

Describing What You Cannot Understand: Another Look at *Fear and Trembling*

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It has now become almost a commonplace to readers of *Fear and Trembling*¹ that, as C. Stephen Evans puts it, “it would be a mistake to look to *Fear and Trembling* for a positive account of the nature of faith.”² In other words, an appreciation of the role of pseudonymity in Kierkegaard’s writings and of the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio’s admission that he is an outsider who does not have faith both strongly suggest that the view of faith presented by Silentio should not be taken to represent Kierkegaard’s own view of faith. But the many people who might agree with Evans’s claim do not all necessarily have the same reasons for agreeing.

John Lippitt’s recent guidebook to *Fear and Trembling* devotes an entire chapter to the question “How reliable is Johannes de Silentio.”³ Lippitt documents how commentators have recognized that the presence of the motto at the beginning of the book – the passage from Hamann about the messenger who conveyed what he did not understand – is important to understanding the book, and he explores a variety of variations on the charge of unreliability. He agrees with Evan’s claim, concluding “that Johannes is fallible, and that he should not straightforwardly be taken as the spokesman for Kierkegaard’s own positive view of faith.”⁴ He continues: “I do not think that Johannes’s unreliability is either as calculated a ruse as Mulhall claims, or as big a problem as some critics have alleged. Johannes may be flawed, but he is honestly so.”⁵ In what follows I want to build on this and reconsider what is at stake in this debate. I want to complicate the matter further by offering what I take to be a different view than has hitherto been presented – in effect, arguing that this recognition of Silentio’s likely unreliability needs to be clarified because in one sense it needs to be understood even more radically than it usually is, and yet in another sense it can obscure the very important ways in which

Silentio's message may be just the one Kierkegaard wants us to appropriate.

Begin with the motto. The question has been raised whether the motto is to be attributed to Kierkegaard or to Silentio, and what different consequences follow from each attribution.⁶ I suggest that taking the authorship of Silentio seriously demands assuming that he is responsible for the title, the motto, and the organization and content of the book. Nevertheless, I do not think that that solves the problem. The author of a book (in this case, Johannes de Silentio) and the author of the author of a book, if there is one (in this case, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard) may well have different goals in writing. So it is important to distinguish them. One author may go further than the other – one author may achieve something that the other does not. I think that this applies to the recognition that the motto of *Fear and Trembling* is crucial to understanding the book. In other words, I think it is reasonable to suppose that Silentio himself is alerting the reader to something in particular by adding the motto – namely, that Silentio is reminding us of the possibility that a messenger may well not understand a message that he accurately conveys. I think it is also reasonable to suppose that the author of Silentio is alerting the reader to something in particular by having Silentio add the motto – and the two things we are alerted to may be different. The author of Silentio may well have a different sense of what is not understood, or of what is accurately conveyed, than does Silentio. To appreciate the literary strategy of pseudonymity, we need to ask the question whether (and how) Silentio guides the reader through the motto and whether (and how) the author of Silentio guides the reader through the motto – I suggest that each does it differently.

Presumably, Silentio relies on the motto to support his claim that he is able to “describe” movements of faith that he is unable to understand. That is, the pseudonymous author warns us about the possibility that he may be a messenger who does not understand what he conveys, but he also implies that his lack of understanding does not preclude his being able to give a correct description of faith. To say that Silentio is deliberately guiding the reader in this way, however, does not yet tell us how much Silentio understands. I want to suggest that in one sense, he understands less than he claims to. Yet in another sense he conveys a more accurate message than he realizes. Silentio alerts us to his own unreliability, but he may be mistaken about the depth or the locus of his unreliability. He may be even more unreliable than he thinks he is (or less so).

In sum, the question is whether the problems Silentio runs into or the

carelessness or confusions he exhibits in his attempt to provide an alternative to the philosophical understanding of faith are deliberately undertaken by him in an effort to get the reader to understand something, or whether Silentio is himself confused (and the author of Silentio is deliberately using this confusion to get us to understand something). Is it Silentio who deliberately fashions the text so that we will discover something, piece something together in a particular way? Or are the problematic aspects of the presentation not deliberate on Silentio's part, but rather created by the author of Silentio in order to get us to see something.

Why does any of this matter? I suggest that it makes a difference in the following way. In saying that "resignation is the last stage before faith," and saying that it is a move philosophy can make (*FT*, 48; *SV1* 3, 98), and a movement that must be made by the person of faith ("faith is preceded by a movement of infinity; only then does faith commence...by virtue of the absurd" – *FT*, 69; *SV1* 3, 118), Silentio is effectively limiting the challenge he poses to modern philosophy – that is, he is not presenting a challenge to all kinds of philosophy. To say that resignation is the last stage before faith and that it is a move that philosophy can make is a challenge to the naivete of the notion of immediate faith, or the notion of faith before resignation. But it is not a challenge to philosophy as such – if the movement philosophy makes coincides with or is co-extensive with the movement that faith must first make, then faith is merely an extension of philosophy. Silentio clearly wants to argue that philosophy cannot generate faith ("philosophy cannot and must not give faith" – *FT*, 33; *SV1* 3, 85), but if infinite resignation is a philosophical position, and one cannot have faith without making the movement of resignation, then faith presupposes philosophy. This view of infinite resignation as a move possible to philosophy means that philosophy does not go further than faith – rather, faith goes further than philosophy, and the relation is, in principle, an amicable one. This position, however, is put in question by something else at work in *Fear and Trembling*, something both philosophical and literary.

Let's reconsider Silentio's peculiar project of simultaneously offering (a) a positive valuation of faith, (b) a claim not to understand faith, and (c) a proposed description of faith. The "dialectic of faith is the finest and most extraordinary of all" (*FT*, 36; *SV1* 3, 87), he says; it is a "glorious" story (*FT*, 28; *SV1* 3, 80) that inspires his "reverence" (*FT*, 30; *SV1* 3, 82) and the most extreme obeisance, bowing "seven times to his name and seventy times to his deed" (*FT*, 36; *SV1* 3, 87). He is convinced that faith is not "inferior" to philosophy (*FT*, 33, 36; *SV1* 3, 86, 87), and in fact, states that "there is

nothing I wish more” than to make the movement of faith (*FT*, 51; *SV1* 3, 101). He implies that he understands what Abraham had to go through, because he stipulates that Abraham’s “anxiety” was the distinctive hallmark of his action (*FT*, 28, 30; *SV1* 3, 80, 82), and that Abraham’s action “appalls” him (*FT*, 36; *SV1* 3, 87). He suggests that one can understand without being able to act accordingly (*FT*, 73; *SV1* 3, 121).⁷ Yet he affirms repeatedly that he does not understand Abraham,⁸ that he is “shattered,” even “paralyzed,” when he attempts to think his way into Abraham (*FT*, 33; *SV1* 3, 85).

Silentio problematizes understanding from the beginning of the book – the preface highlights the difficulty of understanding a text (however many times one reads it), and the eulogy suggests that some kinds of understanding have to be worked for – that the process, both passionate and earnest, is integral to such understanding. Silentio implies then that there are different levels or different kinds of understanding. From the beginning of the book to the end, he insists that he “cannot understand Abraham” (*FT*, 99, 112; *SV1* 3, 146, 158). Alternatively, he says that he “perhaps can understand Abraham, but only in the way one understands the paradox” (*FT*, 119; *SV1* 3, 165). He provokes the question what it means to understand a paradox. With respect to Abraham’s ‘last word,’ Silentio “presumably can understand it, perhaps in a certain sense understand Abraham in what was said without thereby coming any closer to him than in the preceding exposition” (*FT*, 117–18; *SV1* 3, 163). This, along with his suggestion that “Insofar as I can understand the paradox, I can also understand Abraham’s total presence in that word” (*FT*, 118; *SV1* 3, 165), raises the possibility that one might understand someone without understanding what they say.⁹ In asking both about Abraham’s understanding of the Akedah and his own understanding of Abraham, Silentio raises the spectre of a speaking in which what one says is not understood, as well as of a speaking in order that what one says is not understood. The notion of “silence” is expanded to cover what occurs when one cannot make oneself understood, however much one says. And irony is connected with silence, insofar as “It is always irony when I say something and still do not say anything” (*FT*, 118; *SV1* 3, 164). There is, then, an irony about what Silentio understands. The admiration and approval one can have for what he claims not to understand is peculiar, but it is even more surprising that Silentio claims to be able to “describe [*beskrive*]” (*FT*, 37; *SV1* 3, 88) the faith he cannot understand.

Silentio clearly distinguishes “two” movements in the “double-movement” [*Dobbelt-Bevægelse*] (*FT*, 36, 119; *SV1* 3, 87, 164) made by Abraham:

“Abraham makes two movements [to *Bevægelse*]. He makes the infinite movement of resignation...but next, at every instant, he makes the movement of faith” (*FT*, 115; *SV1* 3, 161), or more specifically, one movement of “renouncing everything” and another movement in which “I do not renounce anything” but rather “receive everything” (*FT*, 48–49; *SV1* 3, 98), indeed, gain the finite “whole and intact” (*FT*, 37; *SV1* 3, 88).¹⁰

This description of the two movements of faith is quite specific, and is achieved for the most part by making the dialectical move of contrasting Abraham with another figure, variously called “the hero” (someone whom the world admires – *FT*, 33; *SV1* 3, 85), the “tragic hero” (who is illustrated in dramatic literature) whom he confesses himself to be, at best (*FT*, 34; *SV1* 3, 86), and the maker of the “infinite movement” of “resignation,” whom he likewise confesses himself to be (*FT*, 35; *SV1* 3, 86). The general contrast between these radically different ways of experiencing life is symbolized in the contrast between the “knight of faith” (*FT*, 46; *SV1* 3, 96)¹¹ and the “knight of infinite resignation.”¹² He “describes” the “movement of infinity” (*FT*, 38; *SV1* 3, 89), “infinite resignation” (*FT*, 45; *SV1* 3, 95), the “infinite movement of resignation” (*FT*, 47; *SV1* 3, 97), as one in which I “find myself and again rest in myself” (*FT*, 35; *SV1* 3, 86); it yields a sense of self-sufficiency (*FT*, 44; *SV1* 3, 94) and brings “peace and rest and comfort in the pain” (*FT*, 45; *SV1* 3, 96), resting in the “pain of resignation” (*FT*, 50; *SV1* 3, 100). This movement of infinite resignation, which is the “last stage before faith,” is one in which I gain my “eternal validity” (*FT*, 46; *SV1* 3, 96), and is a “purely philosophical movement” in which I gain “my eternal consciousness” (*FT*, 48; *SV1* 3, 98). This “purely philosophical movement,” he goes on, “I venture to make when it is demanded and can discipline myself to make, because every time some finitude will take power over me, I starve myself into submission until I make the movement, for my eternal consciousness is my love for God, and for me that is the highest of all” (*FT*, 48; *SV1* 3, 98). Clearly, “God” figures centrally in such a life, but it is important to note that the understanding of God’s love in this view is one of “lyrical validity” – i.e., God’s love is “incommensurable with the whole of actuality” (*FT*, 34; *SV1* 3, 85). In other words, there is no common measure between God’s love and the world of actuality in which we live: “in the world of time God and I cannot talk with each other, we have no language in common” (*FT*, 35; *SV1* 3, 86). For the “knight of resignation” or the “tragic hero,” God’s love invites (only) a resignation of the finite world.

But there is another movement – one in which “I receive everything” – that *Silentio* contrasts with the movement of resigning or renouncing

everything (*FT*, 49; *SV1* 3, 98). In this movement one receives back what one has resigned: the knight of faith “does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact” (*FT*, 37; *SV1* 3, 88). The knight of faith makes a “double-movement” (*FT*, 36; *SV1* 3, 87), involving “dialectical struggles” and “gigantic passion” (*FT*, 32; *SV1* 3, 85). This “next” (*FT*, 115; *SV1* 3, 161) movement, after the resignation of the finite, involves a “paradox,” indeed, a “prodigious paradox” (*FT*, 33; *SV1* 3, 84) – namely, the paradoxical reception of the finite again. The paradox resignation-cum-impossible hope; as he affirms, “this having, after all, is also a giving up” (*FT*, 47; *SV1* 3, 97). Since the second movement is paradoxical and Silentio cannot understand it, it is presumably incommensurable with the first movement that he claims he can understand – yet Silentio goes on to “describe” the second movement in some detail. As we saw, it is one in which one “does not lose the finite but gains it whole and intact” (*FT*, 37; *SV1* 3, 88). He equates doing something “by virtue of the absurd” as doing something “by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible” (*FT*, 46; *SV1* 3, 97). The hope the believer maintains is one that is “impossible” according to the conclusions of human understanding – to be infinitely resigned is to be “convinced of the impossibility, humanly speaking” (*FT*, 46; *SV1* 3, 97), but to think that “in the infinite sense it was possible” (*FT*, 47; *SV1* 3, 97).

That Silentio calls it “paradoxical” to ‘have’ yet simultaneously ‘give up’ in this way suggests that he sees a qualitative difference in what the two knights do. So one could say that Silentio presents an incommensurability between the knight of faith and the knight of resignation, a lack of a common measure between them, insofar as the second movement is paradoxical. But Silentio also has another valuation of commensurability, because he sees the knight of faith as ultimately a believer in commensurability with actuality insofar as he engages deeply with the whole of actuality (is exceedingly conscientious at his job, takes walks in the woods, looks like a tax-collector, and fantasizes about what there might be for dinner). This is because, unlike the knight of resignation who believes that God’s love is “incommensurable with actuality” (*FT*, 34; *SV1* 3, 85), the knight of faith believes that God’s love is commensurate with actuality – it is concrete and does not take one away from the world’s tasks and pleasures. Faith involves taking Isaac back again with joy: “It takes a purely human courage to renounce the whole temporal realm in order to gain eternity...but it takes a paradoxical and humble courage to grasp the whole temporal realm now by virtue of the absurd, and this is the courage of faith” (*FT*, 49; *SV1* 3, 99). The apparently qualitative distinction between the knight of faith and the

knight of resignation lies in the relation to actuality: “temporality, finitude – that is what it is all about” (*FT*, 49; *SV1* 3, 99). It is a new understanding of what loving God means – love is not simply renunciation.

It is worth stopping briefly to consider how nuanced Silentio’s evaluations of commensurability and incommensurability are. First, commensurability “with actuality,” which the knight of faith has, is the goal, whereas incommensurability “with actuality,” which the knight of resignation has,¹³ is a limited thing. We might normally connect immanence with commensurability and transcendence with incommensurability, but Silentio unbalances these connections. The result, somewhat surprisingly, is that the kind of transcendence that would be an alternative to Hegelian immanence involves a commensurability with actuality: “To exist in such a way that my contrast to existence constantly expresses itself in the most beautiful and secure harmony with it” (*FT*, 50; *SV1* 3, 99). But of course this commensurability must also be understood in terms of the claim that “the paradox of faith is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority” (*FT*, 69; *SV1* 3, 118) – it is in this context that Silentio claims that “subjectivity is incommensurable with actuality” (*FT*, 111-12; *SV1* 3, 158).

To return now to the “double-movement” of faith (comprised of the first movement of infinite resignation of the finite and another movement of receiving back the finite) and Silentio’s understanding of himself in relation to it: he sees himself as at best a “tragic hero” (*FT*, 34; *SV1* 3, 86) who can make the movement of infinite resignation (*FT*, 35; *SV1* 3, 86), and he asserts repeatedly that he can achieve (or has achieved) such resignation (*FT*, 38, 48, 50; *SV1* 3, 89, 98, 99); moreover, he can “describe” [*beskrive*] “the movements of faith although he “cannot make them” (*FT*, 37; *SV1* 3, 88). In sum, he can “describe,” but he “cannot make the final movement, the paradoxical movement of faith” that he wishes to make (*FT*, 51; *SV1* 3, 101), and the very thought of it evokes “anxiety” in him” (*FT*, 48; *SV1* 3, 98) – he cannot follow Abraham, because Abraham not only achieves infinite resignation, but “he actually goes further [*gaaer videre*] and comes to faith” (*FT*, 37; *SV1* 3, 88).

In one important sense, Silentio presents an insightful reading of the Abraham story by highlighting the way in which, for faith, there is both a suffering resignation and a rejoicing. Abraham’s faith is not found in a negative, distancing from actuality, from the finite world. It is a faith that finds enjoyment in finite pleasures and in seeing God in all of God’s creation. Faith is not a matter of other-worldliness, but of a radical this-worldliness (in Bonhoeffer’s sense¹⁴). Faith is not acosmic, but rather receives the world

back again once one has been willing to give it up. But what is being described? What should we make of his descriptions both of what he says he can understand and what he says he cannot?

Silentio is responsible for bringing to our attention the motto that suggests that someone can fail to understand what he can nevertheless convey accurately. This is presumably intended to allay our fears that we readers might be misled by the description of someone who doesn't understand what he is describing. And it is presumably intended to help us take for granted that he does understand the part he says he does. But the relation between what he understands and what he doesn't is worth more attention. I suggest that the motto has an even deeper dimension of irony, and that Silentio in fact, in a crucial way, doesn't even understand the first movement of faith.

My concern about how much Silentio understands arises because his project seems to have within it two models that seem at odds with each other. On the one hand, in the preface his overwhelming concern seems to be to propose an alternative to the model that philosophy "goes further" – further than "doubt" (*FT*, 5; *SV1* 3, 57) and further than faith (*FT*, 7; *SV1* 3, 59)¹⁵; in the eulogy he points out that Abraham "got no further than faith" (*FT*, 23; *SV1* 3, 75). In the Epilogue, too, he sounds the refrain all over again, culminating the work by deploring that "'One must go further, one must go further.' This urge to go further is an old story in the world" (*FT*, 123; *SV1* 3, 168). In between, he describes two movements in such a way that the first movement, renouncing everything, can be understood and made by philosophy, while the second movement, receiving back the finite that was renounced, can only be made in faith. Since Silentio initially claimed to offer a challenge to philosophy's view that philosophy goes further than faith, it is not surprising that he proposes a model in which faith "goes further" than philosophy. A model in which Abraham "goes further" (*FT*, 37; *SV1* 3, 88) engages the philosophical agenda and reverses it. The notion of faith as an additional movement, made after a movement possible to philosophy, invokes what one might call a '*quantitative model (or additive model)*' in which faith extends and supplements an earlier movement. This gives 'going further' a quantitative dimension, and the idiom of resignation as "antecedent" (*FT*, 47; *SV1* 3, 97), as "the last stage before faith" (*FT*, 46; *SV1* 3, 96), and of faith as "the final movement" (*FT*, 51; *SV1* 3, 101) inform this quantitative model. On this view, the first movement is the same whether one goes on to make the second movement. It is the model that one offers when one is angry that "theology is

willing to sell [faith] off at a low price” (*FT*, 48; *SV1* 3, 98) – but selling faith off at a high price is still within the quantitative, economic model.¹⁶

There are in Silentio’s discussion, however, the rudiments of another model of faith which one might call a ‘*qualitative*’ model, in which faith does not go “further” than philosophy because they are on different tracks altogether, incommensurate with each other. Such a model of faith as genuinely incommensurable with philosophy cannot employ images of ‘going further’ and “additional’ movements. In this model faith is experienced in a qualitative, all-or-nothing shift. This is hinted in Silentio’s suggestion of the ‘paradoxical’ element of faith, implying a radical discontinuity or qualitative difference. This qualitative model is also supported by an important distinction that Silentio has already made in “Problem One” between two radically different ways of making a movement of resignation – one is for the sake of a *telos* immanent within the ethical universal, and the other for the sake of a *telos* that is not immanent within the ethical universal. The original act of resignation (*FT*, 35; *SV1* 3, 86) is, thereby, redescribed here as an act of going against the ethical universal (*FT*, 54; *SV1* 3, 104): in resigning the finite we also resign the ethical in some sense. Resignation is an act in which one goes against an ethical universal duty in such a way that one gives up something one loves (the finite that is given up is both the normal expression of duty and the loved one who it is a duty to love) for the sake of a higher expression of the ethical. Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter for the sake of his duty to the state is a paradigm example. This “infinite movement of resignation” takes strength, but “it can be done” (*FT*, 47; *SV1* 3, 97) since it is a “purely philosophical movement” (*FT*, 48; *SV1* 3, 98). The resignation made by the tragic hero or knight of resignation goes against the ethical but “is still within the ethical” and “allows an expression of the ethical to have its *telos* in a higher expression of the ethical” (*FT*, 59; *SV1* 3, 109). But Abraham’s act of resignation “transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher *telos* outside it, in relation to which he suspended it” (*FT*, 59; *SV1* 3, 109). Silentio makes this qualitative distinction explicitly but then seems to forget it when he later assesses how far he has come.

Silentio’s contrast between someone making a movement of infinite resignation of the finite that goes against the ethical universal for the sake of a higher expression of the ethical and someone whose movement of resignation goes against the ethical without being able to appeal to any higher expression of the ethical (Abraham) implies that the movement of resignation made by each of them is qualitatively different, and that Abraham is

not simply making an additional movement. Even the first movement is different, qualitatively different, because the resignation made by faith is made in the paradoxical hope that what is resigned will be kept or regained. The resignation made in virtue of a “higher” expression of the ethical does not have such a hope – it is a qualitatively different way of resigning the finite. Thus, on this view, the two ‘first’ movements are different, the one that culminates in faith and the one that doesn’t – the relation between the two movements of faith is not one in which one can make the first and then it is up for grabs whether one makes the second or not. The first movement is integrally related to the second, and affects it. The movement of resignation made by the person of faith is made by reference to a *telos* outside the ethical. It is not a “higher expression of the ethical” (*FT*, 59; *SV1* 3, 109), but a “completely different expression,” a “paradoxical expression” (*FT*, 70; *SV1* 3, 119) such that it “transgresses” (*FT*, 59; *SV1* 3, 109) ethics without “invalidating” it (*FT*, 70; *SV1* 3, 119). The movement of resignation made by the person of faith is made “by virtue of the absurd” – it is a movement of giving up the finite, of going outside the universal, that has no publicly available justification. The ‘faithful’ resignation is a giving up that cannot be explained, any more than the mad hope for the impossible receiving back can be explained. Silentio does not work this out, but it could be argued that there is a necessary or intrinsic connection between kind of resignation that is done for the sake of a *telos* beyond the ethical and the hope and receiving back that mark faith. In fact, Silentio acknowledges at one point that although they can be conceptually distinguished, the two movements are inseparable – “the having, after all, is also a giving up” (*FT*, 47; *SV1* 3, 97). The paradox lies in the simultaneity of the movements – if one makes the second, he does so “at every moment”; “After having made this movement, he has at every moment made the next movement” (*FT*, 115; *SV1* 3, 161). On this model faith is qualitatively different from philosophy. In other words, on Silentio’s own terms there is a kind of first movement he could not understand any more than the second.

The resignation that is required of a knight of faith is made more concrete in “Problem Two” where Silentio uses a passage from Luke to illuminate the idea of an “absolute duty to God” – “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (*FT*, 72; *SV1* 3, 121). He makes the connection between this passage which “if it is to have any meaning...must be understood literally” (*FT*, 73; *SV1* 3, 122) and the resignation made in virtue of a *telos* beyond the ethical when he

writes: “Futhermore the passage in Luke must be understood in such a way that one perceives that the knight of faith can achieve no higher expression whatsoever of the universal (as the ethical) in which he can save himself” (FT, 74; SV1 3, 123). Of this harsh and controversial passage, which shows that “God is the one who demands absolute love” (FT, 73; SV1 3, 122), he notes that “anyone who does not dare to mention such passages does not dare to mention Abraham” (75). Although Silentio has been accused of being overly concerned with taking things literally,¹⁷ it seems clear that he is not advocating a literal reading after all: “But if he actually hates Isaac, he can rest assured that God does not demand this of him, for Cain and Abraham are not identical” (FT, 74; SV1 3, 122). In other words, “the absolute duty can lead one to do what ethics would forbid, but it can never lead the knight of faith to stop loving” (FT, 74; SV1 3, 122). In fact, Silentio seems concerned to nuance his claim significantly – “But how to hate them? I shall not review here the human distinction, either to love or to hate, not because I have so much against it, for at least it is passionate, but because it is egotistic and does not fit here. But if I regard the task as a paradox, then I understand it” (FT, 73; SV1 3, 122). The literality is decisively qualified. ‘Literal’ hatred of self and others, for Silentio, involves a dying to the self, a resignation that reflects on God rather than on self: “he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself; he who loves God in faith reflects upon God” (FT, 37; 88). In other words, Silentio’s claim in the eulogy that Abraham was “great by that hope whose form is madness, great by the love that is hatred to oneself” (FT, 16-17; SV1 3, 69) suggests that hatred to oneself and others amounts to reflection on the God of love who is “commensurate with actuality,” and hence gives us reason for the impossible hope that allows us to take joy in the finite we have resigned. The paradox at issue is the same one that informs the Scriptural recommendation – “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (Luke 17:33). When all is said and done, it seems that ‘literal’ hatred of self and others is precisely that willingness to resign all (while continuing to love and cherish what is loved) for the sake of a *telos* beyond the ethical.¹⁸

This is why the movement of resignation made by the knight of faith is not coextensive with the movement of resignation made by someone who does not at the same time make the movement of receiving back in hope. When Silentio says that he can understand the first movement as opposed to the second movement, he is trading on a vacillation about the ‘first movement.’ He has already made a qualitative distinction between the kind

of resignation made by the tragic hero/knight of infinite resignation and the kind made by the person of faith, but he then seems to lose track of the difference and uses the phrase, “the first movement,” as if there is only one kind of resignation, the kind contrasted with ‘receiving back the finite.’ He falls back again into the crude initial contrast between resigning and receiving back (*FT*, 48-9; *SV1* 3, 98-99), without qualifying the kind of resignation. He suggests over and over again that he can perform the first movement, get as far as philosophy can get you, but that he cannot perform the second infinite movement of receiving the finite back again. But Silentio’s presentation gives us the resources to realize that he does not understand what he thinks he does. He has conveyed two messages about what faith is, and one of them suggests that he is mistaken in his own assessment of how far he gets.

In other words, when Silentio makes the distinction between two ways of resigning the finite, he gives us the resources (as readers) to see that the putative incommensurability between philosophy and faith that the notion of paradox is trying to uphold is ultimately relativized, is less than a qualitative distinction, because it amounts to having faith merely make an ‘additional’ movement, i.e., going ‘further.’ In this sense he seems to have made a distinction he does not follow through on, with the result that we, the readers, cannot take him at his word when he says he understands the first movement.

There is irony in the very attempt to show that one thing does something ‘in addition’ to the other, goes ‘further’ than the other, alongside the attempt to show that these two things are incommensurable, that their relation is paradoxical and hence not understandable. It is easy to see why one can fall into the quantitative model even when wanting to present an alternative of genuine transcendence – Silentio gets caught up in the philosophical agenda he is trying to challenge, thinking that the only challenge to philosophy going further than faith is a model of faith going further than philosophy, or that the only challenge to selling off something at a low price is selling it off at a high price. On the quantitative model, it is easy to see why Silentio says he can understand the movement of resignation but not the movement of receiving back, since the quantitative model ignores the telos for which the resignation is made. The idea of the “first movement” of resignation is broad enough to cover two kinds of thing – one, a simple contrast to receiving back, and two, a movement that has two qualitatively different ways of being made. When he says he can make the first movement, but not the second, Silentio ends up trading on the ambiguity

of the phrase “the first movement.” Thus, Silentio unwittingly places himself in the position of the messenger mentioned in the book’s ‘motto’ – the messenger who is unaware of the implications of what he says – but in a deeper way than he intended.

Silentio conveys a message about faith that he does not understand. He admits he does not understand the ‘additional’ part, but has put before us a distinction between kinds of resignation that allows us to see that he understands even less than he thinks he does. We are given two different pictures of faith, despite Silentio’s lack of awareness. In this way, the motto has an even greater depth of meaning.

The two pictures of faith – the quantitative and the qualitative – are both different from the picture that Silentio says philosophy puts forth, and in that way Silentio has deepened our appreciation of the different possible understandings of faith. His announcement that “I do pay attention to [the movements]” (*FT*, 38; *SV1* 3, 89), which allows him to see the continuum available to the knight of faith (from ordinary to extraordinary), and his recognition that some people “confuse the movements” (*FT*, 48; *SV1* 3, 98) are, unfortunately not enough to save him from failing to see the implications of his description for his own case. To say that “faith is preceded by a movement of infinity” or that “only when the individual has emptied himself in the infinite, only then has the point been reached where faith can break through” (*FT*, 69; *SV1* 3, 118–119) – these can be understood according to a quantitative model or a qualitative model. By conflating the two movements of resignation, he is doing what he earlier warned against – he is “cheat[ing] himself” and God “out of the first movement of faith” (*FT*, 37; *SV1* 3, 88). He is then like the messenger in the book’s ‘motto’ – he does not understand what he conveys, while conveying what is necessary for us to understand that he doesn’t understand.

It is worth noting here that some might see the contrast I have drawn between the two models of faith to be support for the view that the discussion of the tragic hero and the discussion of the knight of resignation are two different alternatives to faith. It is true that the language of ‘additional movement’ is found in discussions of the knight of resignation, and that discussions of the tragic hero explicitly invoke the qualitative contrast between what is within the ethical and what is above the ethical. However, I do not think that what I have said in the foregoing does support the contrast between the tragic hero and the knight of faith for several reasons: first, Silentio says he is both a tragic hero and a knight of resignation (*FT*, 34–5; *SV1* 3, 86); second, the discussions of the tragic hero and of the

knight of resignation go back and forth in the text¹⁹ (if they were different alternatives to faith I would expect there to be successive presentations of them).

However, I am not comfortable simply concluding that we as readers are provoked to realize that Silentio has not understood either the first movement or the second. It is not enough to say that Silentio is confused in his repeated claims that the difference between him and the person of faith is that he (Silentio) cannot make the second movement – he cannot even make the first movement. This is because it seems important to note that Silentio may well be unaware that he understands more than he claims to. In one sense, of course, if faith is a double movement and he doesn't understand the qualitative character of the movement of resignation when coupled with faith, then he doesn't understand faith. Yet Silentio does present the reader with some quite remarkable claims about faith that do represent a view of faith we find in the signed authorship. That is, Silentio gets a lot right. Consider the following significant things he appears to recognize. First, that there is an either-or in place between faith and philosophy – this is made totally explicit at least four times (*FT*, 52, 66, 81, 120; *SV1* 3, 102, 116, 128–9, 165), and implies that there is therefore a qualitative difference between them. Second, that passion (and work) are crucial to understanding, and so there are different levels of understanding or different kinds of understanding. Third, that a movement of resignation is essential to any expression of faith. Fourth, that there are different ways of resigning the finite, different *teloi* for which the resignation is made. And finally, most importantly, perhaps, in terms of a new understanding of faith, he sees that faith involves the importance of receiving the finite, of commensurability with actuality. Silentio may not be able to make the movements of faith, but he still manages to convey something very important, something that the author of Silentio wants to have conveyed.

Notes

1. *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1983. All further parenthetical page references in the text will be to this edition.
2. Evans, "Faith as the Telos of Morality: A Reading of Fear and Trembling," in *Fear and Trembling and Repetition, International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Robert Perkins, Macon GA, Mercer University Press, 1993, p. 14.
3. See John Lippitt's excellent commentary, *Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling*, Routledge Philosophy GuideBooks, London, Routledge, 2003, Chap. 7, pp. 177-208.
4. Lippitt, *ibid.*, p. 205.
5. Lippitt, *ibid.*, p. 205.
6. "We cannot be sure whether to credit the epigraph to Johannes or to Kierkegaard" (Lippitt, *ibid.*, p. 198).
7. "I dare say these words can be understood without the necessary consequence that the one who has understood them has the courage to do what he has understood" (*FT*, 73; *SV1* 3, 121).
8. Note that the context of the first instance of this claim suggests that it may be a psychological strategy to preclude disciples, because he worries that someone will think he can get faith from someone who has it, but he later unambiguously states that "I cannot make the final movement, the paradoxical movement of faith, although there is nothing I wish more" (*FT*, 51; *SV1* 3, 101).
9. In *Concept of Anxiety*, Haufniensis writes that "To understand a speech is one thing, and to understand what it refers to, namely, the person, is something else" (*Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans., Reidar Thomte, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 142; *SV1* 4, 408).
10. Most of the time he suggests that faith involves both movements, whereas sometimes he seems to restrict faith to the movement of receiving back (as when he concludes that "By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac, but by faith Abraham received Isaac" (*FT*, 49; *SV1* 3, 99)). At other times he suggests that there are "movements" [plural] of resignation as well as "movements" [plural] of receiving (*FT*, 37-38; *SV1* 3, 88-89).
11. "Knight of faith" is one "who carries the treasure of faith" (*FT*, 38; *SV1* 3, 89), whom he later calls the "marvelous knight" (*FT*, 50; *SV1* 3, 99).
12. I take it that the tragic hero and the knight of infinite resignation are covered under the same rubric precisely because the formal movement they make is the same: i.e., both of them make a "purely philosophical" movement, and neither of them experiences an impossible hope. What might distinguish the tragic hero from the knight of infinite resignation seems far less crucial than what unites them.
13. Silentio locates irony and humor in the sphere of infinite resignation, and notes that the "elasticity" of irony, humor, and resignation is "owing to the individual's incommensurability with actuality" (*FT*, 51; *SV1* 3, 101).
14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer contrasts a "profound this-worldliness" – a disciplined life – with the "shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, SCM Press, 1971, p. 369).
15. Modern philosophy "is unwilling to stop with doubting everything but goes further" (*FT*, 5; *SV1* 3, 57); "In our age, everyone is unwilling to stop with faith but goes further" (*FT*, 7; *SV1* 3, 59).

16. I take it that this is something like what Mulhall argues, in *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 382.
17. Lippitt, *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling*, pp. 194–202, where Mulhall's charge is discussed.
18. *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 374.
19. First mention of “tragic hero” (*FT*, 34; SV1 3, 86), contrast between knight of faith and knight of resignation (*FT*, 38; SV1 3, 89), “tragic hero” (*FT*, 58–59; SV1 3, 108–09), “movement of infinity” (*FT*, 69; SV1 3, 118), knight of faith (*FT*, 71; SV1 3, 120), tragic hero (*FT*, 75; SV1 3, 124), “hero” (*FT*, 90; SV1 3, 138).