

Abraham in Kierkegaard Research

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1. Johannes de silentio, the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, cannot be accused of being too moderate. Dealing with the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22, 1–19), he offers this radical alternative:

The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac (*FT* 30; *SV*2, 3, 92).¹

Is Abraham justified in following the command of his God and raising the knife against his son? As a figure in Kierkegaard's play of indirect communication, de silentio does not answer the question. But in constant admiration for Abraham, whom he paradigmatically calls a 'father of faith' and a 'knight of faith,' he develops a conviction which seems to contain a hard attack on human ethics (or reason) and its validity: divine orders, in certain cases, may abolish fundamental moral principles. Faith, then, may include a »teleological suspension of the ethical,« in Johannes' words, a violation of the ethical for the sake of a higher purpose, the will of God and its realisation. So religious belief is not ethical, not rational, but 'a paradox' and 'absurd'.

It is no surprise that such a hard attack met with strong resistance from the very beginning,² a resistance, which has still not vanished today.³ Even philosophers or theologians who appreciate Kierkegaard as a thinker have difficulties with the radicality of *Fear and Trembling*. Representing many, Edward F. Mooney asks:

Wouldn't it be better to throw down the book, to frankly admit what our untutored conscience would declare anyway, that Abraham has made the *wrong* choice, and that Kierkegaard is sadly, *greatly*, deluded in his effort to glorify such outrage?⁴

But it is no surprise, either, that within Kierkegaard research such a negative result is not generally accepted. Especially in the English-speaking literature of the last decades, we find a whole string of approaches which try to replace the traditional critique with a more affirmative understanding and assessment. Their intention is, generally speaking, to avoid the conflict between morality and religion which *Fear and Trembling* is said to emphasize.

The result of this is that there has been a vivid debate about the book during the last twenty or thirty years, and one may doubt whether it makes sense to continue it, for instance, by adding another approach to the many approaches which already exist. However, this is not the primary purpose of this paper. On the contrary, its purpose is to show that the aforementioned tendency within Kierkegaard research to read de silentio's work in an 'anti-traditional' or 'harmonizing' way, is not successful.⁵

In order to support my thesis, I shall investigate the different types of the approaches in question. This investigation, of course, cannot be complete, but I have chosen examples which throw light on the main types. Then I shall briefly discuss the consequences of my critique for a reading of *Fear and Trembling*.

2. The first kind of anti-traditional strategy is the *systematic* one. Johannes de silentio, it is said, describes a very important systematic problem correctly, but he fails to solve it. He fails because he is closely attached to German idealistic philosophy, especially the philosophy of Hegel, and therefore lacks a plausible theory of morality and its relation to religion. So, by replacing or reshaping Johannes' idealistic ethics, we are able to replace his irrationalistic conclusions by more acceptable ones.

To the most elaborated approaches of this type belongs that of John Donnelly. Donnelly argues that two different sources for moral standards exist. First, there are »tasks that attach to stations, offices, and roles in society, and that are generally of an institutional sort,«⁶ the public principles and rules; moreover, there are personal norms which guide the indi-

vidual's conduct, although they are not demanded by society; Abraham's supreme moral principle, »'to obey the mandates of God in all situations',« is precisely a norm of this second type.⁷

So, Donnelly tries to undermine Johannes' idea of the 'paradox' by locating the supreme religious duty within the realms of human ethics. If the rule to obey God itself is a moral rule, then there on principle cannot exist a disharmony between ethics and faith.⁸ But this explanation has to be supplemented. For Abraham does not simply receive an order from his God, he receives an order which seems to contradict another divine order. As Kierkegaard puts it in a draft:

The terrifying thing in the collision is this – that it is not a collision between God's command and man's command but between God's command and God's command (JP 908; Pap. IV B 67).⁹

Donnelly is aware of this collision and sees Abraham in a dilemma between two 'contextual implications' of his obedience to God, namely between the obligation to care for Isaac on the one hand and to kill him on the other. Donnelly's suggestion is that Abraham has to endure this dilemma, for its purpose is a trial, an ordeal from God to test his faith.¹⁰

However, it is necessary to stress that Abraham did not know that God's new command was the beginning of an ordeal. Donnelly reads the Abraham-story from its end and thereby neglects its decisive character of fear and trembling.¹¹

This point indicates a serious difficulty in justifying Abraham morally: whether it is really possible to pay sufficient attention to Abraham's absolutely exceptional dilemma.¹² But even if that were possible, another difficulty would remain, namely that of justifying the presupposed ethical theory itself. Whether Donnelly's account of ethics is convincing or not may be an important question, but it would change the discussion about Abraham into a fundamental discussion about ethics. In other words, a systematic approach will ultimately require a systematic examination.¹³

3. There is, however, a more direct way of defending *Fear and Trembling*: the *hermeneutic* one. Does the book really present us with an anti-ethical concept of religious belief, as traditionally assumed? The pseudonym's name 'de silentio', the motto from Johann Georg Hamann, the pseudonym's assurance that he lacks faith and is unable to understand Abraham

– these elements of the text may be taken as signals for another, hidden meaning. And this is what is maintained here: The ‘standard interpretation’¹⁴ or ‘prevalent interpretation’¹⁵ with its »straightforward reading of the book is likely to be misleading.«¹⁶ On the contrary: »Beneath the illusion of esthetic or antiphilosophical irrationalism«¹⁷ we find the real dimension of the book, we find »a secret message.«¹⁸

What does this message consist of?

3.1 A radical attempt to explain it is made by Jerry H. Gill. For him, *Fear and Trembling* constructs an irrationalistic idea of faith only in order to show that such an idea must completely fail. Although in the beginning the pseudonymous author declares himself unable to understand faith, he develops nothing other than an understanding of faith and its structure – »a glaring self-contradiction.«¹⁹ Moreover, in its effort to destroy rationality, de silentio’s work has to return to rationality; it must make use of argumentation and of »the very rational and ethical categories it is seeking to debunk.«²⁰ For Gill, these obvious absurdities can only be interpreted as ironic ones: *Fear and Trembling* is an ironic book, and in treating an irrationalistic understanding of faith with irony, it tries to illustrate that faith is not at all a question of understanding, not a question of theory, of propositions, but »a way of life.«²¹

It is no accident that Gill later relies on Kierkegaard’s remarks on indirect communication, in the *Point of View*,²² because he represents a line of research which takes Kierkegaard’s method of indirect communication very seriously and therefore takes the fictional, narrative elements of the text (like the use of the pseudonym) as a key for interpretation. But Gill is mistaken in assuming that indirect communication excludes theory. It is de silentio’s justified intention to clarify the relationship between morality (or reason) and religion in a theoretical way, the way of reason. This is justified in the eyes of the later Kierkegaard himself, whom Gill summons as a witness: Johannes’ project exactly fulfils the function the later Kierkegaard delegates to theoretical work:

It is specifically the task of human knowing to understand that there is something it cannot understand and to understand what that is
(JP 3089; Pap. VIII 1 A 11).

Hence Kierkegaard does not consider his own terms of ‘the paradox’ and ‘the absurd’ as non-theoretical terms, but as a result of systematic

thinking: as categories, as well-defined concepts by which reason describes its own limits. In fact, this is one of the main points in Kierkegaard's defence of the book against his contemporary critics.²³

3.2 The more popular readings of *Fear and Trembling* attempt to comprehend both its indirectness and its content. They take the book, in Edward F. Mooney's words, as a »call to selfhood.«²⁴ At first sight, this formulation fits in well with Kierkegaard's authorship, but it becomes problematic when it is related to the story of Abraham. How can this story contain a »call to selfhood»? Here the approaches in question point to de silentio's definition that in faith »the single individual is higher than the universal« (FT 55; SV2, 3, 118), and they point to the Hegelian character of Johannes' ethics: Ethics as 'the universal' means public morality (*Sittlichkeit*), the social values in laws and institutions; so an ethical self-understanding means a self-understanding as totally shaped by social convention, as a product of environment. On the other hand, God's command to Abraham is a private, individual one, and therefore it represents a 'higher' self with its own personal values. Edward F. Mooney, once more:

The teleological suspension of ethics describes *a phase in individual development*, a phase where the crucial issue is becoming an individual distinguishable from, and possessed of worth 'higher' than, the universal (...) *irreducible* to convention.²⁵

So we need not even understand de silentio's God as a transcendent power: we can just take him as 'absolute' in the sense of 'inescapable ideals or overarching goods' as they are necessary in order to become a self – whatever they may consist of;²⁶ and, with Jerome I. Gellman, we can take de silentio's 'duty to God' as »a duty to oneself, a duty of freedom in unfettered individuality.«²⁷

It comes as no surprise, then, that de silentio's representation of Abraham is ultimately regarded as a 'parable', 'metaphor' or 'allegory'.²⁸ But this does not shed very much light on the problem. First, some open questions concerning such interpretation remain: Why should we not accept that a theoretical discussion (like de silentio's discussion of the morality-religion-problem) has a value of its own? And why should we take precisely this part of the Kierkegaardian work as allegorical or symbolic?²⁹ What about the other parts? A fuller justification for such a

reading of Kierkegaard needs to be provided. Secondly, one may ask whether Gellman and Mooney's account includes the uniqueness of Abraham's dilemma in all its aspects. As already suggested, Abraham does not only stand between a public (or social) and a private (or personal) demand, but the public demand itself is a divine one – and it is strengthened by a private (or personal) revelation: by God's promise that Abraham, through his son Isaac, will become the father of many peoples (Gen. 17).³⁰ Thirdly, a reading of *Fear and Trembling* as a 'call to selfhood' underestimates the role of this book within Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship. Such a call does already exist, namely in the ethics of *Either/Or II*. There, Assessor Wilhelm develops both a critique of mere conventionality and, with his idea of 'choice', a theory of selfhood. If the genuinely religious, anti-ethical claim of *Fear and Trembling* is not taken into consideration, its difference from the ethics of *Either/Or* can hardly be explained.

3.3 Hence it seems plausible to view the subject matter of *Fear and Trembling* as a specifically religious one. Arguing for this opinion, Louis Mackey and Ronald M. Green point to an exegetical tradition up to Kierkegaard, they point to several allusions to the New Testament in the book, and, above all, they point to the important remarks about sin in the context of the Merman-legend in »Problema III« (FT 98; SV2, 3, 162f.): For Mackey and Green, all this indicates that *Fear and Trembling* »uses the Abraham story not literally but figuratively or typologically.«³¹ Its elements serve »as *symbolic expressions* of God's ability to redeem those he calls into relationship with himself, whatever their moral accomplishments or failures.«³²

While for Gellman and Mooney the book points to selfhood *in genere*, now it is said to point to Christian belief *in specie* and »the promise of the grace of forgiveness.«³³ But the strategy is the same as above – to take the book symbolically – and therefore, is subject in principle to the same objection. First, it presents a problem as central which is not even developed in the book and thereby ignores the faith-ethics-issue and its genuine value.³⁴ Secondly, it abstracts from Abraham's unique situation. Thirdly, it does not pay attention to *Fear and Trembling*'s role in the pseudonymous authorship. Gellman and Mooney underestimate this role, whereas Green and Mackey overrate it. Although it is true that the book names the problem of sin as a decisive problem, it does not really investigate it.³⁵

4. The attempts to 'harmonize' the conflict of reason with faith in *Fear and Trembling* are not really satisfying. – But what follows from this result? Do we have to draw exactly the same conclusions which all authors here criticised tried to avoid, and tried to avoid for good reasons? Do we have to take de silentio's attack as Kierkegaard's decisive attack on ethics and reason at all?³⁶ I do not think so. Of course, it is impossible here to argue for my opinion,³⁷ but let me end this paper by sketching it:

It is not only the different pseudonyms who refer to each other, and not only Climacus in his »Appendix« to the *Postscript*, but also Kierkegaard in his journals who supports the idea that the pseudonymous authorship should be taken as a coherent whole, as a unit. In 1846, he writes:

My concern was to present the various stages of existence in one work if possible – and this is how I regard the whole pseudonymous productivity (*JP* 5893; *Pap.* VII 1 A 106).

This sentence indicates what Climacus tries to explain in the »Appendix,« namely that the pseudonymous authorship contains a theory of stages and that this theory is developed progressively – from the esthetic stage in *Either/Or I*, via the ethical, to the (Christian) religion, and finally religiousness B in the *Postscript*. As mentioned above, with *Either/Or II* a portrayal of the ethical stage already existed when *Fear and Trembling* was published. It is likely, therefore, that this book is a station on the way from the ethical to the religious stage, preparing for later works like *The Concept of Anxiety* which treats religious issues. It performs this function by (indirectly) opposing the religious to ethical, the ethical of Assessor Wilhelm in *Either/Or II*.

Indeed, there are different ethical problems raised in Johannes' work, four types of problems in all: first, the problem of satisfying human inclinations or wishes, treated with help of the concept of 'resignation'; secondly, the problem of an individual right to violate an ethical obligation, the subject investigated above; thirdly, the problem of the inability to fulfil an ethical obligation – the problem of 'outsiders' like Gloster and Sara; and fourthly, the problem of the inability to reconcile a violated ethical obligation – the question of guilt within the Merman-story (with allusions to the question of sin).

It is true that the legend of Abraham shapes the frame for all these problems, but it must be stated that they are discussed in a certain order.

While the »Preliminary Expectoration« is devoted to the issue of resignation, and while »Problema I« and »Problema II« are devoted to the problem of Abraham and his conflicts with ethics, the other problems, as mentioned, do not exist until »Problema III.« This construction gives rise to the conclusion that *Fear and Trembling* constitutes and expresses a progression in the critique of ethics and the theory of stages as a whole. According to this assumption, *Fear and Trembling*'s main topic itself constitutes a progression on the one hand, but on the other hand, the book reaches new or more precise questions which the subsequent writings focus on while neglecting the original topic.

This conclusion is supported by the pseudonymous development up to de silentio's work. Its predecessor, *Repetition*, discusses difficulties within the ethical stage, which were already mentioned but not critically illuminated in *Either/Or II*. However, this discussion develops in such a way that it is able in the concluding section of the book to identify a new problem, namely, the problem of the »religious exception« – Johannes' interest in the Abraham case.

The conclusion that *Fear and Trembling* is similarly a transitional book, is also supported by the further pseudonymous development until the *Postscript*. De silentio's successors pay attention only to the problem of the outsider (or 'natural' exception) and, more and more, to the problem of guilt and sin, whereas we cannot find any further example of a religious exception like Abraham. On the contrary: There are only disapproving comments. When Assessor Wilhelm in the second part of the *Stages* presents his ethics once more, he indirectly responds to *Fear and Trembling* and defines the religious exception in a way which *excludes* Abraham from being one.³⁸ And Climacus in the *Postscript* not only regards *Fear and Trembling*'s emphasis on the religious exception as a mere intermediate stage to the decisive discussion of sin and forgiveness,³⁹ but he criticizes de silentio's method of communication and his portrait of Abraham for showing »only a rough anticipation« (*CUP* 500; *SV*2, 7, 490).

No doubt, de silentio's specific critique of ethics and reason remains a challenge. But within Kierkegaard's work, it only is a passing phenomenon: it simply vanishes.

Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. and ed. H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983 (FT). References to the Danish edition: *Samlede Værker*, 2. ed., eds. A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg & H.O. Lange, Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel/Nordisk Forlag 1920ff. (SV2).
2. See e.g. Johan Frederik Hagen, »Frygt og Bæven,« *Theologisk Tidsskrift* 8 (1844), pp. 191–199, and Magnus Eiriksson (Theophilus Nicolaus), *Er Troen et Paradox og 'i Kraft af det Absurde'?* Copenhagen, 1850.
3. Perhaps the most famous of such critiques is that in Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970. – A recent and interesting essay in Norwegian is worth mentioning: V. Hösle, »Kan Abraham reddes? Og: Kan Søren Kierkegaard reddes? Et hegelsk opgjør med 'Frygt og Bæven',« *Norsk Filosofisk Tidsskrift* 27 (1992), pp. 1–26.
4. Edward F. Mooney, »Abraham and Dilemma: Kierkegaard's Teleological Suspension revisited,« *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 19 (1986), pp. 23–41; p. 23. Similar Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation. Reading Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling'*, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991, p. 64f.
5. I focus on Abraham's ethical-religious dilemma, which de silentio considers in the »Problemata« chapters. For reasons of space, a related subject of debate in Kierkegaard research, the problem of »resignation« and »faith« in the »Preliminary exhortation,« will have to be disregarded here.
6. John Donnelly, »Kierkegaard's Problem I and Problem II: An Analytic Perspective,« *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling': Critical Appraisals*, ed. R.L. Perkins, Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1981, pp. 115–140; p. 124f.
7. Donnelly, op. cit., p. 131.
8. The same strategy is followed, among others, by C. Stephen Evans, »Is the Concept of an Absolute Duty toward God Morally Unintelligible?« *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling': Critical Appraisals*, ed. R.L. Perkins, Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1981, pp. 141–151.
9. Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, trans. and ed. H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–1978 (JP). References to the Danish edition: *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2. ed., N. Thulstrup, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1968ff. (Pap.).
10. Donnelly, op.cit., p. 139f.
11. Here I agree with Michael Eisenstein, *Selbstverwirklichung und Existenz – ethische Perspektiven pastoralpsychologischer Beratung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung S. Kierkegaards*, St. Ottilien, 1986, p. 360f.
12. Cf. Mooney, *Knights of Faith*, p. 160, and A. Sagi, »The Suspension of the Ethical and The Religious Meaning of Ethics in Kierkegaard's Thought,« *Philosophy of Religion* 32 (1992), pp. 83–102; p. 99f. – Furthermore, Sagi draws attention to the fact that Donnelly and Evans are forced to neglect an important distinction of Johannes, namely the distinction between the 'knight of faith' and the 'tragic hero' (pp. 84–88).
13. One's judgement of Abraham depends on the ethical stance one takes, a fact which is illustrated, e.g., by the debate in the context of German idealistic philosophy. While Kant strictly rejects Abraham's willingness to kill his son, the late Schelling expresses a more affirmative opinion; he understands the contradiction between the two divine commands to Abraham as a contradiction in God himself. Cf. Hartmut Rosenau,

- »Die Erzählung von Abrahams Opfer (Gen. 22) und ihre Deutung bei Kant, Kierkegaard und Schelling,« *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 27 (1985), pp. 251–261; see further notes 2 and 3. – Related to modern analytical ethics, the Dutch scholar A. van den Beld, »Over Kierkegaards notie van de suspensie van het ethische,« *Bijdragen* 39 (1978), pp. 424–439 comes to the conclusion that Abraham could be justified within the ethics of R. M. Hare, but not within the ethics of W. K. Frankena.
14. Jerome I. Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire. Kierkegaard and Hasidic Masters on the Binding of Isaac*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994, p. 1.
 15. Sagi, op. cit., p. 83.
 16. C. Stephen Evans, »Faith as the 'Telos' of Morality: A Reading of 'Fear and Trembling',« *International Kierkegaard Commentary: 'Fear and Trembling' and 'Repetition'*, ed. R.L. Perkins, Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1993, pp. 9–27; p. 11.
 17. Mooney, *Knights of Faith*, p. ix.
 18. Ronald M. Green, »Deciphering 'Fear and Trembling's Secret Message,« *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), pp. 95–111.
 19. Jerry H. Gill, »Faith Is as Faith Does,« *Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling': Critical Appraisals*, ed. R.L. Perkins, Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1981, pp. 204–217; p. 207.
 20. Gill, op. cit., p. 211.
 21. Gill, op. cit., p. 204.
 22. Gill, op. cit., p. 209f. – Moreover, Gill apologises to the reader for not being able to practise this method in his own essay (p. 217).
 23. See for example *JP* 10 and 11; *Pap.* X 6 A 79 and 80 ; cf. *JP* 7; *Pap.* X 2 A 354. – However, one may admit that in *Fear and Trembling* it is not the theoretical, but the fictional elements that evoke a contradiction. This is discussed, in a deconstructive manner, by Joakim Garff, »Johannes de silentio: Rhetorician of silence,« *Kierkegaard Studies. Yearbook 1996*, eds. N.J. Cappelørn & H. Deuser, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996, pp. 186–210.
 24. Mooney, *Knights of Faith*, p. ix.
 25. Mooney, *Knights of Faith*, p. 95.
 26. Mooney, *Knights of Faith*, p. 69.
 27. Jerome I. Gellman, »Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling',« *Man and World* 23 (1990), pp. 295–304; p. 301. Gellman continues: »It therefore can be said that in a deep sense God's appearance in *Fear and Trembling* is not of a classical theological nature. Had Kierkegaard written for a later age he might have been able to write directly about freedom and possibility, making God superfluous.« – It must be added that in Gellman's later version (1994) the cited sentences are not repeated.
 28. Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling, and the Fire*, pp 6, 13, and 16. See further Mooney, *Knights of Faith*, p. 108.
 29. Of course, *Fear and Trembling* includes poetical passages which may be read figuratively, namely opening sections such as »Exordium« and »Eulogy.« But from such poetical passages the later chapters concerning Abraham's dilemma, the »Problemata,« are clearly distinct by their theoretical issue, the conceptual framework, and their explicit dispute with Hegel's philosophy; de silentio himself calls these chapters »dialectical« (*FT* 90; *SV*2, 3, 154). – And of course, we find poetical elements within these chapters, too, the references to many characters from world literature. But these references just serve as illustrations, examples in the discursive inquiry. So, it is far from being evident that these decisive parts of the book should be read in the same way as its beginning.

No doubt, it is also possible to point to a specific dimension of symbolic meaning in all of Kierkegaard's (pseudonymous) writings, a »secret message«: the message to Regine Olsen, his former fiancé. The close connection between the Dane's life and work suggests such a biographical interpretation. But there is no doubt either that the meaning of the authorship is not exhausted in this biographic dimension. Cf. Green, »Deciphering 'Fear and Trembling's Secret Message,« and John H. Whittaker, »The Suspension of the Ethical in 'Fear and Trembling',« *Kierkegaardiana* 14, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1988, pp. 101-113.

30. See FT 19; SV2, 3, 82, and JP 7; Pap. X 6 B 80.
31. Ronald M. Green, »Enough is Enough! 'Fear and Trembling' Is *Not* about Ethics,« *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993), pp. 191-209; p. 198.
32. Green, »Enough is Enough!« p. 198.
33. Louis Mackey, »The View from Pisgah: A Reading of 'Fear and Trembling',« *Points of View. Readings of Kierkegaard*, Tallahassee, 1986, p. 41-67; p. 66. – For another similar position see Whittaker, *op. cit.*
34. In a critique of Green, Gene Outka, »God as the Subject of Unique Veneration. A Response to Ronald M. Green,« *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993), pp. 211-215; p. 212) puts the decisive questions: Why is the problem of the sin *not* mentioned before »Problema III« (and there only in a few sentences), and why does de silentio declare that this problem does *not* explain the case of Abraham? The answers are not convincing. Green himself (»A Reply to Gene Outka,« *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21 (1993), pp. 217-220; p. 218) merely repeats that the pseudonym here shows his figural use of Abraham, whereas for Mackey (pp. 64 and 66) all this only indicates »irony.«
35. This point is, e. g., stressed by C. Stephen Evans (»Faith as the 'Telos' of Morality,« p. 21). According to him, Johannes notices that for some people there is no chance of becoming a self within society; and he describes those outsiders, for example the figures »Gloster« and »Sara,« as »exceptional characters.« Now it is the importance of »Abraham's story to provide hope to such people.« For the narrative shows that »it is at least possible for God to encounter a person directly, not simply through social ideals« and give »a new self, a new identity« (p. 23). But for Kierkegaard, nobody becomes a self by means of social values, »an insight« which is beyond de silentio's horizon, because it »depends on a Christian understanding of sin.« Related to Christian belief, the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling* gives only a »poetic anticipation« (p. 21). However, concerning the Abraham-problem, Evans follows the known 'anti-traditional' strategy and does not take it as a problem with an independent, non-figurative meaning.
36. As an example for this kind of reading, combined here with an affirmative assessment, cf. St. J. Grenz, »The Flight from God: Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling' and Universal Ethical Systems,« *Christian Freedom. Essays in Honor of Vernon C. Grounds*, Lanham, Md: University of America Press, 1986, pp. 69-85; p. 83: »(...) Kierkegaard's message (...) remains relevant. No norm (...) will ever be able to mediate one's position before God. The life of the individual must always be directed toward God alone, who may on occasion ask one to act in a seemingly unethical manner.«
37. Cf. Wilfried Greve, *Kierkegaards maieutische Ethik. Von 'Entweder/Oder II' zu den 'Stadien'*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1990.
38. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. and ed. H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 169ff.; SV2, 6, 182ff. See p. 182; SV2, 6, 194: »I do not know whether there is a justified exception, and if

there is such a person, he does not know it either, not even at the moment he droops, for if he has the slightest intimation of it, he is unjustified.»

39. Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. and ed. H.V. Hong & E.H. Hong, vol. 1. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992 (*CUP*), 259-62; *SV2*, 7, 253-255.