

From Robert Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 173-203

CHAPTER 6

KIERKEGAARD'S CRITIQUE OF HEGEL

In an earlier chapter, it was argued that Kant turned away from a divine command account of obligation, to offer instead a hybrid account, while Hegel then turned away from this to offer his social command account instead. In this chapter, the wheel turns again, as Kierkegaard's critique of the latter takes us back to a divine command account.

However, whilst it is scarcely surprising to say that Kierkegaard was a critic of Hegel in some broad sense,¹ and also possibly to say that he was a divine command theorist in some broad sense,² it is less easy to narrow down these aspects of his position, so to say exactly what these criticisms amount to, and exactly what form of divine command theory Kierkegaard was proposing. When it comes to the former, we need to substantiate that it was Hegel's social command account of obligation that formed the focus of Kierkegaard's objections, and not just other issues that have no impact on this question; and when it comes to the latter, we need to substantiate that Kierkegaard was offering a divine command account of *obligation*, and not an ethic of a different sort, or a divine command theory of a more radically voluntaristic kind, which treats the good and right as altogether dependent on God's command, not merely for their obligatory force.

¹ Those who read Kierkegaard as a critic of Hegel include: Thulstrup 1980; Crites 1972; Collins 1983; Westphal 1998; Taylor 2000. For a more revisionist account, which argues that Kierkegaard's real target was the members of the school of Danish Hegelians, rather than Hegel himself, see Stewart 2003. However, whilst Stewart succeeds in adding a lot of fascinating detail to the story of Kierkegaard's encounter with Hegel and Hegelianism, I am not in the end convinced that he succeeds in overturning the more standard view. For responses to Stewart along these lines, see Westphal 2004; Pattison 2005: 28-33; and James 2007.

² For characterizations of Kierkegaard in relation to divine command theory, see Quinn 1996 and Quinn 1998; and Evans 2004. For the suggestion that Kierkegaard is not a divine command theorist, see Green 1992: 202; Ferreira: 40-2, 242, and also Ferreira 2002, esp. pp. 149-52; and Manis 2009.

My discussion of Kierkegaard will be structured as follows. In this chapter, which focuses on Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel, I will look mainly at the two pseudonymous works that contain objections to Hegel's ethical outlook, namely *Fear and Trembling*, and *Either/Or*. However, in part because they *are* pseudonymous, and in part also because their intentions are mainly negative, it is unwise to see in these writings the full extent of Kierkegaard's positive position as a whole – where for this, in the next chapter, we will turn to Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*.

1. Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel in *Fear and Trembling*

Published by Kierkegaard in 1843, *Fear and Trembling* was written under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio, and is centred around the story of the binding of Isaac by Abraham (Genesis 22:1-19). It can be seen as a 'singularly problematic text',³ for a variety of reasons – not only because of its pseudonymous authorship and curious literary form; for its hints at a hidden meaning; and for its tantalizing relation to Kierkegaard's biography at this period; but also because of the need to do justice to its ethical and religious radicalism on the one hand, without on the other tipping it into a position that is so extreme, that it becomes difficult to take seriously. In particular, to do justice to its radicalism, it can seem necessary to interpret it as offering a strongly voluntaristic divine command theory, as many have done;⁴ but then it has appeared easy to dismiss it, given the rebarbative implications of such a theory.⁵ Faced with this difficulty, defenders of Kierkegaard then point to the pseudonymous nature of the work, its clear polemical intent, as well as its possibly secret messages, and argue that this is not really his own position and that it is misleading to think of Kierkegaard himself as a divine command theorist at all; but then, as a result, *Fear and Trembling* becomes rather marginalized.⁶ Or it is argued

³ Pattison 2005: 115.

⁴ For a recent reading of Kierkegaard along these lines, see Irwin 2009: 313-5 and 322-4. See also Olafson 1967: 28-31.

⁵ Cf. Green 1993: 198: 'A more serious problem is that if *Fear and Trembling* defends a divine command ethic, it is a forbidding and frightening ethic'.

⁶ Cf. Ferreira 2001: 40.

that *Fear and Trembling* has no real relation to divine command approaches, and is given a different focus: but this is to go against what appears to be a natural reading of the work.

In what follows, I hope to avoid this oscillation, by treating the text as putting forward a divine command account of *obligation* in contrast to Hegel's social command account, but where (as we have seen), this sort of 'intermediate' divine command theory is distinct from any strong voluntarism; however, as we shall go on to see, it still does have a radical potential of a different kind that the social command theory does not, which Kierkegaard exploits in his dialectic with Hegel, so that none of the text's tendency to disturb need be lost. The root of Kierkegaard's concern here, I will argue, has to do with the relation between ethics and faith: on Hegel's social theory of obligation, there is a huge cost in religious terms, as such a theory cannot treat the good and the right as transcendent and thus beyond our full comprehension, where for Kierkegaard it is precisely this transcendence which it is necessary to acknowledge if we are to stand in the proper relation to the divine. This transcendent conception of moral value will still mean that *Fear and Trembling* represents a radical challenge to secular ethicists, who will characteristically take it that moral value is broadly graspable within the human perspective; but it is a challenge distinct from that posed by a voluntaristic divine command theory, and it is one that Kierkegaard thinks it is necessary to preserve in order to make sense of religious faith.

That this is the key focus of *Fear and Trembling* is made clear by the way in which the text is 'framed', by its Preface at the beginning and its Epilogue at the end. In both, it is religious faith and in particular the *devaluing* of faith that is the primary concern – where Kierkegaard treats his contemporary Hegelians as symptomatic in this respect, who as a result of following Hegel, have been lead to believe that faith is easily come by, and surpassed. In the Preface, de Silentio draws a parallel in this respect between faith and doubt, which contemporary Hegelians also take in their stride and effortlessly 'go beyond' – and with respect to both, he contrasts the modern outlook with that of previous eras, where faith and doubt were taken more seriously, both in terms of how long it took to properly come to terms with them, and of how hard they were to transcend.

De Silentio sees that what might make this possible is the Hegelian 'System', in which religion is 'sublated' by philosophy, so that 'the whole content of faith [is

converted] into conceptual form' and so made intelligible;⁷ but he confesses that he himself cannot grasp this 'System', as he is 'not at all a philosopher',⁸ so that faith for him is much harder to deal with and 'get beyond'. In the Epilogue, de Silentio makes clear that in fact, it cannot be *genuine* faith that has been 'sublated' in this way: 'There are perhaps many in every generation who do not even come to [faith]; but nobody goes further':

Whether there are also many in our age who do not discover it, I do not decide; I dare only refer to myself, who does not conceal that it may not happen for a long time to come for him, yet without his therefore wishing to deceive himself or the great by making it into a trifling matter, into a childhood malady one must wish to get over as soon as possible.⁹

De Silentio then compares himself not to a merchant who dumps spices in the sea to raise their price artificially in a sluggish market, but to someone who, in the foregoing discussion of Abraham, has shown what faith really amounts to, in order to combat the complacency with which it is treated by the Hegelians, by bringing out its truly difficult and challenging nature.¹⁰

Now, within the main body of the text, the primary term with which de Silentio tries to bring out the difficult nature of faith, is 'the absurd' – for this, he

⁷ *FT* 3:59 (p. 5). Cf. Hegel *LHP* 18:100 (I, p. 79; translation modified): 'Thus Religion has a content in common with Philosophy the forms alone being different; and the only essential point is that the form of the Concept should be so far perfected as to be able to grasp the content of Religion'.

⁸ *FT* 3:59 (p. 5).

⁹ *FT* 3:167 (p. 108).

¹⁰ *FT* 3:166 (p. 107): '...is what [the present generation needs] not rather an honest earnestness that fearlessly and incorruptibly calls attention to the tasks, an honest earnestness that lovingly preserves the tasks, that does not anxiously want to rush precipitously to the highest but keeps the tasks young, beautiful, delightful to look upon, and inviting to all, yet also difficult and inspiring for the noble-minded (for the noble nature is inspired only by the difficult)?'.

argues, is how Abraham must appear to those without faith (of whom he is one),¹¹ but where if this absurdity were lacking, Abraham would not be a ‘knight of faith’, but another kind of figure entirely. De Silentio presents two dimensions to this absurdity in connection with the binding of Isaac,¹² relating to two ways in which Abraham might be thought of as less than a ‘knight of faith’, where each dimension relates roughly to the two halves of the main part of the book – namely, the half covering the ‘Attunement’, the ‘Tribute to Abraham’ and the ‘Preliminary Outpouring from the Heart’, and the half containing the three ‘Problems’.

The first dimension in which Abraham’s position can be viewed as absurd, and yet in a way which also qualifies him as a knight of faith, is not as immediately ethical as the second, though it does relate to it nonetheless. This first dimension of absurdity is brought out by de Silentio by contrasting Abraham’s way of responding to God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, and what his own response would have been in the same situation – namely, rather than carrying it out with dread, foreboding, or resignation, Abraham set about carrying it out with joy. De Silentio attributes this difference to a belief that Abraham had, which could not be had by someone like himself who lacks faith, and who therefore could not share in Abraham’s joyous demeanour – namely, the belief that God demanded that he sacrifice Isaac, but *also* that the demand would be waived, where Abraham takes both equally seriously in a way that defies ordinary comprehension:

But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too *early* nor too late. He mounted the ass and rode slowly along the way. During all this time he believed; he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while he still was willing to sacrifice him if it was demanded. He believed by virtue of the absurd, for human calculation was out of the question, and it was indeed absurd that God, who demanded it of him, in the next instant would revoke the

¹¹ Cf. *FT* 3:84 (p. 26): ‘By no means do I have faith’; *FT* 3:85 (p. 28); ‘I can well endure living in my own fashion, I am happy and content, but my joy is not that of faith and in comparison with that is really unhappy’.

¹² De Silentio also mentions other aspects of absurdity in relation to the Abraham story more generally, such as his emigration and his belief that Sarah would have a child: see *FT* 3:69-70 (p. 14).

demand. He climbed the mountain, and even at the moment when the knife gleamed he believed – that God would not demand Isaac.¹³

Perhaps feeling, however, that this does not quite capture the full nature of the relation between Abraham's faith and the absurd, de Silentio adds a further level to the account, which is not only that God would allow Abraham to keep Isaac despite requiring that he be sacrificed, but that God would allow him to kill Isaac, but somehow give him back:

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.¹⁴

As de Silentio observes in the preceding 'Tribute to Abraham', not only here but throughout his life, Abraham 'left one thing behind, took one thing with him. He left his worldly understanding behind and took faith with him; otherwise he undoubtedly would not have emigrated but surely would have thought it preposterous'.¹⁵

In the 'Preliminary Outpouring of the Heart', this aspect of Abraham's position is then used to draw a contrast between faith, and what de Silentio calls 'infinite resignation', where the latter involves abandoning the joys, passions and pleasures of ordinary existence, for the sake of some higher cause, while the former somehow manages to retain a commitment to the finite despite all that is being asked of it. De Silentio's suggestion is that it is the absurdity of Abraham's belief that makes this commitment possible for him, as the more reasonable position would seem to be resignation, as the reasonable view is that everything has been lost in sacrificing Isaac – not just Isaac himself, but all Abraham's hopes for his legacy and for his people that have been founded on Isaac's continuance of his line. De Silentio thus

¹³ *FT* 3:86-7 (p. 29).

¹⁴ *FT* 3:87 (pp. 29-30).

¹⁵ *FT* 3:69 (p. 14).

pictures the knight of faith dwelling contentedly within the finite, mundane world – perhaps as an ordinary tax-collector, rather than as any sort of other-worldly ascetic. In order to achieve this, like Abraham, this ordinary believer must have made the movement of faith, of renunciation followed by return:

And yet, yet – yes, I could fly into a rage over it, if for no other reason than out of envy – yet this person has made and at every moment is making the movement of infinity. He empties the deep sadness of existence in infinite resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest thing he has in the world, and yet the finite tastes every bit as good to him as someone who never knew anything higher, for his remaining in finitude has no trace of a dispirited, anxious training, and yet he has this confidence to delight in it as if it were the most certain thing of all. And yet, yet the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd. He resigned everything infinitely and then grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd.¹⁶

De Silentio goes on to develop the contrast, with his tale of a young lad who forms a doomed attachment to a princess, who can never consummate his love: the ‘knight of resignation’ finds his love transfigured by his abandonment of his early hopes, while the ‘knight of faith’ retains his place within the finite, by retaining the belief that somehow the princess will be his in the end, even while he suffers through the pain of knowing that she will not.¹⁷

¹⁶ *FT* 3:91 (p. 34).

¹⁷ *FT* 3:96-7 (p. 39): ‘We shall now let the knight of faith appear in the incident previously mentioned. He does exactly the same as the other knight, he infinitely renounces the love that is the content of his life and is reconciled in pain. But then the miracle occurs. He makes yet another movement more wonderful than anything, for he says: “I nevertheless believe that I shall get her, namely by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God everything is possible.” The absurd does not belong to the distinctions that lie within the proper compass of the understanding’. Cf. 3:99 (p. 42): ‘But by my own strength I cannot get the least bit of what belongs to finitude, for I continually use my strength to resign everything. By my own strength I can give up the princess, and I shall not become a sulker but find joy and peace and rest in my pain. But by my own strength I cannot get her back again, for I use all my strength just for the act of resigning. But by faith, says that miraculous knight, by faith you

In this way, therefore, de Silentio takes himself to have shown how difficult it is to make sense of faith, for faith can only take on its characteristic feature by virtue of its connection with the absurd; once a more reasonable attitude is adopted, it becomes something more like infinite resignation. So, the first criticism of the Hegelian is that he has underestimated this absurdity. The second, and related, criticism, is that he has therefore mischaracterized faith and confused it with infinite resignation: for, although faith involves the transcendent, for de Silentio it also brings with it precisely the kind of ‘being at home in the world’ that the Hegelian claims to provide, but which the Hegelian thinks requires immanence and not transcendence.¹⁸ Far from losing touch with the finite through the transcendent, de Silentio suggests, it is only through the latter that the finite is genuinely retained, which is otherwise in danger of being lost in the attitude of infinite resignation – an attitude which the Hegelian confuses with genuine faith.

We have seen, then, how in the first half of the book, de Silentio draws out the constitutive connection between faith and the absurd – where up to this point, the absurdity in question has primarily been metaphysical in a broad sense (how can Isaac be sacrificed and yet live? how can God intend him to be sacrificed yet equally intend to stop the sacrifice? how can the princess come to love the young lad, given all the obstacles that stand in the way?). If this absurdity did not form part of religious life, de Silentio is clearly arguing, such life would not be truly possible. My claim now will be, that the discussion at this point moves on to a different kind of absurdity – an *ethical* absurdity – that is equally said to form a crucial part of the religious life in a way that the Abraham story also brings out, where it is *this* that would be lost of

will get her by virtue of the absurd’. Cf. also 3:97 (p. 40), where de Silentio contrasts the faith of the young boy with a girl whose optimism is just based on ‘childlike naiveté and innocence’, and who is not therefore aware of all that stands in the way of her hopes being fulfilled, and so experiences no difficulty in her optimism.

¹⁸ Cf. *EL* §38Z 8:109 (p. 78), where Hegel expresses his admiration for this side of empiricism, though of course he is critical of it in other respects: ‘From Empiricism the call went out: “Stop chasing about among empty abstractions, look at what is there for the taking, grasp *the here and now*, human and natural, as it is *here* before us, and enjoy it!” And there is no denying that this contains an essentially justified moment. This world, the *here and now*, the present, was to be substituted for the empty Beyond, for the spiderwebs and cloudy shapes of the abstract understanding’.

the Hegelian account of obligation were accepted, and with it the possibility of religious faith.

However, it is important to also recognize that the absurdity encountered so far can be thought of as having an ethical dimension. For, behind Abraham's belief that God is working in these mysterious ways, is also his belief that somehow through all this, God's earlier promises to Abraham regarding his own happiness and that of his people will be kept – though this is also equally mysterious for him and seemingly absurd, given that if Isaac dies as God seems to require, Abraham will lose all that matters to him and his people will have lost their next leader. Nonetheless, as C. Stephen Evans notes, 'Abraham simply rests unwaveringly in his trust in God's goodness'¹⁹ without doubting that goodness, even though he has no real idea how it is being displayed in what he is being asked to do. It is this transcendent aspect to what is good, I will now argue, that is explored more explicitly in the subsequent discussion of the ethical in the second part of the book.

De Silentio's turn to the ethical is signaled at the end of the 'Preliminary Outpouring',²⁰ where moves to the discussions of three 'Problems' raised by the *Akedah*, beginning with 'Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?', and continuing with 'Is there an absolute duty to God?' and 'Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, from Isaac?'. My suggestion will be that in each of these discussions, a key theme is that for faith to retain its character, it must retain its connection to the ethically absurd, where this is only possible if a social command theory of obligation is rejected in favour of a divine command theory of obligation, for only then can what is right or good be seen as possibly outstripping our understanding in a way that this conception of the absurd requires.²¹

¹⁹ Evans 2006: xix.

²⁰ *FT* 3:103 (p. 46; my emphasis): 'It is now my intention to draw out in the form of problems the dialectical factors implicit in the story of Abraham in order to see what a prodigious paradox faith is – a paradox that is *capable of making a murder into a holy act well pleasing to God*, a paradox that gives Isaac back again to Abraham, which no thought can lay hold of because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off'.

²¹ This aspect of Kierkegaard's account has been emphasized by in Outka 1973: 236 p. 236: '...Abraham's own antecedent criteria of right and wrong are not antecedently authoritative. For in a fashion akin to Job, he must finally defer to a wisdom superior to his own. His obedience may presuppose a general confidence in the wisdom of

In the first Problem, de Silentio begins with a characterization of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, which involves not merely a Kantian conception of the universality of ethical principles,²² but also the universality of the ethical community of which the individual is part, and within which he encounters no ultimate antithesis between his merely particular interests and the universal good of the social whole, as that distinction becomes blurred. Within this conception, as we have seen, duties are enforced through the community, within this social end or telos in view, of creating a harmonic social order, one in which the individual is not crushed or subordinated, but finds their higher realization. As a result, therefore, the good underlying the imposition on the individual of any duty is transparent, and what the individual is obliged to do can be justified to all by appealing to it directly.

This does not mean that on this account no conflict can arise, of course, as there will be circumstances in which the individual may be called upon to undergo great personal sacrifice for the sake of the well-being of the community. In this case, de Silentio argues, the individual is put in the position of what he calls the *tragic hero*, of which he gives three exemplars: Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Lucius Junius Brutus. All three are fathers who sacrifice their offspring for the sake of the good of society, where their duties are laid down as a result of their place within it, qua king or civic leader. The end for which these men acted is therefore clear, as are the requirements upon them; and while we may sympathise with them greatly, the ethical import of their actions is made transparent by the good realized by what they choose to do, where in each case their duties to the family are outweighed by their obligations to the state:

God's commands, but it does not require in the situation a perfect understanding in accordance with his own autonomous moral lights. In this life, at least, he must be prepared to change his mind. So he sets out, knowing that it is God who tries him, but not fully understanding the point of the command'. Cf. also pp. 240-44, and also Outka 1993: 213: '*Fear and Trembling*...focuses on the danger ethics presents insofar as it sets antecedent terms for the individual's personal relation to God. We cannot fully anticipate what God may command us to do'.

²² Whilst it was once customary to take Kant to be Kierkegaard's focus here, it has increasingly been recognized that it is Hegel that forms his primary target. See, for example, Westphal 1981: 73-4/1991: 76-77. See also Evans 2009: 103-4. For a more complete set of references to different views on this issue, see Lee 1992: 102-3, note 3.

The tragic hero still remains within the ethical. He lets an expression of the ethical have its telos in a higher expression of the ethical; he reduces the ethical relation between father and son or daughter and father to a sentiment that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of the ethical life. Here, then, there can be no question of the teleological suspension of the ethical itself.²³

However, while these men might make for tragic heroes, they cannot (in the manner of Abraham) make for knights of faith, not only because (unlike Abraham) they do not believe their children will be returned to them,²⁴ but also because (again unlike Abraham) the duties relating to their actions are of a *civic* kind, as is the moral value that belongs to them. Abraham, by contrast, acted because God commanded him to, where the good to be realized by sacrificing Issac is opaque and unknown, and where that good is given priority over the moral value of acting to preserve the social order:

The case is different with Abraham [from that of the tragic hero]. By his act he transcended the whole of the ethical and had a higher telos outside, in relation to which he suspended it. For I would certainly like to know how Abraham's act can be brought into relation to the universal, whether any connection can be discovered between what Abraham did and the universal other than that Abraham overstepped it. It is not to save a people, not to uphold the idea of the state, not to appease angry gods that Abraham does it.²⁵

²³ *FT* 3:109 (pp. 51-2).

²⁴ Cf. *FT* 3:108-9 (p. 51): 'When at the decisive moment Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus heroically have overcome the pain, heroically have lost the beloved and merely must complete the deed externally, there never will be a noble soul in the world without tears of sympathy for their pain and tears of admiration for their deed. However, if at the decisive moment these three men were to add to their heroic courage with which they bore their pain the little phrase, "but it will not happen," who then would understand them? If as an explanation they added, "we believe it by virtue of the absurd," who then would understand them better? For who would not easily understand that it was absurd, but who could understand that one could then believe it?'

²⁵ *FT* 3:109 (pp. 52).

The fact that Abraham did not act to achieve any social good, and thus did not act in accordance with the duties that might legitimately be imposed upon him within the framework of *Sittlichkeit*, means that he can appeal to no such conception of moral value to legitimate his actions; all he can do is to appeal to the fact that God requires these actions of him and that they are therefore his duty, but where the link between that duty and moral value can no longer be discerned, in the way that it can in the case of the tragic hero:

Why does Abraham do it then? For God's sake, and what is altogether identical with this, for his own sake. He does it for God's sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it. Hence the unity is quite rightly expressed in a word always used to denote this relation: it is a trial, a temptation. A temptation; but what does that mean? That which ordinarily tempts a person, to be sure, is whatever would keep him from doing his duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself, which would keep him from doing God's will. But then what is the duty? Well, the duty is precisely the expression for God's will.²⁶

The latter claim, therefore, shows that Abraham is much more than a tragic hero, and why a 'new category' is needed 'for understanding Abraham'.²⁷

Now, what makes this 'new category' that of the knight of *faith* is (as we saw previously) the link to the absurd, where here the link is based on the epistemic and moral uncertainty that Abraham is under and embraces, in a way that the tragic hero is not: for the tragic hero knows how his duty connects to the good, where Abraham does not, and so takes an enormous risk in acting as he does and taking it to *be* his duty to sacrifice Isaac. For, God would not make it obligatory for him to kill Isaac by commanding it, unless it *were* good in some way – but he has no idea how this might be so. In view of this, he then could use this as reasonable grounds on which to reject the command, by taking it to show that it is not God who is commanding him, or that

²⁶ *FT* 3:109 (p. 52).

²⁷ *FT* 3:110 (p. 52).

he is misunderstanding what is being commanded²⁸ – but Abraham does not, because he has the humility to simply trust in God, a humility which he could not exercise if the Hegelian position were right, and the connection here between moral value and duty could always be made clear, as it can on the social command account.

It is thanks to this opacity, however, that Abraham's position is fraught with epistemic and moral risk, because he cannot ever be certain he is not deluded and that his trust is not entirely misplaced:

[T]he tragic hero gives up the certain for the even more certain, and the eye of the beholder rests confidently upon him. But the one who gives up the universal in order to grasp something higher that is not the universal, what does he do? Is it possible that this can be anything other than a temptation? And if it is possible but the single individual then made a mistake, what salvation is there for him? He suffers all the pain of the tragic hero, he destroys his joy in the world, he renounces everything and perhaps at the same moment blocks himself from the sublime joy which was so precious to him that he would buy it at any price. The observer cannot understand him at all, nor confidently rest his eyes upon him.²⁹

It is by contemplating this possibility of radical error in Abraham's actions, a possibility that does not exist for the tragic hero, that Abraham becomes a figure of 'fear and trembling',³⁰ as one looks on at his action with dread. We can miss this, de Silentio argues, because we just think of the result of what actually happened, and how in the end things worked out well, as the moral value in what God was intending here is made clear again (God was trying to test Abraham, to work out the extent of his faith, to demonstrate his disapproval of child sacrifice, and so on). But for

²⁸ Cf. Kant, *Relig* 6:99 note (p. 134): '[I]f an alleged divine statutory law is opposed to a positive civil law not in itself immoral, then is there cause to consider the alleged divine law as spurious, for it contradicts a clear duty, whereas that it is itself a divine command can never be certified sufficiently on empirical evidence to warrant violating on its account an otherwise established duty'; and also *Relig* 6:186-7 (pp. 203-4).

²⁹ *FT* 3:110 (p. 53).

³⁰ Cf. *FT* 3:111 (p. 53).

Abraham at the time, of course, this was not clear, and hence the awesome nature of his decision, and its apparent absurdity – where, de Silentio notes, a similar uncertainty related to those who first had faith in Christ, and to the actions of the Apostles.³¹

In the second Problem (‘Is there an absolute duty to God?’), de Silentio is again concerned to show how an Hegelian ethics makes faith impossible. In this ethics, he allows, one might say that in some sense ‘every duty, after all, is duty to God’; but the content for these duties really comes from the moral values inherent within ethical life, so that the appeal to the divine in fact acts nothing: ‘God becomes an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought, his power being only in the ethical which fills all existence’.³² There is thus no inner moment of fateful decision in the light of the divine, and thus there is no faith: ‘Faith, on the contrary, is this paradox, that inwardness is higher than outwardness’.³³ De Silentio makes clear that by the ‘inwardness’ of faith here, he does not mean anything like mystical feeling, which he agrees that philosophy would be right to ‘get beyond’; rather, he means this vital connection with the absurd: ‘Faith is preceded by a movement of infinity; only then does faith commence, unexpectedly, by virtue of the absurd’.³⁴

As a knight of faith, therefore, Abraham recognizes a duty to God here, which cannot be given any grounding in the duties of ethical life. But this means it cannot be related to any social ends – where normally we would take it that if an action is not so related, then it is grounded in self-interest instead. However, that is not the basis of

³¹ *FT* 3:115 (p. 58; translation modified): ‘One is moved, one returns to those beautiful times when sweet, tender longings lead one to the goal of one’s desires, to see Christ walking about in the promised land. One forgets the anxiety, the distress, the paradox. Was it so easy a matter not to make a mistake? Was it not appalling that this person who walked among others was God? Was it not terrifying to sit down to eat with him? Was it so easy a matter to become an apostle? But the outcome, the eighteen centuries, it helps; it lends a hand to that paltry deception whereby one deceives oneself and others. I do not feel brave enough to wish to be contemporary with such events, but for that reason I do not judge harshly of those who made a mistake [and doubted that Jesus was God] nor slightly of those who saw things rightly’.

³² *FT* 3:117 (p. 59; translation modified).

³³ *FT* 3:69 (p. 60).

³⁴ *FT* 3:118 (p. 61).

Abraham's action, which comes from his acknowledgement of a duty to God. Here, then, we have a duty that is nonetheless not mediated by the 'universal' of *Sittlichkeit*, by an appeal to the 'common good'. The paradox involved in thinking of Abraham's action as a duty to God, therefore, is that he is not acting for the general good (and so is acting egoistically?), but he is acting to sacrifice all he holds dear (and so is not acting egoistically?) – a paradox that can be resolved by recognizing a good beyond the general good, that forms the basis of a duty to God alone, who cannot then be reduced to a 'vanishing point'.³⁵

De Silentio underlines how such duties to God can go beyond our civic duties by quoting from Luke 14:26, and the 'hard saying': 'If any man cometh unto me and hateth not his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple'.³⁶ De Silentio resists all attempts to 'soften' these words; on the other hand, he does not take them to mean literal hatred either, as Abraham would not be Abraham unless he loved Isaac. What he is doing, however, is something that from any social conception of ethics must appear to be one of hatred and not of love, of murder and not of cherishing – just as the disciple may be required to renounce family and friends if asked to devote his life to God. De Silentio therefore also resists the thought that perhaps we *can* find some social good here, such as the good of the Church,³⁷ as in this case we would have a tragic hero again, and not a knight of faith. De Silentio concludes the second Problem with further reflections on the difference between the two, and how the certainties of the

³⁵ *FT* 3:120 (p. 62): 'Thus if one sees a person do something that does not conform to the universal, one says that he hardly did it for God's sake, meaning thereby that he did it for his own sake. The paradox of faith has lost the intermediate factor, i.e. the universal. On the one hand, it is the expression for the highest egoism (doing the frightful deed for one's own sake); on the other hand, it is the expression for the most absolute devotion (doing it for God's sake). Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for it is thereby annulled'.

³⁶ Cf. *FT* 3:120-1 (p. 63).

³⁷ Cf. *FT* 3:123 (p. 65): 'Furthermore, the passage in Luke must be understood in such a way that one perceives that the knight of faith has no higher expression of the universal (as the ethical) at all in which he can save himself. If we thus let the church require this sacrifice from one its members, then we have only a tragic hero. For the idea of the church is not qualitatively different from that of the state, inasmuch as the single individual can enter into it by a simple mediation'.

former make their position relatively easy compared to the latter, notwithstanding the undoubted sacrifices required of both.

In the third and final Problem ('Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, from Isaac?'), de Silentio treats at some length a feature of Abraham's position that he has touched on in earlier discussions: namely, how that position necessarily isolates him from other people, and cuts him off from normal communication with them. This, again, relates to the deep uncertainty concerning the value of what he is about to do, an uncertainty that does not attach to the actions of the tragic hero. The latter can point to a generally recognized good that would be realized in his sacrifice, whereas the former cannot, and is therefore conscious that in the eyes of others, it cannot be explained or justified. Given this opacity concerning the moral value of his action, he does not and cannot expect to be able to convince others of the worthiness of what he is doing: he is alone, and cannot expect anyone to follow him, as in this situation, each must judge how things stand for themselves. As de Silentio has put the point in the second Problem: 'Whether the single individual is now actually situated in a state of temptation or is a knight of faith, only the individual himself can decide'.³⁸

In the third Problem, therefore, the contrast with the Hegelian position is that nothing in Hegel's conception of moral value can prevent the grounds of an ethical action from being transparent, so that here Abraham's inability to communicate his purposes to Sarah, Eliezer and Isaac would be a sign that he is in the wrong. But in fact the paradox of Abraham's position is that he is in the right, but where he cannot say what its rightness consists in or offer any ethical grounding for it, because God has only commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, without vouchsafing to him the reason why, where from the human perspective those reasons are utterly opaque. Thus, if Abraham were asked to justify his actions, he could not – just like the person who does what is wrong, but where here that incommunicability is *not* a sign that the act actually is wrong. The opacity of the moral value in question, therefore, renders the action something that must be concealed – where the Hegelian, who has no such opacity within his account, cannot make sense of this, and so must mistakenly take Abraham's silence to show that he is acting in moral error.

³⁸ *FT* 3:127 (p. 69; translation modified).

De Silentio again contrasts Abraham's position to that of the tragic hero, who can speak and explain his actions, and also to other cases where silence might be permitted on grounds that do not apply to Abraham – for example, where that silence would save somebody else. Abraham's silence has an altogether deeper source, based on the transcendent grounding of what he is called upon to do, where that grounding is something he cannot articulate to others, by explaining to them what makes his actions right. The tragic hero, by contrast, 'ought not to be afraid of having overlooked anything',³⁹ and so can explain what he takes to be the moral value in what he is doing, even if others might then disagree with him about that. By contrast, Abraham understands that if he did try to explain himself to Sarah, Eliezer and Isaac, his action would inevitably start to seem unwarranted in his eyes, in a way that would constitute a temptation to do wrong. It is this threat that compels him into silence: where normally it is the possibility of silence that allows us to contemplate wrongdoing, here it is the possibility of communication, as the attempt at public justification makes clear exactly how difficult it is to supply.

I have argued, therefore, that *Fear and Trembling* involves a critique of Hegelian ethics from the perspective of faith, and the claim that this requires us to accept a divine command account of obligation instead. Within *Sittlichkeit*, the most that one can be is a tragic hero, because within *Sittlichkeit* one's duties are transparently grounded in the moral values recognized within the social order. If we are to understand how Abraham could be a knight of faith, however, he must find himself in a situation where this sort of transparency breaks down, which can only occur if God is seen as the source of obligation for him, and not society – for it is possibly to imagine God grasping the good in a way that we cannot, and so putting us under obligations in a way that are opaque from the human perspective, and which can therefore suspend the normal sense of where our duties lie. Only in this manner, Kierkegaard is arguing, can we put Abraham in the right relation to the absurd, and so see him not just as a tragic hero, but as a knight of faith.

In this way, therefore, we can do justice to the radical and disturbing implications that Kierkegaard clearly wanted to draw out from the Abraham story, without needing to commit Kierkegaard to a strongly voluntarist version of the divine

³⁹ *FT* 3:159 (p. 100).

command account in order to do so. As the contrast with Hegel has I hope made clear, it is sufficient to contrast their positions as account of *obligation*, and so to treat Kierkegaard's position as an 'intermediate' divine command theory, which views obligatoriness as constituted by God's will, rather than the good and the right as such. For, in the account I have offered, the radical nature of Kierkegaard's account comes from allowing the good and the right to be beyond our cognitive grasp, not from the fact that they depend on the arbitrary determination of the divine will.⁴⁰

There is, however, a way in which Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel in *Fear and Trembling* is dialectically limited (though it would scarcely have struck Kierkegaard as such): namely, that it rests on the strategy of showing that Hegel's ethical position is in the end inadequate, because it cannot do justice to the nature of faith. Now, against Hegel himself, this is arguably an effective strategy, as Hegel did claim to be able to accommodate the latter – so if Kierkegaard has succeeded in showing that in fact his position in ethics makes this impossible, then this might well be considered an important consideration against it. But for those who are not committed to this part of the Hegelian programme, and who also takes matters of faith and religion rather lightly, it may appear that the Kierkegaardian strategy can easily be shrugged off: for they will feel that even if Kierkegaard is right that endorsing the social command account of obligation comes at a cost in religious terms, this is of little significance to them, as that is a price they are happy enough to pay. In other words, it may be felt that in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard has not yet given us a critique of the Hegelian position that will have much purchase on those who lack Kierkegaard's commitment to the religious life. For this, there is perhaps more reason to turn to *Either/Or*.

2. *Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel in Either/Or*

⁴⁰ Along similar lines, Philip Quinn has argued that even if one abandons radical voluntarism in favour of some sort of 'modified' divine command theory of the sort proposed by Robert Adams, nonetheless '[t]o preclude the possibility of a credible divine command to practice human sacrifice would be to attempt to domesticate the transcendent, which is at odds with its fearful and dangerous character' (Quinn 2002: 465). Cf. also Wainwright 2005: 205-8.

Either/Or is also a pseudonymous work, and is also published by Kierkegaard in 1843, a few months before *Fear and Trembling*. It consists of two volumes, put together by one ‘Victor Eremita’, where the papers of an aesthete known as ‘A’ make up the first volume, while those of a person known as ‘B’ make up the second one, where ‘B’ is revealed to be a Judge William. His papers mainly consist of two long letters that he has sent to A, together with a concluding sermon that he has received from a country priest. Broadly speaking, the structure of the work can be taken to reflect Kierkegaard’s three ‘spheres of existence’, namely the aesthetic (volume 1), the ethical (William’s papers in volume 2), and the religious (the sermon).⁴¹ As with *Fear and Trembling*, the question is again whether the ethical can be developed in a way that is prior to the religious, but where this is not here posed by making the matter of faith quite so central, but rather the question of the ethical itself – what are the limitations of an ethics conceived of in this way?

Judge William presents himself as critical of some aspects of what he takes to be Hegelian doctrine, most especially of its treatment of contradiction and of its attendant inability (as he sees it) to take individual choice seriously.⁴² Nonetheless, perhaps in one of those ironies of failed self-knowledge that Kierkegaard delighted in as an author, William’s own ethical outlook is shown to be that of an Hegelian.⁴³ This can be seen primarily in the way in which Judge William acts as a spokesman for the family, to the value of which he seeks to win round the A of volume 1. In doing so, the Judge was not only following Hegel in treating the family as a central institution of ethical life, but he also defends it as such in clearly Hegelian terms, through the working of ‘love’s dialectic’,⁴⁴ whereby the romantic love that A champions is

⁴¹ I say ‘broadly speaking’, because as we shall see, there are significant religious elements in Judge William’s ethical position; the question is, however, whether those elements take the religious dimension sufficiently seriously.

⁴² This mostly occurs in the opening parts of the Judge’s second letter, on ‘The Balance Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality’. This critical element is reflected also in the comments that the pseudonymous author of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* makes about ‘the ethicist in *Either/Or*’: see *CUP* 7:438 note (p. 503).

⁴³ Jon Stewart has also emphasized the connections with Hegel here, criticizing attempts by Niels Thulstrup to minimize these: see Stewart 2003: 225-9. For Thulstrup’s treatment, see Thulstrup 1980: 324-8.

⁴⁴ *EO* 2:17 (p. 18). For a comparative study, see Perkins 1967.

‘sublated’ within the familial form (where it may not be coincidental to all this that William was also Hegel’s second name).

As the first stage in this dialectic, A’s romantic love is characterized in terms of *immediacy*: ‘But first I shall indicate the characteristics of romantic love. One could say in a single word: It is immediate. To see her and to love her would be one and the same, or even though she saw him but one single time through a crack in the shuttered window of a virgin’s bower, she nevertheless would love him from that moment, him alone in the whole world’.⁴⁵ Romantic love involves no rational reflection, but only the immediacy of feeling or impulse, where it is then related to the sensuous experience of beauty. At the same time, however, it takes itself to be distinguished from mere lust or carnal desire, so that it ‘has an analogy to the moral in the presumed eternity, which ennobles it and saves it from the merely sensuous’.⁴⁶ The question Judge William presses, however, is whether it can maintain this distinction in a stable way, unless it incorporates more of morality: for in fact, through being based on feeling, it is no more eternal and enduring than lust itself. It may then be said, however, that the eternal consists in ‘living in the present’, whereby the moment of union is treated as if it lasts forever, where marriage is then rejected as a prolonging of this precious instant into the tedium of days and years together – an attitude encapsulated in the Byronic sentiment that ‘love is heaven, marriage is hell’.⁴⁷ While a naïve romantic love is therefore prepared to accept the marriage ceremony as a joyful ‘festivity’, this more sophisticated form of romantic love dreads the thought of love going cold, and so insists that if marriage occurs, it can always be terminated if this happens; the eternal is therefore lost again, as divorce is possible on this basis at any moment. Judge William diagnoses a deep melancholy here, a kind of paranoid fear of abandonment and loss of affection, together with a morbid sense that perhaps one could do better elsewhere: “‘What can one depend upon; everything may change; perhaps even this being I now almost worship can change; perhaps later fates will bring me in contact with another being who for the first time will truly be the ideal of which I have dreamed’”.⁴⁸ Likewise, the lover may fear that they may themselves

⁴⁵ *EO* 2:18-19 (pp. 19-20).

⁴⁶ *EO* 2:20 (p. 21).

⁴⁷ *EO* 2:21 (p. 22).

change, and also leave the beloved in a hopeless relationship, and so again shun marriage. In a typically Hegelian reversal of the dialectic therefore, romantic love that started with the eternal and with joy has ended with the transitory and with despair.

In response, the reaction may then be to turn from the romantic position to its opposite, which moves from immediacy and feeling to mediation and reflection, as the individual contemplates the advantages to be gained from a marriage of convenience, with its basis in ‘the understanding’ and ‘common sense’. This may appear to be a more ethically satisfactory position than romantic love, but in fact Judge William questions this: ‘Insofar as it has neutralized the sensuous in marriage, it seems to be moral, but a question still remains whether this neutralization is not just as immoral as it is unesthetic’.⁴⁹ It has also not solved the problem of the relation to the eternal, for a marriage of convenience may be dissolved at any time, when it outlives its usefulness. Judge William brings out the dialectical tension between the two positions so far discussed by quoting from ‘a commonsensical little seamstress’ in a ‘recent play’, who ‘makes the shrewd comment about fine gentlemen’s love: They love us, but they do not marry us; they do not love the fine ladies, but they marry them’.⁵⁰

Judge William then sets out, in a Hegelian manner, to find some way of achieving a ‘mediated immediacy’ here, and thus of ‘sublating’ both positions in a higher one, that retains what is worthwhile in each while overcoming their ‘one-sidedness’⁵¹ – for otherwise, we will be left with a lasting antithesis between inclination and duty, feeling and reason, and the temporal and the eternal. As Judge William puts it:

The question remains whether the immediate, the first love, by being caught up into a higher, concentric immediacy, would not be secure against this scepticism so that the married love would not need to plough under the first love’s beautiful hopes, but the marital love would itself be the first love with

⁴⁸ *EO* 2:24-5 (p. 25).

⁴⁹ *EO* 2:25-6 (p. 27).

⁵⁰ *EO* 2:26 (p. 28).

⁵¹ Cf. *EL* §§79-82, 8:168-79 (pp. 125-33).

the addition of qualifications that would not detract from it but would ennoble it. It is a difficult problem to pose, and it is of the utmost importance, lest we have the same cleavage in the ethical as in the intellectual between faith and knowledge.⁵²

Judge William thus takes as his ‘task’⁵³ the attempt to show how this mediation between romantic love and marriage can be achieved, and the opposition that A sees between them can be overcome. It is this task that he carries out in the rest of his long first letter.

Clearly, Judge William’s position here echoes Hegel’s own, where as we have seen,⁵⁴ he too argues that the immediacy of love as mere feeling must be transmuted, and given a more ‘ethical character’ in marriage, in which love can take on a higher and more satisfactory form. Likewise, Judge William’s strategy is to argue that while first love can be a unity of sensuousness and spirituality, freedom and necessity, and eternity and temporality, it is so only in ‘immediate’ form, where this is more properly realized when love is contained within marriage:

[First love] is implicit in the unity of contrasts that love is: it is sensuous and yet spiritual; it is freedom and yet necessity; it is in the instant, is to a high degree present tense, and yet it has in it an eternity. All this marriage also has; it is sensuous and yet spiritual, but it is more, for the word “spiritual” applied to the first love is closest to meaning that it is psychical, that it is the sensuous permeated by spirit. It is freedom and necessity, but also more, for freedom applied to the first love is nevertheless actually rather the psychical freedom in which the individuality has not yet purified itself of natural necessity... Even

⁵² *EO* 2:28 (p. 29).

⁵³ Cf. *EO* 2:29 (p. 31): ‘So you see the nature of the task I have set for myself: to show that romantic love can be united with and exist in marriage – indeed, that marriage is its true transfiguration’.

⁵⁴ See above, Chapter 4, §2.3.

more than the first love, it is an interior infinitude, for marriage's interior infinitude is an eternal life.⁵⁵

Judge William then considers a series of objection to this view. The first set of objections centre on the ends of marriage (that is it is no more than a 'school for character', a means of producing children, or of acquiring a home), where the concern is that these all deprive it of any relation to love.⁵⁶ He then focuses on the marriage ceremony, and its apparently empty rituals, where the congregation and the public nature of marriage more generally seem to intrude on the privacy and inwardness of love. He also considers the threat to love within marriage posed by the kind of external trials that life can throw at the married couple, as well as the more internal threat of the dread hand of custom and familiarity, and of duty.

Judge William in all three cases attempts to defend marriage against the objections that he imagines A as raising, where it is the final criticism concerning duty that is of particular concern to us here. For, again, the Judge adopts an Hegelian line on this question, arguing that it is a mistake to see any antithesis between duty and inclination, and thus to assume that because it involves duties, marriage must in the end suppress love: 'So, then, you regard duty as the enemy of love, and I regard it as its friend... For me, duty is not one climate, love another, but for me duty makes love the true temperate climate, and this unity is perfection'.⁵⁷ The mistake A is making, William argues, is to think (in a Kantian manner) that because love is an emotional state and something one feels willingly, it cannot be commanded;⁵⁸ but in

⁵⁵ *EO* 2:55-6 (pp. 60-1). Cf. also 2:42 (p. 45), where the argument for this conclusion starts: 'So we turn back to the first love. It is the unity of freedom and necessity. The individual feels drawn by an irresistible power to another individual but precisely therein feels his freedom. It is a unity of the universal and particular; it has the universal as the particular even to the verge of the accidental. But all this it has not by virtue of reflection; it has this immediately'.

⁵⁶ Hegel deals with these aspects of marriage in *PR* §§161-180, 7:308-38 (pp. 200-18).

⁵⁷ *EO* 2:133 and 134 (pp. 146 and 147).

⁵⁸ Cf. *MM* 6:401 (p. 530): 'Love is a matter of *feeling*, not of willing, and I cannot love because I *will* to, still less because I *ought* to (I cannot be constrained to love); so a *duty to love* is an absurdity... What is done from constraint...is not done from love'.

fact, in marriage one's duty *is* to love in this way, so that '[d]uty is always consonant with love'.⁵⁹

Nonetheless, Judge William recognizes, A may reply that while duty makes sense at a civic level, it makes no sense within a purely personal relationship, where 'if I form a close friendship with another person, love is everything here. I acknowledge no duty'.⁶⁰ William responds to this objection by arguing that even when it comes to civic duties, an individual may find in them his highest realization, and yet it still makes sense to call them his duties – not because he does not want to carry them out, but because they are what are expected of him within society.⁶¹ Likewise, when it comes to love, an individual can expect certain things of himself and blame himself for failing in them, so that it also makes sense to think of love as a duty,⁶² without assuming that it becomes so because it goes against his inclinations; this would indeed make a duty to love into a contradiction, in the manner that A mistakenly takes it to be. Judge William thus concludes this part of the discussion, on which the philosophical reflections contained in this first letter ends, with a final statement of his position on this issue:

⁵⁹ *EO* 2:135 (p. 149).

⁶⁰ *EO* 2:136 (p. 150).

⁶¹ *EO* 2:137 (pp. 151-2): '[Y]ou think that all the rest of life can be construed within the category of duty or its opposite and that it has never occurred to anyone to apply another criterion; marriage alone has made itself guilty of this self-contradiction. You cite as an example the duty to one's occupation and think that this is a very appropriate example of a pure duty-relationship. This is by no means the case. If a person were to view his occupation merely as the sum total of assignments he carries out at specific times and places, he would demean himself, his occupation, and his duty. Or do you believe that such a view would make for a good public official? Where, then, is there room for the enthusiasm with which a person devotes himself to his occupation, where is there room for the love with which he loves it?'

⁶² *EO* 2:138 (p. 152): 'In marriage, however, the internal is primary, something that cannot be displayed or pointed to, but its expression is precisely love. Therefore, I see no contradiction in its being required as duty, for the circumstance that there is no one to supervise is irrelevant, since he can indeed supervise himself'.

But I have not been afraid of duty; it has not appeared to me as an enemy that would disturb the fragment of joy and happiness I had hoped to rescue in life, but it has appeared to me as a friend, the first and only confidant in our love.⁶³

Likewise, in the second letter to A, where Judge William moves beyond his discussion of marriage and considered the contrast between the aesthetic and the ethical more broadly, this is a theme that he comes back to frequently. Once again, William expresses himself in Hegelian terms, contrasting his position with a more Kantian one:

The ethical is the universal and thus the abstract. That is why in its perfect abstraction it is always interdictory. Thus the ethical takes the form of law... When the ethical becomes more concrete, it crosses over into the category of morals... But the ethical is still abstract and cannot be fully actualized because it lies outside the individual. Not until the individual himself is the universal, not until then can the ethical be actualized... The person who views life ethically sees the universal, and the person who lives ethically expresses the universal in his life. He makes himself the universal human being, not by taking off his concretion, for then he becomes a complete non-entity, but by putting it on and interpenetrating it with the universal... The ethical individual, then, does not have duty outside himself but within himself.⁶⁴

Judge William therefore contends in an Hegelian manner that there is no fundamental antithesis between the individual and the ethical, no element of Kantian struggle: ‘So the personality does not have the ethical outside itself but within itself and it bursts forth from this depth’.⁶⁵ Judge William also follows Hegel in stressing how life within

⁶³ *EO* 2:138 (p. 153).

⁶⁴ *EO* 2:229-30 (pp. 255-6)

⁶⁵ *EO* 2:230 (p. 257).

Sittlichkeit will bring self-realization to the individual, as he is able to exist as a concrete particular within the social whole.⁶⁶

Judge William then considers three possible objections to the picture that he has presented. The first is a worry about relativism: for, '[w]hen living for the fulfillment of duty is made a person's task in life', then 'what is often pointed out is the scepticism that duty itself is unstable, that laws can change', where this issue is said to apply particularly to 'civic virtues'. Judge William admits that this may be true up to a degree, but only within limits, for '[t]his scepticism, however, does not apply to the negative aspect of morality' (that is, certain fundamental ethical prohibitions), 'for that continues unchanged'.⁶⁷

The second objection turns out to be more fundamental for the critique of Hegelianism that is to follow. This is that duty is something beyond us, something that we may be utterly unable to do, because it demands too much of us: 'The duty is the universal. What is required of me is the universal; what I am able to do is the particular'.⁶⁸ Judge William argues, however, that from a Hegelian perspective, this worry is misplaced. For while doing one's duty in a general sense is aimed at the good of all, and while none of us can achieve this as individuals, I can still be capable of doing my *particular* duties, as the things required of me by virtue of my place within the wider whole, where it is at this wider level that the good of all is realized:

I never say of a man: he is doing his duty or duties; but I say: He is doing *his* duty; I say: I am doing *my* duty, do *your* duty. This shows that the individual is simultaneously the universal and the particular. Duty is the universal; it is required of me. Consequently, if I am not the universal, I cannot discharge the duty either. On the other hand, my duty is the particular, something for me

⁶⁶ *EO* 2:235 (p. 262): 'The person who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself defined in his entire concretion. He then possesses himself as an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits, who is subject to these external influences, who is influenced in one direction thus and in another thus. Here he then possesses himself as a task in such a way that it is chiefly to order, shape, temper, inflame, control – in short, to produce an evenness in the soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues'.

⁶⁷ *EO* 2:236 (p. 263).

⁶⁸ *EO* 2:236 (p. 263).

alone, and yet it is duty and consequently the universal. Here personality appears in its highest validity. It is not lawless; neither does it itself establish the law, for the category of duty continues, but the personality takes the form of the unity of universal and particular. That this is so is clear; it can be made understandable to a child – for I can discharge the duty and yet not do *my* duty, and I can do *my* duty and yet not discharge the duty.⁶⁹

Judge William therefore presents it as a fundamental feature of his Hegelian position, and also one of its great virtues, that it treats our ethical obligations as attainable by the individual; for otherwise, A would be right in viewing the ethical standpoint as an alienated form of life, in which we could no longer feel ‘at home in the world’.

A third objection William consider is an *historicist* worry, that if we endorse this Hegelian picture, we will have to assess people’s ethical standing by the moral practices of their own society; but these can vary greatly, so that we might have to say that those who do unspeakable things are nonetheless to be considered good, because that is what their practices encouraged and sanctioned. Judge Williams’s response is twofold. On the one hand, he argues, we should be careful not to exaggerate the historical relativity that can be found, so that for example, ‘there has never been a nation that believed that children should hate their parents’.⁷⁰ On the other hand, he allows that practices within societies may still vary greatly, so that ‘savages [have] practised the custom of putting their aged parents to death’.⁷¹ However, he claims, we should be careful about assuming that the individuals involved in these practices were therefore evil: for what they were intending to do thereby was often good (such as ensuring the parents’ souls reached heaven, for example), so that the divergence is about the facts (concerning how the afterlife works and whether there is one), not a

⁶⁹ *EO* 2:236 (pp. 263-4).

⁷⁰ *EO* 2:237 (p. 265). Kierkegaard is doubtless expecting us to have in mind the passages from Luke that were quoted in *Fear and Trembling* which we have cited earlier, concerning the ‘remarkable teaching’ that duty to God may require the hatred of family.

⁷¹ *EO* 2:237-8 (p. 265).

deep ethical variation which cannot be sufficiently marked on the Hegelian account.⁷² At the same time, Judge William argues, if one does not accept the moderate historicism of his position, then one will be searching for an ‘Archimedean point from which one can lift the world’, a perspective outside all our historical ethical practices from which to judge them – but this, the Judge urges, is as hopeless as looking for the source of the Niger, where it must be admitted that ‘no one knows where it is’.⁷³

After prematurely promising A that ‘[h]ere I shall bring my theorizing to an end’, by then recounting his own childhood experience of the inculcation in him of a sense of duty, Judge William finally takes up the theme of the relation between obligation and beauty. Where A sees a clear antithesis here, the Judge again follows Hegel’s more Schillerian outlook, and insists that the latter can be found in the former, even in the duty to work. Once more, William insists that this is so because within the social whole within which the individual works, he also contributes to his self-realization, so that work need not be seen as alien to him or his nature.⁷⁴ Having accepted this view of work, and also the earlier one of marriage, Judge William’s ‘hero’ is ready to settle equably into the kind of contented bourgeois life that Hegel too treats as an ideal within *Sittlichkeit*:

Hence our hero lives by his work; his work is also his calling; therefore he works with a will. Since it is his calling, it places him in touch with other people, and in carrying out his task he accomplishes what he would wish to accomplish in the world. He is married, content in his home, and time runs smoothly for him.⁷⁵

⁷² ‘The ethical always resides in this consciousness [of intending to do good or evil], whereas it is another question whether or not insufficient knowledge is responsible’ (*EO* 2:238 (p. 265; translation modified)).

⁷³ *EO* 2:238 (p. 265).

⁷⁴ Cf. *EO* 2:262 (p. 292): ‘The ethical thesis that every human being has a calling expresses, then, that there is a rational order of things, in which every human being, if he so wills, fills his place in such a way that he simultaneously expresses the universally human and the individual’. For Hegel on work, cf. *PR* §§196-8, 7:351-3 (pp. 231-3)

⁷⁵ *EO* 2:293-4 (p. 305).

And, as the Judge later in effect confesses, ‘our hero’ is Judge William himself, who concludes by putting forward his own life to A as a paradigm of ethical existence, and the kind of satisfactions it can bring.⁷⁶

Before turning finally to the critique that Kierkegaard sets up in the last part of *Either/Or*, it is important to the force of that critique to emphasize that Judge William has also presented himself as including a *religious* dimension within his perspective on the ethical, where this is comfortably accommodated within his conception of civic life.⁷⁷ Judge William therefore presents himself as a Christian, who sees marriage and the having of children in religious terms.⁷⁸ He therefore accepts A’s challenge to show that, like the ethical, Christianity is also not inimical to the aesthetic, properly conceived, and so is not opposed to all notions of sensuousness and beauty.⁷⁹ He also accepts A’s challenge concerning the Christian view of sin, pointing out that the Church does allow marriage, while the Judge clearly finds any idea of original sin hard to accept, particularly as this relates to the individual rather than just human kind in general.⁸⁰ He also rejects mysticism as a model for the Christian life,⁸¹ in large part because this removes an individual from their civic responsibilities: ‘It is especially as a married man and as a father, that I am an enemy of mysticism’.⁸² While it cannot be gone into fully here, in his attitude to the relation between the religious and the ethical, Judge William’s approach once again mirrors Hegel’s to a large degree, and

⁷⁶ Cf. *EO* 2:290-1 (pp. 323-4).

⁷⁷ Cf. Rudd 1993: 141-3, where Rudd comments that for the Judge, ‘his religion is a sort of metaphysical epiphenomenon of his ethics – a halo on his head, but no part of his body’ (p. 141). Norman Lillegard has protested against views of William that treat him as ‘an insipid “Hegelian” bourgeoisie who essentially lives without God while hiding in a civil righteousness’; but even he admits that it is ‘nonetheless true that he sees the relation to God as always being mediated by and thus limited by the ethical’: see Lillegard 1995: 108. On this issue, see also Watkins 1995.

⁷⁸ *EO* 2:27-9 (pp. 28-29); 2:51-4 (pp. 55-8); 2:82-6 (pp. 89-94); 2:291 (p. 324).

⁷⁹ *EO* 2:44-6 (pp. 48-50).

⁸⁰ *EO* 2:83-4 (pp. 91-2).

⁸¹ *EO* 2:216-25 (pp. 241-50).

⁸² *EO* 2:219 (p. 244).

shares many of the latter's assumptions concerning the place of religion within social life.⁸³

Now, as other commentators have noted, it is against this background that we need to understand the concluding part of *Either/Or*, and its role as a critique of the foregoing.⁸⁴ This section takes the form of a sermon sent to Judge William by a pastor in Jutland who was a student friend; William now passes it on to A some time after he has received the Judge's letters. The juxtaposition here is startling, and tells us a good deal about what will follow in the *Works of Love*.

The title of the sermon is 'The Edification that Lies in the Thought That in Relation to God We Are Always in the Wrong'.⁸⁵ This is an immediate challenge to Judge William's Hegelian outlook, not only in violating Hegel's dictum that 'philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying',⁸⁶ but also in suggesting that our duty may be beyond us. As we have seen, this was a concern about the ethical that was raised by A, who feared that it might involve a constant process of Kantian self-overcoming, in which the individual must set aside their own desires and interests in such a way to act as morality requires. In response, Judge William had argued, because within civic life the duties of each particular individual can be limited and yet still realize the good of the whole, the ethical is therefore not so strenuous as to make its realization difficult or impossible for the individual, in a way that would result in a clash between our moral and non-moral selves. Likewise, for Hegel, '[a]n ethical order provides individuals with a generally satisfying mode of life, so that they are seldom called upon to make great personal sacrifices for others'.⁸⁷ This does not mean, of course, that they live merely within the range of their narrow self-interest, as

⁸³ Cf. *PR* §270, 7:415-31 (pp. 291-303).

⁸⁴ Cf. Westphal 1998: 106-7, where he notes that '*Either/Or* is Janus faced by virtue of this ending, which in the fewest of words puts the long, Hegelian exposition of the ethical in question'. See also Perkins 1995 and Law 1995. Curiously, in his very full discussion of the Hegel/Kierkegaard relation, Jon Stewart does not mention this part of *Either/Or*, and thus presents the latter as a 'pro-Hegelian' text.

⁸⁵ I have preferred the translation of 'Edification' to 'Upbuilding', and will continue to use this throughout.

⁸⁶ *PS* 3:17 (p. 6).

⁸⁷ Wood 1999: 210.

those interests will include a concern with others and their well-being, built on a variety of social ties through the family, civil society, and the state; but on the other hand, it does mean that there are limits to the demands placed upon them as individuals, as those demands are mediated through the workings of the community as a whole, thus reducing the requirements on each to a manageable level, one that is consistent with the concerns they can be expected to have developed as virtuous individuals living within a well-ordered society that cares for its citizens. This is why Judge William thinks he can satisfactorily answer the aesthete's concerns about duty, because he thinks he can rightly claim that the moral demand on us is not so great as to outstrip our human capacity to meet it.

By characterizing Judge William for us, however, and then juxtaposing his position with that of his pastor friend as well as with that of the aesthete, Kierkegaard seems to have wanted to highlight what he sees as the limitations of the Judge's Hegelian outlook: for it is precisely the ethical *undemandingness* of William's life that this juxtaposition shows up, and the extent of his moral complacency. Again, this is not because William is any sort of straightforward egoist or amoralist, who denies that morality has any call on him at all; it is just that he is sure that this call is a moderate one, that can be met relatively easily within the terms of his bourgeois life. He thus feels every confidence that if he satisfies his place in society, his ethical requirements will have been honoured, which is precisely why he thinks he can calm A's fears concerning the ethical. At the same time, he is uncomfortable with the suggestion that the Christian outlook somehow goes beyond this, with its claims about sin, repentance and grace;⁸⁸ properly conceived, he clearly hopes, nothing in the Christian outlook threatens his ethical stance.

What the pastor's sermon offers, however, is a challenge to the Judge's comfortable conception of the moral demand, taking as its theme that in fact ethically considered, 'we are always in the wrong'. The text that the pastor chooses for his sermon is Luke 19: 41-8, in which Jesus predicts the downfall of Jerusalem, and then

⁸⁸ Robert Perkins has emphasized the limited view that Judge William has of these notions: see Perkins 1995: 215-7.

ejects the merchants and money-changers from the temple – where the mistake is to confuse civic virtue with what is required of us in order to ‘live in the right’.⁸⁹

But, it might be said, isn’t this to ask more of us than can be reasonably expected? The pastor is scornful of this sort of response:

If I should speak in a different way, I would remind you of a wisdom you certainly have frequently heard, a wisdom that knows how to explain everything easily enough without doing an injustice either to God or to human beings. A human being is a frail creature, it says; it would be unreasonable of God to require the impossible of him. One does what one can, and if one is ever somewhat negligent, God will never forget that we are weak and imperfect creatures. Shall I admire more the sublime concepts of the nature of the Godhead that this ingenuity makes manifest or the profound insight into the human heart, the probing consciousness that scrutinizes itself and now comes to the easy, cozy conclusion: One does what one can?⁹⁰

While someone with Judge William’s ethical sensibilities may feel he has ‘done what he can’, the pastor makes clear that the right attitude is the ‘dread’ that one has fallen short, that one could have done more, that one has fooled oneself into thinking that this was all that was required when in fact more is really demanded. ‘So every more earnest doubt, every deeper care is not calmed by the words: One does what one can’.⁹¹

The pastor then moves on to consider whether anything *edifying* can be found in the thought that ‘as against God we are always in the wrong’, and if so, how? Being in the wrong pains us, though it may be edifying to think that this sense of wrongness may then induce us to be better; but here we are considering the claim that we are

⁸⁹ Cf. Hannay 1991: 64: ‘[Jesus’s] point is not, of course, by association to accuse incumbents of positions of civic and political responsibility of thievery; it is rather...to bring out the incompatibility between civically defined virtue...and the notion of a transcendent God as the source and guarantor of personal value or fulfilment’.

⁹⁰ *EO* 2:310 (pp. 344-5).

⁹¹ *EO* 2:311 (p. 346).

always in the wrong, so this sort of edification will not apply in this case. The pastor then considers a situation in which you love someone, who does wrong to you; here, he suggests, you might find some edification in the thought that you would rather it were *you* who had done wrong. But still, you don't believe here that you actually *have* done wrong, so that again this does not really fit the position the pastor is considering. Nonetheless, he suggests, thinking of a relationship in which love plays an important role is a significant step forward, where what is in question is love of an infinite being like God. But again, there is no edification in believing that one is in the wrong by comparing oneself to God's infinite goodness and then realizing that one always falls short.⁹² If it is to be edifying, the sense of one's wrongness must not come about through reflection in this way: rather, it must come through the love one feels for God:

Therefore this, that in relation to God you are always in the wrong, is not a truth you must acknowledge, not a consolation that alleviates your pain, not a compensation for something better, but it is a joy in which you win a victory over yourself and over the world, your delight, your song of praise, your adoration, a demonstration that your love is happy, as only that love can be with which one loves God.

Therefore this thought, that in relation to God we are always in the wrong, is an edifying thought; it is edifying that we are in the wrong, edifying that we are always in the wrong.⁹³

It is this relation to God that Judge William, who thinks he is mostly in the right,⁹⁴ fails to attain, and from which he is therefore cut off.

⁹² Cf. *EO* 2:314-5 (p. 350): 'You acknowledge, then, that God is always in the right, and as a consequence of that you are always in the wrong, but this acknowledgement did not edify you. There is nothing edifying in acknowledging that God is always in the right, and consequently there is nothing edifying in any thought that necessarily follows from it. When you acknowledge that God is always in the right, you stand outside God, and likewise when, as a conclusion from that, you acknowledge that you are always in the wrong'.

⁹³ *EO* 2:315-6 (p. 351).

The pastor recognizes, however, that this thought that we are always in the wrong might be taken to be paralyzing: for if this is so, why should we bother trying to act rightly at all, and not simply despair of ethical action altogether?⁹⁵ The pastor concedes that if we come to the conclusion that we are always wrong by comparing ourselves to the way in which God is always right, we might indeed become despairing in this way. However, he has already argued that this is not how the thought of our wrongness should be seen as coming about; rather, we have come to this belief out of our love for God, so that it brings with it joy and a positive sense of potentiality, not gloomy inadequacy and hopelessness: ‘In relation to God we are always in the wrong – this thought puts an end to doubt and calms the cares; it animates and inspires to action’.⁹⁶

Kierkegaard may therefore be read as setting the pastor’s theologically informed ethics alongside Judge William’s more Hegelian and secular one, according to which one ‘does what one can’ within the duties prescribed by the state – a state that seeks to balance the ‘particularity’ of our interests with the ‘universality’ of the general good, and thus does not ask too much of us as individuals. According to the pastor’s theological ethics, by contrast, one is always ‘in the wrong’, always falling short of what is required, where nonetheless this remains an edifying and not dispiriting perspective, in so far as these requirements come to us from a loving God.

This contrast is not fully developed or defended by the pastor – whose brevity marks another contrast with Judge William and his loquaciousness. Instead, the pastor concludes with what sounds like a warning of what might happen if a secularized Hegelianism were to triumph, and the properly theological tradition in ethics were lost:

⁹⁴ Cf. *EO* 2:213 (p. 237), where Judge William affirms that it is ‘a sign of a high-minded person and a deep soul if he is inclined to repent’, but on the other hand he thinks it can be done ‘without too much pondering’.

⁹⁵ *EO* 2:317 (p. 353). Hegel was himself always keen to stress the dangers of paralysis in a certain kind of overwrought moral sensibility: see, for example, his discussion of the beautiful soul as well as his critique of Kant’s postulates in *PS* 3:453-94 (pp. 374-409)

⁹⁶ *EO* 2:317 (p. 353). There are obvious parallels between what the pastor says here about the possibility of joy in the face of God’s demand, and what Johannes de Silentio said about Abraham’s joy in *Fear and Trembling*.

Could you wish that you might be in the right; could you wish that the beautiful law which for thousands of years has carried the generation through life and every member of the generation, that beautiful law, more glorious than the law which carries the stars on their paths across the arch of heaven, could you wish that that law would break, an even more terrible catastrophe than if the law of nature lost its power and everything disintegrated into dreadful chaos? Could you wish that?⁹⁷

Here, it is clear, Kierkegaard intends us to see in the pastor's words a fundamental challenge to the Hegelian position represented by Judge William, who had tried to present ethics as going with the grain of our human capacities, while the pastor sets it at odds with them, in a way that puts us always in moral error. The challenge here is not only a religious one (though of course it is also that), but is also based on a concern with how ethics itself is to be conceived: namely, as a radical demand that we cannot fulfill on our own, and which therefore only makes sense when understood in theological terms. It is this challenge, I will now suggest, that is more fully explored in the *Works of Love*, to which we turn next.

⁹⁷ *EO* 2:318 (p. 354).