaard maps out suggest that it should.

There is no formulaic shortcut to understanding this Christian writer. For however deep his religious devotion, his commitment defies, and is meant to defy, simple creedal articulation. Clearly he is someone halted, stopped, and then drawn by those familiar yet unsettling stories of God and his faithful, faithless children—someone moved by wonder, love and terror to knit tales on tales of God, spin narrative fabrics of care and folly, crisis and repose, despair, faith, and resignation.

Of course, keeping presumptions in check is especially hard in the case at hand. How can we *not* prejudge the issue? *Fear and Trembling* deals with a terrifying incident in Old Testament history about which, it seems, we can hardly remain either ignorant or neutral, an incident so offensive to an “enlightened” moral or religious sensibility that it had perhaps better be left in obscurity. Why even begin a story that seems to promote blind obedience to God, obedience to a God cruel enough to demand one’s child? Yet as in the case of resisting a presumptive “knowledge” of ethics or Christianity, here, too, Johannes will have us *resist* immediately “knowing” what this ordeal implies. Its meaning emerges gradually, drawn out slowly page by page, tale by tale.

### **An Overview**

Listed in the left column is Johannes’s table of contents for *Fear and Trembling*. The corresponding chapters in this book are listed in the right column. Where Hannay’s translation of section titles differs from other renderings, I give the alternatives in the notes.

<u><i>Fear and Trembling</i></u> <u><i>Dialectical Lyric</i></u>	<u><i>Knights of Faith and</i></u> <u><i>Resignation</i></u>
	1 <i>Masks and Commitment</i>
<i>Preface</i>	2 <i>Ordeals of Meaning</i>
<i>Attunement</i> <sup>28</sup>	
<i>Speech in Praise of Abraham</i> <sup>29</sup>	
<u><i>Problemata:</i></u>	
<i>Preamble from the Heart</i> <sup>30</sup>	3 <i>Ordeals of Love</i>
<i>Problema I</i>	
<i>Is there a teleological suspension of ethics?</i>	} 4, 5 <i>Ordeals of Reason</i> 6, 7 <i>Ordeals and Reconciliations</i>
<i>Problema II</i>	
<i>Is there an absolute duty to God?</i>	
<i>Problema III</i>	8, 9 <i>Ordeals of Silence</i>
<i>Is Abraham justified in his silence?</i> <sup>31</sup>	
<i>Epilogue</i>	
	10 <i>From Socrates to Abraham</i>

(In Chapters 4–7, I treat Problemas I and II together; they raise a single broad and complex issue.)

The narrative, poetic side of Johannes de silentio's venture suffers in commentary, especially in abstract summary. Nevertheless, an overview will be helpful. My reading of *Fear and Trembling* starts in Chapter 2. An opening "Preface" takes us from the busy world of the Danish marketplace toward the world of spirit. Then "Attunement" or "Prelude" presents a striking quartet of variations on the Abraham story. Each variation highlights, by what it omits, an essential feature of the faithful version of the story. "Speech in Praise of Abraham" or "Eulogy," is a third preface. Here Johannes reflects on the difficulty a poet must have in approaching his subject. How can he adequately convey his adoration? These short dramatic scenarios, exhortative pleas, and reflective passages create an imaginative space to contain our moral, dialectical, and religious thinking. They describe *ordeals of meaning*, trials of word, deed, and theory to stem a haunting threat of nihilism.

In Chapter 3, I explore still another preface, "Preamble from the

Heart.” (The usual translation, “Preliminary Expectoration,” though perhaps true to a Latin root, is especially awkward, producing overtones of coughing and disease rather than lyrical and heartfelt effusions.) In this introduction to the “Problemata” we first meet a pair of heroes, the knights of faith and resignation. These guardians of human spirit present alternative ways to cope with the risks and vulnerabilities accompanying a life of commitment, love, or care. Here the struggle for faith is seen as an *ordeal of love*, a test of our capacity for selfless care. And here we grapple with Johannes’s view that faith is acquired “on the strength of the absurd.”

Following these multiple prefaces or rehearsals, Johannes confronts the problems that inspire his specifically analytical or philosophical efforts. He presents them as three queries, reminiscent of clever examination questions: Is there a teleological suspension of ethics? Is there an absolute duty to God? Can Abraham’s silence before Isaac and Sarah be justified? But these are more than daunting theoretical challenges. They inscribe personal ordeals of love, reason, and affiliation, of speech, and hope. And they not only inscribe. In sum, they *recreate*, as nearly as telling can, the trial that Abraham must undergo, the ordeal of faith.<sup>32</sup>

In Chapter 4, I prepare the ground for understanding Kierkegaard’s infamous “teleological suspension of the ethical.” Drawing on discussions of moral dilemmas by Sartre and contemporary analytic philosophers, I argue that this suspension can be read as the outcome of intractable conflict between exceptionless requirements. Dilemmas present an *ordeal of reason and ethics*. Describing this ordeal, Johannes distinguishes universal ethical demands from more particular, subjective commitments that are essential to character and personal identity. And he brings out a potential conflict between such universal demands and particular ones, a conflict that can numb and silence.

Abraham must obey God, and Abraham must love and protect his son; yet he cannot do both. I argue in Chapter 5 that the “teleological suspension” does not represent the offensive principle that one must set ethics aside, even kill one’s son, if God so demands. Instead, it describes an unhappy but not uncommon fact of moral-spiritual life. We can undergo a terrible clash of irreconcilable requirements, leaving ethics impotent to point the way. Abraham’s ordeal is a story of dilemma where a terrible decision must be made, largely in the dark. I end with a thought experiment. At least in part faith is a strength and hope that gets us through dilemmas that test our moral integrity. Could we invert Abraham’s ordeal, having him *refuse* God’s command? Could he survive this refusal, integrity intact? Is dispute or disobedience compatible with religious faith? This leads us to distinguish religious from secular articulations of faith.

The faith Johannes sketches is more than the power that gets us through

dilemmas. There is also a specific expectation of faith, the trust or hope that Isaac will be returned—and in *this* life. Crisis is answered by *reconciliation*, alienation displaced by affiliation. This suggests an alternative reading of ordeals of ethics and faith. In Chapter 6, I present the teleological suspension as a moment of transitional confusion and conflict as an old view is given up and one is readied to receive the new. One receives not only a new Isaac, but a new moral orientation, as well. We are accorded stewardship of our essential humanity, represented as a cluster of moral and religious virtue.

The contrast between an initial conventionalist view of ethics which must be suspended, and a revised “post-suspension” ethics is filled out in Chapter 7. How does an individual possessed of inward virtue express herself through the universal, through the social matrix in which we find ourselves immersed? Faith is not a *rejection* of the social or worldly, but the ability to live within it, in a certain way. And I develop a parallel between Kant’s good will and Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the personal virtues.

Whereas Kant depicts our essential humanity as deriving from a relationship to an impersonal absolute, Sovereign Reason, Johannes depicts ethics and our essential humanity as a gift from a personal power. One achieves one’s humanity by “relating absolutely to the absolute,” to a Good that grants us our particularity, the very selves we are and will become. This parallel also clarifies the respect in which a knight of faith might be both Abraham and, more surprisingly, a simple shopkeeper, someone apparently exempt from any dramatic test of faith, someone who lives happily, gracefully, in the full embrace of community.

Johannes’s final dialectical section explores a knight of faith’s silence. I turn to “Problema III” in Chapters 8 and 9. In the course of this wandering “problema,” Johannes attempts yet another characterization of ethics and the possibilities of its suspension. This allows us to review once more the overall argument of this strange and demanding text. And I end Chapter 9 speculating briefly about the silences in Kierkegaard’s *own* life, the secrets behind his broken engagement to Regine Olsen and his undertaking a literary life both polemical and confessional, both lyrical and dialectical.

The paths toward discovery of a moral-spiritual self in *Fear and Trembling* are reminiscent of the paths Socrates traverses through the pages of the *Republic*. Plato opens his dialogue, we recall, with Socrates returning from the noisy business of a public festival. He carries us first into a fantastic city-soul constructed by dialectical imagination, then witnesses his construction’s decline, and at last deposits us back in the ordinary world, transformed, musing poetically on the destiny of the soul. Kierkegaard’s text likewise carries us lyrically from the business world of Copenhagen into a fantastic-yet-familiar biblical scene, dialectically takes that scene apart, and returns us then to the ordinary world of commerce, musing urgently on last things.



My accounts of knights of faith and resignation close in Chapter 10 with reflection on Socrates and faith. It's striking that Johannes decides to conclude this powerful book not just with final words on Abraham, as we would expect, but with thoughts on *Socratic* death and immortality. As Johannes has it, Socrates gives up his life and becomes immortal the moment he hears the Athenian death sentence. Here we have the relinquishing of worldly life to gain eternal life. This loss and gain seems to parallel the loss and return of Isaac. There are, as we shall see, essential differences. But however much separates a stoic resignation from Old Testament faith, a Socratic giving up and getting back from Abraham's "double movement," the stakes are remarkably similar: At risk are self and value, time and eternity.

One can flourish and flounder in the terrain of insight long before its shape becomes clear. With its contrasting movements, moods, aching dissonance and redeeming joy, *Fear and Trembling* has seemed at times as demanding and impossible a task for words as a late Beethoven Quartet. And one can then proceed, it seems, only on the basis of the very faith the work inscribes. Johannes de silentio describes his task as taking "a journey to the mountain" with Abraham. These words could as well describe the present task: to consider the meaning of that journey of father and son as Johannes and Kierkegaard project it—its ordeals of love, reason, and silence; its moments of crisis and reconciliation; its trials of faith and resignation.