ABSOLUTE ACTION: DIVINE HIDDENNESS IN KIERKEGAARD’S FEAR AND TREMBLING

PETER KLINE

God is worshipped not by moods, but by action. Kierkegaard, Papers

But with all my education
I can’t seem to command it
And the words are all escaping
Coming back all damaged
And I would put them back in poetry
If I only knew how
I can’t seem to understand it . . .
I was screaming out a language
That I never knew existed before

Florence + the Machine, “All this and Heaven Too”

I

I offer here a reading of Fear and Trembling as a theological work. Despite its brevity, Fear and Trembling is a wide-ranging and multivalent text, and it has lent itself to multiple uses and interpretations. I take it that, fundamentally, it is a kind of spiritual workbook, a text meant to “work on” the reader. As with all other of Kierkegaard’s texts, the intended audience is first of all “that single individual” [hiin Enkelte], that reader who reads not to become an “anemic abstractor” but a singular self before God, formed by and given over to love. Admittedly, Fear and Trembling approaches an “extreme of
indirection”3 as it “works on” its reader, but given the particular work the text aims to perform, this is entirely fitting. Following Johannes de Silentio’s winding production that goes back and forth between philosophical dialectics and poetic indulgence, we become dizzied; our understanding is left reeling. This is precisely the point. Confronted with the stark mystery of the father of faith, Abraham, we are meant, with Silentio, to be reduced to silence, led to question the ease with which we assume ourselves faithful. And yet, in this silence, we are also meant to glimpse the possibility of a new beginning for ourselves; we are meant to hear a whisper from Kierkegaard about a way forward. We are, in fact, the son in the garden meant to receive a message that our messenger, Silentio, cannot himself understand.4 Fear and Trembling is not a treatise on ethics; it is not a disquisition on a series of intellectual “problems”; nor is it, even, primarily, a polemic against Hegel. It is a call to self-examination, repentance, and, ultimately, action. Precisely as such, the text is theological to the core. At stake is the nature of “faith” as well as the mystery of the God who summons us to its venture.

My aim is to read this text constructively.5 I am acutely aware that in doing so I risk becoming an “anemic abstractor” that simply uses Kierkegaard’s work to play around in the world of concepts. My goal, however, is not to “improve” the text by clarifying its conceptual “payoff,” so to speak. There is no hidden system in Fear and Trembling that I am trying to uncover or advance. There is, though, a profound theological vision at work in this text that deserves to be inhabited and explored. To speak of a theological vision, as opposed to a theological system, is to say that the aim of the text is to deliver the reader over to a lived action in the presence of God, one that could never be theorized or captured in conceptual formulas. I take it that this ought to be the ultimate aim of all theological production, namely, handing readers and hearers over to entirely concrete modes of action that can take place only outside of the reading and writing of texts. This is why I find myself compelled to think and write constructively with Fear and Trembling.

My reading of Kierkegaard’s text is unabashedly theological, which as such goes against the grain of many if not most readings of Fear and Trembling. Many commentators find themselves drawn to questions of ethics. What are the norms and authorities of ethical conduct? Can they ever be suspended? If so, how? The goal of such readings usually becomes either defense or condemnation of Abraham’s actions as portrayed by Kierkegaard.6 Other readings find a depiction of the dilemmas or contradictions that beset human existence as such.7 I am more sympathetic to these readings, since they take into account the “indirect” nature of the work, but something fundamental remains missing even here. Fear and Trembling is about faith, and to reduce faith to the dynamics of either ethics or existence is to miss precisely the core of the text. My reading thus joins those who find in Kierkegaard’s text a theological problematic, namely, the mystery and exigency of life lived before God.8
II

*Fear and Trembling* could very well be read as a treatise on divine hiddenness, a shocking wakeup call to nineteenth-century “Christendom” that the God it purports to worship is not at all within its assumed grasp. If there is a constructive side to this polemic, it is what I want to call an “apophaticism of action.” To coordinate hiddenness with action is to say that what Kierkegaard’s text makes possible is an articulation of our relation to God as a lived movement that is irreducible to the parameters of ontology and epistemology.9 Relation to God is not fundamentally a matter of “being” or “knowing,” that is, it is not a function of the capacity (or incapacity) given to us by the mere fact of our existence. It is not a function of our ability to posit ourselves and our world through the mediation of concepts. Relation to God occurs as a dispossessed, living action that is set in motion by and waits upon the free coming of God.10 Such action, itself borne along by the grace of God, is both prior to and in excess of the structures of immanent givenness, what Kierkegaard’s author names “the ethical.” This is so because the divine action that is the very possibility of relation to God is itself entirely unconditioned by—absolved from—the given structures of the world and the apparatus of consciousness that grasps them. God, in *Fear and Trembling*, names a transcendent action that intervenes into these structures in an utterly free movement.11 Such absolute action suspends the sphere of immanence, not to abolish it, but to open up within it an entirely different way of existing, namely, a way of absolute human action in which “human calculation [has] long since ceased.”12 Such action, Silentio tells us, cannot, strictly speaking, be “thought”—it cannot, that is, be accounted for in terms of ontology or epistemology, in terms of the immanent conditions for the possibility of “being” and “knowing,” “I cannot think myself into Abraham,”13 writes Silentio. This action can only be lived, in fear and trembling, without any internal guarantees. This is what I mean by divine hiddenness, the paradox and non-cognizability of human participation in the absolute action of God, which in *Fear and Trembling* is staged dramatically as God’s return of Isaac after having asked Abraham to sacrifice him. This is not an unknowability that posits a subsistence of God “beyond” or “outside of” finite knowledge and being, which would still be to think God’s hiddenness ontologically and epistemologically, that is, according to the limits of the givenness of immanence.14 Rather, this is to articulate God’s hiddenness in terms of the transcendent freedom of God’s return to and gift of finitude that liberates and transfigures human thought, language, and action beyond their “universal” operation. God is hidden because in relation to God one is given to act beyond what is humanly possible or understandable, in such way that one is utterly dependent on the transcendent grace of God for one’s very life in this world.15 Everything turns on the nature of transcendence in *Fear and Trembling*—“the absolute”—and the mode of human participation in this transcen-
dence—what Kierkegaard’s author calls an “absolute relation to the absolute,” or “the paradox of existence.” The logic of this participation, I want to suggest, is one that transgresses the parameters of ontology and epistemology by way of doxology. This may seem like an odd suggestion, given that relation to God in Fear and Trembling is everywhere described in terms of anxiety and distress. By doxology I mean most basically a lived abandonment toward the free coming of God, borne along by the praise that God has acted and will act to make “all things new.” To live doxologically is to live each moment as “a new creation by virtue of the absurd.” Such a mode of existence, of course, does not exclude fear and trembling, for so to exist one must let go of possession and control in the faith that God has and will act beyond what is immanently possible. Such a faith, by the lights of human calculation, is indeed absurd. The apostle Paul admonished the Philippians to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you” (Phil. 2:12–13), salvation in Paul’s theology being a kind of divine absurdity, accomplished in the obedience unto death of “that One” who had every right to claim equality with God (Phil. 2:5–8). It is crucial, then, to get clear on precisely what “fear and trembling” and “anxiety and distress” name in Kierkegaard’s text. These dispositions name, most basically, the dispossession of the self that is internal to the movement of doxological action, i.e., faith. Doxological action is fundamentally a movement of abasement, a repetitive releasing of the self in love under the pressure of the doxa that is God’s love. “Whoever loves God without faith considers himself, but whoever loves God with faith considers God.” That doxology is the logic internal to Abraham’s dispossessed relation to God is made especially clear when Fear and Trembling is read alongside several of the texts that surround it, most notably Repetition and a number of the Upbuilding Discourses of 1843/4. In all of these texts, for one to undergo—and so to participate in—the movement of transcendence, is to have one’s possession of oneself and everything that is one’s own painfully undone, leaving one exposed to the unanticipated and free (i.e., hidden) coming of God’s grace (cf. Phil. 2:9–10; Rom. 6:3–11; Col. 2:1–3; 3:3–4). To live the action of love under the momentum of this painful exposure is to live doxologically, in fear and trembling.

III

The polemic running through Fear and Trembling against both Hegelian Sittlichkeit and Kantian Moralität should not, therefore, be understood as a crude and simplistic opposition between “society” and “the individual,” or between “reason” and “faith.” The issue is rather more complex. What Fear and Trembling goes after is the heart of the idealist depiction of the ego, in which the self-positing work of consciousness is the ground of Being. The projects of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel are in many ways very different.
Yet if there is one thing that unites them all both formally and materially, it is what David Kangas calls “the effort to regard self-consciousness, ever more radically, as what constitutes the condition for any and all consciousness.”23 What Kierkegaard’s author struggles to articulate throughout the text is that the mode of consciousness called “faith” does not find its ground and possibility in self-consciousness. Silentio writes, “Even if one were able to convert the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that one has comprehended faith, comprehended how one entered into it or how it entered into one.”24 Faith arises not by virtue of the immanent movement of concepts that constitutes the dialectical work of consciousness. The possibility of faith lies in God alone, in the radical exteriority of God’s action and address. Such action absolves and breaks open the “for itself” structure of consciousness, setting the self outside itself in a movement of becoming given over to love of God and neighbor. It is this shattering of the universal, transcendental ego capable of appropriating and representing all of reality to itself that is the source of Abraham’s “interiority” and “silence.” His faith “cannot be mediated”25 into direct and universal knowledge not simply because faith is ultimately a matter of the individual before God, but more basically because faith transgresses the Socratic project of “knowing oneself.” Faith is not a species of the representational work of consciousness that is concerned fundamentally with the production of identity, with the mapping of all of reality onto the horizon of self-presence. The action of God that elicits faith disrupts the sovereignty and security of presence—in Abraham’s case, his “possession” of Isaac and therefore himself—opening in turn an unanticipatable future—God’s return of Isaac. It is in this sense that faith is fundamentally an action, a lived movement of dispossessation that “leaps” forward to receive the free coming of God’s grace.

Each section of Fear and Trembling thematizes in different ways this exposure or dispossession of the self that lies at the heart of faith. In the “Tribute to Abraham,” it is thematized as exposure to the anarchy of time.26 “By faith Abraham received the promise that in his seed all the generations of the world would be blessed.”27 To believe in God’s promise is to open oneself to a future that one has no control over; it is to abandon “human calculation”28 and live by virtue of the absurd, i.e., divine possibility. “Time passed, the possibility was there, Abraham believed; time passed, it became preposterous, Abraham believed.”29 God’s promise to Abraham therefore hides God, even while simultaneously bringing God near, for to believe this promise, that one will bear a child in one’s dotage, Abraham must hand himself over to an impossible possibility that God alone can enact. Openness to God’s future is a disposessive posture, one that lives in time neither by clinging to the achievements of the past nor by “sneak[ing] out of life”30 into an abstract eternity, but by living the oncoming of each moment as a new gift from the hand of God. Abraham’s greatness is that he held himself open to the “fullness of time,”31 refusing the comfort of an abstract, timeless eternity,
believing instead that eternity would meet him in time in the gift and return of Isaac.\(^{32}\) “Abraham believed and believed for this life.”\(^{33}\)

In Silentio’s “Preliminary Outpouring from the Heart,” he admits that he cannot bear to live this kind of dispossession that waits on eternity as an expectancy in time. “In temporality God and I cannot converse, we have no language in common.”\(^{34}\) Silentio can certainly face up to perils of temporality and finitude, but not like Abraham, who does so by opening himself to receive the finite ever anew as gift. “For the movement of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd, yet in such a way, mind you, that one does not lose the finite but gains it entire. For my part, I can very well describe the movements of faith, but I cannot make them.”\(^{35}\) Silentio survives the perils of temporality and finitude by infinitely resigning them and retreating into the security of his “eternal consciousness”\(^{36}\) where existence is preserved in the indestructibility of thought. He knows that “God is love,” but for him this is merely a “thought” that has only “lyrical validity.”\(^{37}\) “To me God’s love, both in a direct and inverse sense, is incommensurable with the whole of actuality.”\(^{38}\) In other words, God is merely a production of his consciousness, a function of his ability to posit himself in self-presence. God’s love is not a reality to be lived, but simply a thought through which he escapes from the actuality of life. “I do not trouble God with my petty cares; the particular does not concern me, I gaze only at my love and keep its virginal flame pure and clear.”\(^{39}\) Silentio, here, is a figure of the idealist, “for itself” structure of thought that grounds all reality in the self-reflexive work of consciousness. Faith, however, undoes such self-reflexivity by being opened to the reality of God’s love. “Faith is convinced that God is concerned about the least thing. I am content in this life to be wedded to the left hand. Faith is humble enough to ask for the right, for that it is humility I do not and shall never deny.”\(^{40}\) Faith is marked by humility in its reception of finitude because it transgresses the “for itself” enclosure of thought in favor of radical openness to the action of God in time. Again: “Whoever loves God without faith considers himself, but whoever loves God with faith considers God.”\(^{41}\)

To be sure, Abraham, too, is a knight of infinite resignation. But the quality of his resignation is rather different than Silentio’s. Silentio renounces the finite on his way inward into himself. Abraham renounces the finite on his way outward toward God. Silentio grasps “the deep secret that even in loving another person one must be self-sufficient.”\(^{42}\) His love puts up barriers to protect him from the threats of alterity, from having actually to receive the beloved again and again in all her temporality and finitude. Abraham’s resignation, by contrast, is a relinquishment of protective self-enclosure, an exposure of himself to the alterity of God, which in turn requires an exposure to the alterity of Isaac. In the presence of God, Abraham cannot cling to Isaac as his own; Isaac is first and foremost God’s gift and must remain that way. Therefore Abraham resigns Isaac not to the recesses of recollection where he can hold onto his son no matter what actually happens in time; he resigns
Isaac to the action of God, once again opening himself to the impossible possibility that Isaac will be given as a gift in time. This is brought out most clearly when Silentio speculates about the possibility that Abraham does in fact kill Isaac. “Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham believed. He did not believe that he would be blessed one day in the hereafter but that he would become blissfully happy here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, call the sacrificed one back to life. He believed by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since ceased.”43

Another way to put this would be to say that Abraham and Silentio have different relationships to possibility. As a knight of infinite resignation, Silentio understands and accepts that, in the finite world, one is bound to run up against impossibilities, such as the impossibility of a certain young man fulfilling his desire to marry a princess.44 “Fools and young people chatter about everything being possible for a human being... That is a great misapprehension.”45 However, Silentio continues, “Spiritually speaking, everything is possible... The knight [of infinite resignation]... makes this impossibility possible by expressing it spiritually, but he expresses it spiritually by renouncing it. The wish that would carry him out into actuality but came to grief over the impossibility is now turned inward but it is not therefore lost or forgotten.”46 By turning the impossibility inward, it becomes a possibility, but only by translating the impossibility into one’s own possibility, into the possibility of thought. The young man can have the princess, but only by denying her the actuality of an existing person and turning her into an object of his own self-reflexivity. Again, we have the “for itself” movement of idealism. Silentio recognizes, however, that this turn inward to make the impossible one’s own possibility is actually a refusal of real possibility. “This possessing [of possibility], you see, is also a relinquishing [of it].”47 Abraham is open to real possibility, by contrast, precisely because he refuses to possess possibility. In the face of the impossibility of having the to-be-sacrificed-Isaac, Abraham makes the impossible possible by handing all possibility over to God. “He therefore acknowledges the impossibility and at the same moment believes the absurd.”48 This is the “paradox of existence,”49 having possibility by refusing to possess it, by giving oneself to the only real possibility—God. Abraham, in other words, relates to possibility doxologically, while Silentio relates to it despairingly.

The questions, then, whether there is a teleological suspension of the ethical and whether there is an absolute duty to God, are questions about whether the self-reflexive movements of consciousness are ultimate, either in the form of Hegelian Sittlichkeit or Kantian Moralität. To deny the ultimacy of such self-reflexivity in light of the dispossessive posture of faith is to affirm the reality of God’s action in time that fractures the self-enclosing, self-justifying structure of immanence. This undercuts the dialectic of particularity and universality in which the task of every particular is “to annul his particularity in order to become the universal.”50 Such a dialectic presumes to
be able to accommodate and account for all of reality, including God, within
the infinite flexibility of thought departing from and returning to itself. Hegel
writes, “Reason is the certainty of consciousness that it is all reality; thus does
idealism express its concept.”51 What Kierkegaard’s author affirms instead is
the ultimacy of absolute singularity, “the single individual.”52 Such singularity
is not an isolated individualism, but an affirmation that authentic selfhood
or existence occurs only as an entirely concrete lived movement of disposses-
sive openness to the action of God. To annul one’s singularity in order to
serve the universal movement of thought is despairingly to deny one’s self
and the selves of others as gifts from God to be received ever anew in a
concrete movement of becoming.

IV

The whole of Fear and Trembling, then, can be understood as a coming to
terms with the following claim: “By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac,
but by faith Abraham received Isaac.”53 It is not Abraham’s willingness to
sacrifice Isaac that so captivates Silentio; it is the eloquence of the movement
that receives Isaac back that causes him to exclaim: “my brain whirls.”54 This
ability so to live in the exposure of dispossession that one neither stumbles
nor falters as one makes one’s way through the perils of temporality and
finitude, nor turns inward toward the security of one’s “eternal conscious-
ness,”55 but lives one’s vulnerability as openness to gift—this is Abraham’s
greatness. “Abraham knew it is kingly to sacrifice such a son for the univer-
sal; he personally would have found rest in it, and everyone would have
rested approvingly in his deed, just as the vowel rests in its silent consonant;
but that is not the task—he is being tried.”56 The task of faith is not conformity
to a universal principle, even if that principle is the command of God. Blind
obedience can be just as much a “universal” that one finds illegitimate rest in
as anything else. The trembling that Abraham experiences is not caused by
the fact that God has given him a command that conflicts with his duties as
a father—this would simply be the pain of a tragic hero. Kierkegaard writes,
“The terrifying thing in the collision is this—that it is not a collision between
God’s command and man’s command but between God’s command and
God’s command.”57 Also: “It was indeed absurd that God, who demanded
[Isaac’s sacrifice] of him, in the next instant would revoke the demand.”58 The
pain of Abraham’s situation is that the very idea of duty has been undone. An
ab-solute duty is one that ab-solves duty itself, that is, removes it from the
sphere of human competence. Abraham has become so dispossessed in his
encounter with God, so utterly dependent on the grace of God for his very life
in this world, that his actions have no immanent meaning in and of them-
selves; they are not aimed at any project or the accumulation of worth.
Abraham simply an empty vessel waiting upon the action of God. He is not a “teacher,”
but simply a “witness” to “God’s grace.”59 His action is not
something he can claim for himself as a fulfillment of duty, as a fulfillment or possession of himself in his relation to God. Abraham’s “test” is not whether he will be blindly obedient—which would be to “have” himself by obeying God’s command—but whether he is willing to receive his life and everything in it as gift—which is to give himself (and Isaac) away to the action of an-Other. Abraham hides himself in a Love so free, so unexpected, so unconcerned with what we are able (or not) to make of ourselves, that is it hidden to us who insist on “having” ourselves and our others through the pursuit of our projects.60

The fact that existence does in fact come to us as pure gift from the hand of God is what makes Abraham a “guiding star that rescues the anguished.”61 But how, we might ask, could such an unapproachable and impeccable knight of faith rescue the anguished, those of us so ineloquent in our movements, so beset by “the various misunderstandings, the awkward postures, the slipshod movements”62 that Silentio knows all too well? Here it is crucial to emphasize that Abraham’s greatness does not lie in his strength or resolve, in his ability to exert his will. This is the greatness of the knight of infinite resignation, which of course Abraham is as well, but such willful resignation is not what makes him the knight of faith who gives hope to the anguished. What is hopeful about Abraham is that he witnesses to the reality that God is not bound by “the ethical,” by what we can make of ourselves. If that were the case, if in the end what is ultimate is what we are able to make of the world and ourselves through our own actions, then our lot is despair. The quest or hope for a new world or self would simply be our standing before “a yawning abyss within which despair plays its tricks.”63 Abraham witnesses to another possibility, a divine possibility, in which our lives can be given to us “a second time,”64 repeated to us as new creation, as a gift beyond what we can achieve or earn.65 This is the possibility of grace that God just is.66 Again, this is why God is hidden—precisely in God’s free coming, in God’s drawing near—because, as grace, God’s action is prior to and in excess of the immanent world and its possibilities. As the world’s impossible possibility, God is beyond recollection or anticipation. To be involved with God, as Abraham is, one must be given over to a work, an action, whose momentum is the waiting upon the absurd arrival of God. An action that waits upon what it alone could never accomplish—this is absolute action.

Kierkegaard’s Abraham witnesses to the reality of what Jean-Yves Lacoste calls “a grace beyond the universal,”67 a possibility that arrives as transcendent gift. Living in the vulnerable momentum of openness to this gift is what makes Abraham both a guide to the anguished and an impenetrable mystery. To live by virtue of grace—“that is beyond human powers, that is a miracle . . . the paradox of existence.”68 Again, we arrive at the nerve center of the book: “The great mystery [is] that it is far more difficult to receive than to give. . . . For what love of God it surely takes to be willing to let oneself be healed . . .”69 Fear and Trembling is ultimately about the difficulty (indeed, the
impossibility, humanly speaking) of receiving and living into God’s grace, which in the third “problem” is thematized as the difficulty of receiving forgiveness and reconciliation. Confessing one’s sin and failure and receiving the loving action of God is a source of deep anxiety and distress for the sinner, for this involves letting go of oneself and entrusting oneself solely to the frightful, yet ultimately healing, “beyond” of grace. Such action requires the “paradoxical and humble courage”70 of faith. In the reception of forgiveness, in the gift of a new self and world beyond both achievement and failure, we have the ultimate collision between “God’s command and God’s command,”71 the ultimate absolving of duty, the ultimate dispossession of the self that has attempted (and failed at) its own self-construction and mastery. And so the stories of Agnes and the merman and Sarah and Tobias both present “a shipwrecked specimen of a human being”72 in need of healing. Such healing, because it is the healing of sin (at least in the case of the merman), must be a radical cure, one not available within the domain of ethics, that is, within the immanent possibilities of self-construction—for sin is precisely the ruination of the self. Kierkegaard’s author therefore writes, “An ethics that ignores sin is an altogether futile discipline, but if it asserts sin, then it is for that very reason beyond itself. . . . As soon as sin is introduced, ethics runs aground precisely upon repentance, for repentance is the highest ethical expression but precisely as such the deepest ethical self-contradiction.”73 In repentance, in the opening of oneself to a transcendent cure, “the ethical” is suspended in favor of the anarchy of God’s grace, a grace that fairness excessively with no basis in what is ethically owed. Abraham’s whole existence might be read as the ceaseless, repetitive movement of repentance—a continual denial of himself in openness to the action of God. Such a movement is one that transgresses ontology and epistemology precisely by way of doxology.

Reading Fear and Trembling correctly, then, is a delicate task. It is easy to get so absorbed in the narrative horror of the binding of Isaac that one misses the fundamental problematic of the text. No doubt Kierkegaard intended to leave open this possibility. As was the case with Repetition, Fear and Trembling was written so “that the heretics would not understand him.”74 Silento’s production, writes Johannes Climacus, is a “noble lie” performed under the “deceptive form” of a “scream.”75 Yet there are clues all throughout the text that the binding of Isaac is not itself the point, that this narrative is a dramatic figure for something else, namely, the inner dynamics of “faith.” That this book is classified as a “dialectical lyric,” and that it opens as a kind of fairy tale—“Once upon a time there was a man . . . ”76—ought to clue us to the fact that the text is to be read with aesthetic distance, with the binding of Isaac serving as a kind of parable. Even within the text there is a demythologizing of the narrative, as Silento compares Abraham’s actions to the everyday actions of a bourgeois philistine.77 The real message of Fear and Trembling, I have suggested, is about openness to a grace that dispossesses. To be sure, this message is not on the surface of the text. But we were told that this would be
the case, that a message would be delivered that our messenger could not understand or articulate. “What Tarquin the Proud communicated in his garden with the beheaded poppies was understood by the son but not by the messenger.” It is grace that Silentio cannot understand—a grace that would absurdly return the world “a second time” as gift, even after giving it the first time as gift. To “have” the world only as gift, to perform the inscrutable feat of having one’s life only in giving it away—only faith borne along by grace can maintain this posture, this dance.

V

To flesh out these claims and set them in relief, perhaps it will be helpful to consider Emmanuel Levinas’ critique of Fear and Trembling. He has two critiques, “two main things that irritate [him] about Kierkegaard.” First, Levinas claims that Kierkegaard has an insufficient understanding of “the ethical.” Kierkegaard is correct, according to Levinas, to issue a protest against the totality of Hegelian immanence. But the protest is insufficient insofar as Kierkegaard still presupposes Hegel’s understanding of “the ethical,” namely, that one’s singularity is erased in relation to others. “But does our relation with Others really entail our incorporation and dispersal into generality? That is the question we must raise, against both Hegel and Kierkegaard.” For Levinas, it is precisely in one’s relation to and responsibility for others that one obtains one’s singularity. “Being a self means not being able to hide from responsibility. This excess of being, this existential exaggeration which is called ‘being a self,’ this irruption of selfhood or ipseity into being, is equivalent to an explosion of responsibility.” The charge is that in his protest against Hegel’s ethics, Kierkegaard has abandoned a proper ethical account of selfhood, which is responsibility for the other. This leads directly into Levinas’ second critique, namely, that Kierkegaard’s account of selfhood as isolated interiority with an absolute religious duty to God leaves open the possibility of sanctioning violence. Levinas is disturbed that Kierkegaard’s account of the self is “capable of making a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God.” He writes, “Kierkegaardian violence begins when existence, having moved beyond the aesthetic stage, is forced to abandon the ethical stage . . . in order to embark on the religious stage.”

These critiques turn on reading Kierkegaard’s depiction of Abraham’s exceptionality as an affirmation, indeed a radicalization, of the idealist depiction of the ego in which the “for itself” structure of consciousness is absolute. Levinas writes, “The identification of subjectivity [in Kierkegaard] is thus prior to language, and depends simply on the way a being clings to its being. The identification of A as A is the same as A’s anxiety for A. The subjectivity of the subject is an identification of the Same in concern for the Same. It is egoism, and its subjectivity is a Self.” On this account, Abraham transgresses the ethical “out of concern for [his] own existence, as a torment over
himself." He is driven by a “sublime thirst for salvation,” by a quest for the fulfillment of his private Self in relation to God, and so the Other is murdered for the sake of the Same. Levinas himself offers a non-idealist or non-egological reading of the Genesis 22 narrative, one that finds the climax of the narrative not in Abraham’s raising the knife, which would emphasize selfhood as isolated duty to God, but in Abraham’s laying down the knife, which emphasizes selfhood as the “explosion of responsibility” for the other. And so, “the highpoint in the whole drama could be the moment when Abraham lent an ear to the voice summoning him back to the ethical order.”

In sum, Levinas wants to understand the self as passion before the face of the other, but what he finds in Kierkegaard is the self as passion for itself. Levinas takes us straight to the heart of the problematic in Fear and Trembling. Is Abraham’s faithful action a quest for self-fulfillment, or is it rather a dispossession of the self? Is faith a movement of secure self-positing, or is faith a movement of radical vulnerability and openness to gift? Does Abraham’s “absolute” relation to God signify an isolated, private interiority, or does it signify the absolution of such interiority that opens up an even deeper interiority? It is significant that in 1851 Kierkegaard could write, “Even more difficult than setting out for Moriah to offer Isaac is the capacity, when one has already drawn the knife, in unconditional obedience to be willing to understand: It is not required.” Here, as in Fear and Trembling itself, Kierkegaard is in agreement with Levinas that the highpoint of the narrative is Abraham’s reception of Isaac. “By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac, but by faith Abraham received Isaac.” The difference between the two authors lies in the mode or the “how” of this reception. Both understand the reception of the other as a movement of transcendence. For Levinas, this transcendence lies within the relation to the other. The openness of human existence to transcendence is simply our existence before each other. Kierkegaard, however, working within the theological tradition stemming from Augustine, understands human existence fundamentally as existence before God. Accordingly, love of God is prior to and the only possibility of love of neighbor. There is no immediate relation to the neighbor; I relate to the neighbor only as I receive her as a gift from God calling forth my love.

It is crucial to understand that the “interiority” of the Augustinian tradition is emphatically not the interiority of the idealist tradition that speaks of the self-positing work of consciousness as the ground of being. Levinas overlooks this distinction. He reads Kierkegaard as operating within the idealist tradition, whereas he is in fact operating within the Augustinian tradition, even as many of his texts inhabit an idealist thought world. Interiority in the Augustinian tradition, paradoxically, is a function of the radical exteriority of God. Relating to God as creature to Creator, as well as redeemed to Redeemer, my relation to God is prior to and in excess of my relation to myself. To be created and redeemed is to be radically dependent on what I cannot produce, contain, or control, namely, God. This radical dependency is
the heart of Augustinian interiority. To relate to oneself truly is to will one’s self by resting “transparently in the power that established it,” to use Kierkegaard’s formulation in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Therefore what is interior is the presence of a relation to that which cannot be appropriated or represented within consciousness, namely, the wholly otherness of God. Augustinian interiority is one without identity, the self always being outside of itself in God, ungrounded in its radical dependency. “But you were more inward than my most inward part; and higher than my highest.”92 This interiority is in radical opposition to idealist interiority, most clearly and succinctly captured in Fichte’s dictum: “I am thoroughly my own creation.”93

Moreover, because in the Augustinian tradition the essence of God is defined as love, one’s ungroundedness toward God always results in an ungroundedness toward the neighbor in a movement of love. The wholly otherness of God establishes and protects the otherness of the neighbor: “You shall love your neighbor.” And what it means to love the neighbor is to recognize her dignity as a fellow creature and so welcome her friendship as a divine gift. This logic of relating to the other only within the presence of the wholly otherness of God is, I submit, one of the fundamental themes of *Fear and Trembling*, even if it is broached only with the utmost of indirection. To be sure, “the ethical” is radically relativized. But it is crucial to understand precisely what this means. Silentio writes, “It does not follow from this that the ethical should be abolished, but it receives an entirely different expression, a paradoxical expression, in such a way, for example, that love for God can cause the knight of faith to give his love for the neighbor the opposite expression of what duty is ethically speaking.”94 In faith, it is not that ethical responsibility is abolished; it is simply that its ground is radically reconfigured such that the “expression” of ethical responsibility out of faith is the “opposite” of what such “expression” is out of duty. To love the neighbor out of duty is to love her only insofar as she is a particular within the universal, that is, a particular in service to the universal. It is to love her only insofar as that love is an expression of the dictates of reason, only insofar as that love makes sense within and contributes to the universal project of human culture and society (Kant and Hegel, respectively). Should there be a conflict between loving the neighbor and serving the universal, the universal always trumps the neighbor. On these terms, “the whole existence of the human race rounds itself off in itself as a perfect sphere and the ethical is at once its limit and its completion. God becomes an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought, his power being only in the ethical, which completes existence.”95

The issue here is precisely whether the neighbor has any inassimilable alterity, whether, in other words, she is a “single individual”96 and not simply a particular that is subsumable within the “perfect sphere” of the universal. Duty says no, for under the dictates of duty “the outer (the externalization) is higher than the inner.”97 In other words, one’s relation to “the outer,” to “the universal,” is all there is to being a self. There is no justified excess, no
justified interiority (i.e., no relation to God that is prior to and in excess of one’s relationship to the universal—to the state, culture, family, etc.), no justified hiddenness of either the self or of God. Faith, however, says yes. There is an inassimilable alterity, an excess, to every person—namely, God’s relation to her. Because God, through God’s own otherness, establishes the otherness of every person, the single individual is higher than the universal. “The single individual . . . determines his relationship to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal.” The “expression” of neighbor-love out of faith, then, is entirely different from the “expression” of neighbor-love out of duty. Faith can never “have” the neighbor; it can never comprehend the neighbor fully and assimilate her into the universal without remainder. The neighbor always remains hidden in God, even as God remains hidden as the excess of the neighbor. Faith releases the neighbor, handing her over to the action of God, so that she retains her excess as a divine gift.

It is jarring to think of the binding of Isaac as a parable of this kind of neighbor-love, and yet this is what it is in Kierkegaard’s text. Abraham’s actions are not a sacrifice of Isaac to a universal principle. The command of God to sacrifice Isaac is not obeyed out of commitment to the principle of blind obedience. Abraham believes all along that this is a “trial,” and therefore that he would continue to relate to Isaac. He remained totally committed to Isaac; “he remained true to his love.” And so, “he climbed the mountain, and even at the moment the knife gleamed he believed—that God would not demand Isaac.” This is not to reduce the “horror” of Abraham’s position, for this belief is not cheap assurance. It is belief by virtue of the absurd, belief that God alone could return Isaac. But what precisely is the horror that Abraham faces? Is it not the horror implicit in very idea of gift? Is it not the anxiety one faces every time one is offered a gift? For to receive a gift requires that we give up our possession of ourselves so that we might become vulnerable to the agency of an-other. It requires that we give up even our loved ones precisely so that they remain gifts to us, not smothered by our possession. To face this requirement is to face an impossible possibility.

It is not insignificant that one of the possible subtitles for Fear and Trembling that Kierkegaard considered was “Between Each Other.” What this signifies is that the notion of God as the “middle term” between lover and beloved that receives explicit treatment in Kierkegaard’s Works of Love is already operative in Fear and Trembling, albeit obliquely. In Works of Love, Kierkegaard distinguishes between “preferential love” and “neighbor love,” the former having the middle term of “admiration,” the latter having simply the reality of God for its middle term. Love that operates with the middle term of admiration loves the other because she possesses certain qualities the lover finds attractive or valuable. Love is mediated through the “idea” of admiration. Such love, however, all too easily fails to love the other as other, in all her singularity, for it filters the beloved through the lover’s own sense of what is
lovable. Such love threatens to become entirely self-reflexive. “The lover is actually relating himself to himself in self-love.” This is “the very peak of self-esteem, the I intoxicated in the other I.” When the reality of God is the middle term between lover and beloved, such self-reflexivity is undone. Loving the other within the love of God, the other becomes a neighbor. “Only by loving God above all else can one love the neighbor in the other human being.” To love the other as a neighbor is to love her doxologically, that is, simply because she is a human being loved eternally by God, not because she possesses anything admirable that would reflect back the lover’s own self-worth. Only neighbor love can love the enemy and those that society deems not valuable at all: the child, the elderly, the sick, the prisoner, the mentally handicapped, the foreigner. Moreover, neighbor love, because it transgresses the dialectical circle of self-reflexivity, operates entirely as dispossessive action. Neighbor love simply gives itself to the other, loving the other simply out of the love of love, that is, out of love for the God who just is Love.

Returning to Fear and Trembling, the following can be said: Abraham’s obedience to the command of God to sacrifice Isaac is a refusal to love Isaac with the middle term of admiration. Abraham had every reason to love Isaac self-reflexively. When he looked at Isaac surely he saw himself, his posterity, the legacy of his own greatness, even the reward for his faith that God could grant such an old couple a son. And yet he knew that he could not love Isaac on this basis, for this would not actually be to love Isaac, but simply love to and for himself. Truly to love Isaac as a singular gift of God, Abraham had to give him back to God, and therefore relate to him only through a renewed abandonment to the action of God.

VI

My intention in all of this has been to speak of the hiddenness of God, about the paradox and non-cognizability of human participation in the absolute action of God. It is fitting, therefore, before I conclude, to turn briefly to a consideration of Abraham’s silence, for it is in his silence that the revelation of God’s hiddenness becomes most obvious.

“Abraham keeps silent—but he cannot speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety.” Why cannot Abraham speak on his way to Moriah? Because “he cannot say that which would explain everything (i.e., so it is intelligible), that it is a trial, of a sort, mind you, in which the ethical is the temptation.” The question that arose in the consideration of Levinas once again emerges. Is Abraham’s silence a function of a private interiority that is concerned only with the salvation of the Same and the expense of the Other? Is his silence primarily about a private relationship to God? Again the answer is no. It is not that Abraham keeps silent out of selfishness or egoism; it is that he cannot speak. He cannot translate his actions into the language of universality; he cannot make it intelligible that “he is willing to sacrifice Isaac because it is a
Perhaps if Abraham were sacrificing Isaac out of blind obedience, he could speak and make himself understandable. He could simply say to Sarah, “God has asked me to kill Isaac, and since we live by the principle of unconditional obedience to God, I must obey.” Even if there were no wider social benefit, fulfillment of the principle of obedience would be enough to make Abraham’s actions understandable. He is doing his duty, preserving his soul in obedience. But what is not understandable, not translatable into any universal categories whatsoever, is that Abraham “is willing to sacrifice Isaac because it is a trial.” If Abraham believes that it is a trial and that therefore he will receive Isaac back, “why does Abraham do it then?” Why not just keep Isaac and avoid all the anxiety and distress? It is the answer to this question that cannot be spoken. God is hidden in the unspeakable answer. Abraham goes through with the sacrifice, I have suggested, because his faith grasps that the only truthful relation to Isaac is one in which Isaac is “given back.” And to relate to Isaac only as “given back,” Abraham must give him up. It is the reception of the transcendent gift of God’s action that cannot be understood universally or translated without remainder into thought; it can only be singularly enacted. It is not quite true, then, to say tout court that Abraham cannot speak. “He speaks no human language,” but he does speak. “He speaks a divine language, he speaks in tongues.” This is the hidden language of doxology, given in praise for every good and perfect gift—a “sacrifice of praise,” indeed (Heb. 13:15).

“Repetition’s love is in truth the only happy love,” writes Constantine Constantius, on the opening page of Repetition that picks up right where Fear and Trembling leaves off. Authentic love does not live in “recollec-
tion,” in the security of the past, in the interiority of memory and posses-
sion. Authentic love lives only in an ever-new repetition and reception of the beloved as gift. Authentic love is openness to the future; it is ab-solute action. It is in this sense that Abraham “remained true to his love” even as he raised the knife—but even more so as Isaac was received back from the hand of God.

VII

Let me conclude by tying together constructively the various threads I have been tracing between action, hiddenness, and doxology. It is here where I would like to gesture toward that “apophaticism of action” I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Doxology, biblically understood, is not simply the analogical ascription of lovely phrases to a Supreme Being. It is an abandon-
ment of one’s very self to the action of God. “Consider and answer me, O LOR D my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, ‘I have prevailed over him,’ lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LOR D, because the LOR D has dealt bountifully with me”
Doxology is a lived movement caught up into and laid open by the action of God. This is a movement of apophasis insofar as handing one’s self and one’s world over to God is an “unhanding” that celebrates the utter prevenience and mystery of God’s grace. Moreover, to emphasize that this unhanding occurs most basically in the concreteness of action is to say that the shape of this “unhanding” is a mode of life that witnesses to its own impossibility, humanly speaking. To posture oneself in the world in such a way as to become entirely dependent upon and receptive to the action of God’s grace is to live both doxologically and apophatically. Life with the poor and despised, care of the unlovely, reconciliation with enemies, the granting and reception of forgiveness, the crossing of borders and boundaries to proclaim and enact the Gospel, silent prayer—these are but a few of the “sites” where life is “unhanded” to God, “unsaid” so that God might speak it anew. Fixed and easy language about God, too, is “unsaid” in these movements. Such unsaying cannot be turned into a methodology, as if simply countering or ‘balancing’ cataphatic statements with apophatic ones were enough to secure the faithfulness of our language. Faithfulness can only be an event, the surprising gift of sharing the praise of God with unexpected others as we are together converted to God and to each other in love. The point is that we can never know in advance how we will be given to live and speak God’s love with and for others. We only can move out and undertake the work of “unhanding” in the expectancy that we will be given the gift of becoming witnesses to God’s grace.

With this, we can turn to christology, specifically to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, as the irreducible core of doxological, apophatic action. God is hidden, finally and most basically, in this crucified one, in this man who abandoned his life to God unto death, even death on a cross. That God raised this mutilated one whose wounds remain open means that we are ushered into his life of abasement, summoned to live, even now, the hiddenness of God he performed. Our doxology happens “in Christ” in an ever new repetition of Jesus’ cross and resurrection as we abandon ourselves in love to the coming reign of God. “For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:11). “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:3–4). This is the pattern of eucharist, that liturgy, that work of a people who inhabit the broken body of Jesus. This christological pattern is also the secret of Kierkegaard’s entire authorship, the central issue in “the problem ‘of becoming a Christian.’ ” Fear and Trembling, specifically, is a dramatic staging of the movement of abasement at the heart of cruciform faith. We have our lives only in giving them away to the action of God. Abraham’s faith, in a certain sense, is already faith in Jesus Christ. Abraham is a “martyr,” a “witness” to the paradoxical action of God that is a reality only in “that One” named Jesus.
“He still exists only in his abasement.”124 So writes Kierkegaard about the living Jesus Christ who claims us as his contemporaries. Following Jesus is a matter of entrance into this abasement, into God’s hiddenness. “One cannot become a believer except by coming to him in his state of abasement, to him, the sign of offense and the object of faith. He does not exist in any other way, for only in this way has he existed.”125 Jesus lives, even now, “poor as the poorest, poorly regarded as the lowly man among the people, experienced in life’s sorrows and anguish, sharing the very same condition as those . . . who labor and are burdened.”126 His life is nothing but “divine compassion . . . the unlimited recklessness in concerning oneself only with the suffering, not in the least with oneself, and of unconditionally recklessly concerning oneself with each sufferer.”127 Such out-going action is the “incognito”128 life of God into which we are summoned and in which we may hide ourselves.

NOTES

1 Many thanks to Ellen Armour for her comments on an earlier draft of this article, particularly her encouragement to explore Kierkegaard’s relation to Levinas more deeply. I am also grateful for ongoing conversation with Nate Kerr about Kierkegaard, without which this essay would not have been written. That such conversation gives life to both our friendship and shared ministry gives me hope that theology might genuinely serve the “absolute action” of which this essay speaks. Finally, for full effect, this essay should be read while listening to Florence + the Machine.


4 The epigraph to Fear and Trembling is a quote from Hamann: “What Tarquin the Proud communicated in his garden with the beheaded poppies was understood by the son but not by the messenger.” Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 2. Throughout this article, I will be quoting primarily from Walsh’s translation of Fear and Trembling.

5 Is there any other way to read Fear and Trembling? The nature of “indirect communication” requires that the reader construct her own response to the text if the text is to do its “work.” To relate to the text merely objectively is to betray it, to misread it, in fact.


7 The most sophisticated and persuasive of these is Edward F. Mooney’s Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).


9 By “ontology” I do not mean the unavoidable practice of using the language of “being,” that is, speaking in terms of predication or the sheer facticity of things. Ontology in the strict sense accounts for the reality of any particular by way of a theory of Being, i.e., the Being of beings. Faith, for Kierkegaard, is irreducible to any theory of Being because the life of faith is constituted by the repetition of singular encounters with God and neighbor. Such repetition can only be lived in the exigency of the moment. To attempt to secure a theory of Being as the condition for the possibility of faithfulness—“communion,” “peace,” and “actualism” are common ones these days—is precisely to step back despairingly from the
task of faith. By “epistemology” I mean that attempt to secure the human person as a “knower” capable of navigating through the world on the basis of its powers of categorization and organization. Again, faith, for Kierkegaard, transgresses this attempt by virtue of its utter reliance on the prevenience and mystery of God’s grace for its life in this world. This is not to shut down epistemology as such, it is simply to say that from within the posture of faith, the thinker is continually undergoing a passion, bearing the burden of thinking what finally cannot be thought. See Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 37.

10 I have in mind here Simone Weil’s understanding of “waiting,” which carries the dual sense of attention and service.


14 This is, of course, Hegel’s retort against Kant’s foreclosure of metaphysics. To think on the basis of the limits of reason is already to have transgressed them into a higher rationality. To get out of this infinite Hegelian dialectic that remains always within the parameters of ontology and epistemology, one has to reconceive God’s transcendence and eternity, which is what I think Kierkegaard does, namely, as the irreducibility of a singular action.

15 In other words, to name God as “Wholly Other” as Kierkegaard does is not to set up a negative dialectic between God and the world in which God is simply the negation of the creature. This is often how Kierkegaard is read, “despair” being the existential articulation of the negative dialectic. As Simon Podmore has shown, by contrast, it is actually *divine forgiveness*, i.e., the positive action of God that presses upon the creature the “infinite qualitative distinction” between God and the world/eternity and time. See Simon D. Podmore, *Kierkegaard & the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).


19 Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1–5: “And I, brothers and sisters, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of human beings but in the power of God.” It is specifically in speaking of a cruciform life empowered by the grace of God that Paul reaches for the language of “fear and trembling.”


22 In a journal entry from 1839, Kierkegaard writes, “Fear and trembling is not the *primus motor* in the Christian life, for it is love; but it is what the oscillating *balance wheel* is to the clock—it is the oscillating *balance wheel* of the Christian life.” *FTR*, p. 239.

23 David Kangas, *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, p. 1. It is Kangas, more than anyone, who has helped me to understand the idealist milieu of Kierkegaard’s thought.


26 For Kangas, in *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, faith at its core is openness to the anarchy of time. I should note here that while I am very much dependent on Kangas’ insightful analysis of
Fear and Trembling, particularly his account of the idealist background, I worry that there is a tendency in his reading to reduce faith to an ontological structure and so regard it as an immanent possibility. For instance: “The suspension of the ethical refers not merely to some discrete command or maxim, but to an entirely ‘new category’; it is not an ontic structure, we might say, but an ontological one. At stake is the subjectivity of the subject” (p. 131). More is at stake in Fear and Trembling, namely, faith as a divine possibility, indeed, a miracle, that cannot be accounted for simply by virtue of the subjectivity of the subject.

28 Ibid., p. 30.
30 Kierkegaard, FTR, p. 131.
31 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 15.
32 Cf. Kierkegaard’s depiction of Anna in the Upbuilding Discourse “Patience in Expectancy” (1844). Anna also performs the doxological movement of faith as openness to the arrival of eternity in time. Her worshipping day and night in the temple awakens in her “an expectancy that is not the fruit of temporality but that awakens only in the person who gave up the temporal in order to gain the eternal and then found the grace to see eternity as an expectancy in time” (p. 218). “In the eminent sense of the word there was only one expectancy in the world, the expectancy of the fullness of time, and this was precisely the object of Anna’s expectancy” (p. 219).
33 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 17.
34 Ibid., p. 29.
35 Ibid., p. 31.
36 Ibid., p. 41.
37 Ibid., p. 28.
38 Ibid., p. 28.
39 Ibid., p. 28.
40 Ibid., p. 28.
41 Ibid., p. 30.
42 Ibid., p. 37.
43 Ibid., pp. 29–30.
44 Ibid., pp. 34–35.
46 Ibid., p. 37.
48 Ibid., p. 40.
49 Ibid., p. 40.
50 Ibid., p. 46.
52 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 47.
53 Ibid., p. 41.
54 Ibid., p. 40.
55 Ibid., p. 37.
56 Ibid., p. 67.
57 Kierkegaard, FTR, p. 248. This is a journal entry from 1843.
58 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 29.
59 Ibid., pp. 70, 19.
60 On this, see the two Upbuilding Discourses published the same day as Fear and Trembling titled, “Love Will Hide a Multitude of Sins,” in Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses.
61 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 18.
62 Ibid., p. 38.
63 Ibid., p. 17.
64 Ibid., p. 7.
65 And so in his 1843 response to Professor Heiberg concerning Repetition, Kierkegaard will come to talk about atonement for sin as the ultimate “movement by virtue of the absurd.” See FTR, p. 313.


Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 91.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 41.

Kierkegaard, *FTR*, p. 248. This way of reading *Fear and Trembling* sees it as a dramatic staging of the Pauline conflict between law and grace. See Ronald Green, “Enough Is Enough! *Fear and Trembling* is Not about Ethics.” Green argues that the book offers a “modern discussion of the classical Pauline-Lutheran theme of justification by faith” (p. 192), whether, that is, God can suspend ethics for the sake of forgiveness.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 91.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 86.


Kierkegaard, *CUP*, p. 262.


In this section, I follow Kangas in *Kierkegaard’s Instant*, pp. 132–143.


Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 32.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 46.


Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 28.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 34.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 28.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 33.


Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 41.

We might say that Kierkegaard’s authorship is an Augustinian undoing of idealism from the inside.


Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 61.


Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 60.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 60.

Most dramatically and centrally in receiving God’s Yes that justifies the sinner.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 61.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 106.

Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 29.


Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 56.

That is, mediation as such is undone. In the place of a universal “idea” that mediates the beloved to the lover, there is simply the absolute love of God for each singular other. God is not the “between” of lover and beloved as a mediating third but as movement of love that establishes each other in a singular relation to God. Such a “between” is a paradoxical “between” that ab-solves the economy of mediation by virtue of an ab-solute movement. Silentio therefore writes, “The paradox of faith has lost the intermediate factor, i.e. the
universal." *Fear and Trembling*, p. 62. Kierkegaard’s account of singularity and otherness, then, is more radical than even Levinas’, for Levinas’ account still operates within an economy of mediation. The other, for him, is mediated through the metaphysical reality of “otherness” as such. Encounter with the face of the other is a kind of recollection of primordial otherness, rather than, as it is with Kierkegaard, a repetition of the action of God who gives the other as a singular gift. See Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 79–153.


108 “When it is a duty to remain in the debt of love to one another, then to remain in debt is not a fanatical expression, is not an idea about love, but is action; thus love, with the help of duty, continues Christianly in action, in the momentum of action, and thereby in the infinite debt.” *Works of Love*, p. 187. Emphasis in original. What “infinite debt” signifies here is the same as what “absolute duty” signifies in *Fear and Trembling*, namely, the impossibility of self-reflexivity as the self comes under the pressure of the *doxa* of God. In relation to God one is continually sent out of oneself into the world to undertake the work of love. “It is God who, so to speak, brings up love in a man; but God does not do this in order that he might himself rejoice, as it were, in the sight; on the contrary, he does it in order to send love out into the world, continually occupied in the task. . . . In the company of the most extreme fanaticism love can loiter a bit before it goes out again, but with God there is no loitering.” *Works of Love*, p. 190. Crucially, Kierkegaard here grounds his denial of human self-reflexivity in a denial of divine self-reflexivity. God does not build us up in love out of production of Godself, in a movement of self-mediation, but in a movement of absolute out-going. This is precisely what constitutes God’s hiddenness. There is no moment of self-reflexivity in God by which we might “catch sight” of some production of objective identity, essence, or being. As sheer, out-going action, God is beyond every possible conceptual labor. Participation in God is performed in the action of love, not in the dialectical mediation of concepts rooted in divine self-mediation. On the question of divine subjectivity, see David Kangas, “Absolute Subjectivity: Kierkegaard and the Question of Onto-theo-egology,” *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 47 no. 4 (Winter 2003), pp. 378–391.

109 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 100.


116 Kierkegaard wrote two *Upbuilding Discourses* in 1843 with the title, “Every Good and Every Perfect Gift Is from Above,” in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, pp. 125–158. Kierkegaard speaks of the biblical text of these discourses, James 1:17, as his “first love,” indeed his “only love.” He writes, “I could call this text my only love—to which one returns again and again and again and always.” *Pap XI 3 B 291*.


119 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 106.

120 In an important early essay, Wolfhart Pannenberg explores the way in which doxological language overcomes the reductions of analogical and univocal language when speaking of God. He writes, “All biblical speech about God, to the extent that its intention is to designate something beyond a particular deed, namely, God himself and what he is from eternity to eternity, is rooted in adoration and is in this sense doxological. Only if one keeps in mind that theological statements about God are rooted in adoration can the doctrine of God be protected against false conclusions. . . . In the act of adoration . . . the one who brings his praise sacrifices his ‘I’ and thereby, at the same time, the conceptual univocity of his speech. . . . For in doxological statements, the otherwise usual sense of the human word is surrendered in its being used to praise God.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Analogy and Doxology,” in *Basic Questions in Theology*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 215–216. See also, Nathan R. Kerr, “From Description to Doxology: The

121 Silentio writes of Abraham’s movement to Moriah: “He hurried as if going to a celebration.” Fear and Trembling, p. 18.

122 Kierkegaard, POV, p. 6.

123 Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 70.


125 Ibid., p. 24.

126 Ibid., p. 13.

127 Ibid., p. 58.

128 Ibid., p. 127ff.