

The Paradox in Fear and Trembling

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Fear and Trembling is one of Kierkegaard's most important works, but at the same time one of the most difficult. It is important, because it contributes with forceful brevity to the ancient philosophical problem of the relations between reason and faith. Its difficulty lies in understanding the exact nature of its contribution towards solving this problem. In this paper, however, I shall not be discussing such profound matters. Rather, I shall try to offer an analysis of *Fear and Trembling* from one particular point of view. I want to exhibit the logical structure of a certain set of interrelated concepts which play a central role in its argument. And even in this my primary aim is merely to make clear certain crucial distinctions in this conceptual schema; distinctions which are not always seen clearly, but whose blurring makes it impossible to understand the teaching of *Fear and Trembling*. Among these concepts are *the paradox* and *the absurd*; *the miracle*, *the marvellous*, *the prodigy*, *the preposterous*, *the impossible*, *the contradiction*, *the conflict*, and *the unreasonable*; *understanding*, *thinking*, *believing*; and the central concept of *faith*. Hence my paper might well be thought of as a 'Prolegomenon to the understanding of *Fear and Trembling*'. There are two further restrictions that I have imposed upon myself here. First, I have not thought it proper to extend my analysis to the occurrences of these, and related, concepts in others of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, for example, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The reason for this restriction is that the pseudonym attached to *Fear and Trembling* ('Johannes de silentio') is unique, and that therefore the point of view expressed in this book is also unique and not to be assimilated to those expressed in the Johannes Climacus works mentioned above. Second, I have not considered the views expressed on these matters by Kierkegaard himself, in his acknowledged publications and his unpublished *Journals*. The reason for this restriction is that in general he does not himself share the point of view of any of his pseudonyms. Comparative analyses, of either of these two

types, require prior analyses of each of the pseudonymous works on its own. But my paper is intended also, perhaps, as a 'Prolegomenon to the understanding of Kierkegaard's doctrine of faith'.¹

1. *The Paradox, The Absurd, and The Impossible.*

In this section of my paper, I shall argue that the concepts of *the paradox* and *the absurd* are quite distinct, and, further, that both are distinct from the concept of *the impossible*. I shall also argue, however, that *Fear and Trembling* implicitly contains a larger conceptual schema in which these three concepts (and their conceptual kindred) are consistently and coherently related.

An examination of the language of *Fear and Trembling* shows quite easily that the concept of *the paradox* is closely related to the concepts of *the miracle*, *the marvellous*, and *the prodigy*. The concept of *the paradox* is introduced in the following contexts: (1) 'that enormous paradox which is the substance of Abraham's life' (p. 44), and 'the tremendous paradox which constitutes the significance of Abraham's life' (p. 63); (2) 'The knight of faith ... is the paradox ...' (p. 90), and 'the role of the paradox', ascribed to Abraham (p. 127); (3) 'faith ... is the paradox of life and existence' (p. 58), and 'to see what a tremendous paradox faith is ...' (p. 64); and (4) 'assuming the burden of the paradox', said of the knight of faith (p. 82). Again, the concept of *the paradoxical* occurs in the following contexts: (1) 'the paradoxical movement of faith' (p. 62); and (2) 'faith ... is needed when it is the case of acquiring the very least thing more than my eternal consciousness, for this is the paradoxical' (p. 59). Now the concept of *the miracle* is introduced in the following contexts: (1) 'I cannot perform the miraculous', said by Johannes with the clear implication that Abraham did perform the miraculous (p. 47); and (2) 'the miracle of faith' (p. 33), and 'faith is a miracle' (p. 77). Again, the concept of *the marvellous* is introduced thus: (1) 'he performs the marvellous', said of the knight of faith (p. 49) and 'in the next place did the marvellous thing ...' (p. 61). Similarly, the concept of *the prodigy* is introduced thus: (1) 'to be able to lose one's reason, and therefore the whole of finiteness ... and then by virtue of the absurd to gain precisely the same finiteness ... is the only prodigy' (p. 47), repeated more or less verbatim on p. 52 and p. 58.

The three concepts of *the miracle*, *the marvellous*, and *the prodigy* are all applied strictly to *the individual's performance of 'the movement of faith'*.

What is miraculous (marvellous, prodigious) is *that* the individual – Abraham, the knight of faith – performs such a movement, or performs such an act. These concepts do *not* apply to the content of this performance, that is, to the movement of faith itself. Although Kierkegaard says, for example, that it is a miracle that the individual performs this movement, he does *not* say that to perform this movement is to perform a miracle (marvel, prodigy). Now ‘the movement of faith’ is distinct from ‘faith’ itself: one is an act, the other is a state or condition of the individual. None the less, they are closely related: the individual can be in the state of faith only in virtue of having performed the movement of faith. Hence, by an easy transference, the predicates appropriate to this movement can be applied to the corresponding state itself. Hence we can also say: it is a miracle (marvel, prodigy) that the individual has faith. And this gives us the correct interpretation of the phrases ‘the miracle of faith’ and ‘faith is a miracle’. These distinctions also fit, fairly obviously, Kierkegaard’s uses of the concept of *the paradox*. What is paradoxical is *that* the individual can make the movement of faith. Hence, by transference, we can speak of the state of faith itself as a paradox: it is a paradox that the individual has faith. This, further, allows us to interpret correctly the claim that the paradox is the ‘substance’ of Abraham’s life. For one may well say that faith is the substance of his life – the substance of the life of the individual who is in the state of faith. And thus, by a further transference of the predicate, we are justified in calling Abraham himself ‘the paradox’. But it can now be seen that (i) this is an extremely condensed and abbreviated remark, and that (ii) its sense is ultimately given by the primary use of the concept of *the paradox*, that is, its predicability of the movement (act) of faith.

This group of concepts, I have argued, is properly applied to the act of faith, but not to the content of that act; not, therefore, to what the individual brings himself to ‘believe’ in performing this act. For this we need, and get, a quite distinct set of concepts. These are the concepts of *the impossible*, *the unreasonable*, and *the preposterous*, on the one hand; and the concept of *the absurd*, on the other. Some examples of these usages are as follows: (1) ‘he who expected the impossible’ (p. 31), ‘he recognizes the impossibility’ (p. 57), ‘to face the impossibility’ (p. 58), and ‘faith . . . has perceived the impossibility’ (p. 58); (2) ‘it became unreasonable, Abraham believed’ (p. 32); and (3) ‘Abraham believed and did not doubt, he believed the preposterous’ (p. 35). These claims are related to those involving the *paradox*-family in the following way. It is

a *paradox* that the individual has faith, since to have faith involves believing what is *impossible* (unreasonable, preposterous). This group of concepts, therefore, is predicable properly of the content of the act of faith, and not of the performance of that act or the corresponding state of faith itself. Kierkegaard's general premiss is the following: that an individual should believe something *impossible* is a *paradox*. (To repeat: he is not saying that it is *impossible*). Or, more precisely: that an individual should believe something that he himself believes to be impossible is a paradox.

This notion of belief is related to the concepts of *understanding* and *thinking* in the following propositions: (1) 'he left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him' (p. 31); and (2) 'faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off' (p. 64). Obviously, if faith involves believing something one believes to be impossible.

The idea that faith involves believing the impossible is connected with the use of the concept of *the absurd*. This concept is introduced in the following contexts: (1) 'to make the movements of faith ... plunge confidently into the absurd' (p. 44); (2) 'He acts by virtue of the absurd' (p. 67); (3) 'by virtue of the absurd to gain precisely the same finiteness' (p. 47), and 'He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd' (p. 51); (4) 'by virtue of the absurd, faith enters upon the scene' (p. 79); (5) 'He believed by virtue of the absurd ...' (p. 46), and 'the movements of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd' (p. 48). The first difficulty we meet in interpreting these claims is the phrase 'by virtue of the absurd'. I suggest that a simple solution is found by identifying the Kierkegaardian claim 'He believed *by virtue of* the absurd' with Tertullian's famous 'Credo *quia* absurdum'. That is, the sense of 'by virtue of' is 'because it is': the sense of 'by virtue of the absurd' is 'because it is absurd'. Hence the concept of *the absurd* qualifies not the act, or the state, of faith, but an essential part of its content. But it does not only, or primarily, qualify the content of the act of faith: what it primarily qualifies is the *reason* for the performance of this act – the reason for making the movement of faith. For Abraham makes the movement of faith (believes) *because* what he believes is absurd. It is thus that we can explain the relationship between the *impossible*-family and the concept of *the absurd*. It is the relationship between the propositions 'Credo quod est impossibile' and 'Credo quia absurdum'. Hence Kierkegaard employs the con-

cept of *the impossible* primarily to describe *the content* of the act of faith (belief), the concept of *the absurd* primarily to describe its *ground*.

We can now relate the concept of *the paradox* to the concept of *the absurd*. For we can say: that an individual should believe something because it is *absurd* is a *paradox*.

The concept of *the absurd* has, however, a further context, which illuminates the contexts hitherto described. 'It was indeed the absurd that God who required it of him should the next instant recall the requirement' (p. 46). (This context recalls a further, so far unmentioned, use of the concept of *the preposterous*: 'The Lord . . . make miraculously the preposterous actual' (p. 34)). This is what we might call the fundamental absurdity: the *absurd fact*. And it is what God performs for the believer: to recall the requirement, to save Isaac, to give the knight of faith back all his finiteness (here reminiscent of the story of Job). This use of the concept of *the absurd* explains the uses previously described, and is therefore fundamental to the whole conceptual schema under analysis. Beneath the proposition 'Credo quia absurdum' lies the proposition 'I believe that God has done/can do/will do what is absurd'.

Hence the structural interrelationships of all these concepts can be explained as follows. (A) God is believed to do what is *absurd* (and here 'absurd' is a predicate of the event in question). (B) To believe that God will do what is absurd is to believe something that is *impossible* to be believed, since it is *impossible* that what is *absurd* should occur (and here 'impossible' is a predicate of the content of the corresponding belief). (C) To have faith is, in addition, to believe this precisely because the fact one believes God will bring about is *absurd*. (D) It is a *paradox* that any man should have such a belief and hold it on such grounds.

It is important to recognise the stringency of this conceptual scheme, and not to commit the error of using the various concepts discussed here in the wrong predicative contexts. For example, it is quite un-Kierkegaardian to say: (1) 'The man of faith believes that God will do what is paradoxical'; or (2) 'To believe that God will do what is absurd is to believe something which is paradoxical'; or (3) 'It is impossible, or absurd, that any man should have faith'.²

There are two negative points which can be made at this point. First, when Kierkegaard speaks of God as doing the absurd, and of the believer as believing something impossible, there is absolutely no reason to suppose that he means either that God does, or the believer believes, what is *logically* or *scientifically*

impossible. There is no reason to suppose that the event which gives faith its content and ground is either a self-contradiction or a contravention of laws of nature. If we take literally and strictly what he says, we can suppose only that this event would be 'absurd', 'preposterous', that to expect its occurrence is 'unreasonable': and this is simply to say that its occurrence is highly improbable, on the basis of the evidence possessed by the believer. For example, an essential part of Abraham's faith, according to Kierkegaard, was his belief that he would 'get Isaac back'. But in this there is nothing self-contradictory or contrary to natural laws. His belief was merely unreasonable. Second, when Kierkegaard calls it a *paradox* that any man should have such faith, he does not imply that this is *self-contradictory*. For there is no self-contradiction involved in Abraham's believing (unreasonably) that he would get Isaac back.

These observations help us to locate more precisely *the paradox*. It is not in the fact that someone believes what it is unreasonable for him to believe. This is not a paradox at all, however weak we make our interpretation of the term: for it is an all too common phenomenon. *The paradox*, strictly speaking, lies in the fact that he believes what he believes because it is unreasonable – quia absurdum. For certainly the proposition 'Credo quia absurdum' is a 'paradox' in one of the ordinary senses of this term. (And note once again: it is *not a self-contradictory* proposition, nor one that states a scientific impossibility).

Therefore Kierkegaard's conceptual scheme, as analysed above, offers no support for the view that in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard puts forward a *strongly irrationalist* position. For if 'strong irrationalism' involves the claims that (i) God can do what is logically or scientifically impossible, or that (ii) the believer believes something that is logically or scientifically impossible, we have seen that there are no grounds in the text for ascribing either claim to Kierkegaard (Johannes de silentio). If, therefore, he is to be called an 'irrationalist', it can be only in a *weak* sense of irrationalism. For his position involves only the claims that (i) God can do what no reasonable man would expect, and that (ii) the believer believes that something no reasonable man would expect will in fact occur. It involves, also, the claim that (iii) the believer believes that it will occur, precisely because it is what no reasonable man would expect: but even this claim is characteristic only of a weak irrationalism.

Therefore, when Kierkegaard says 'he left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him', and 'faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves

off', he does not mean that having faith involves believing the logically or scientifically impossible. He simply means that it involves abandoning *common sense*.

2. *The Paradox and The Contradiction.*

As the reader will have noticed, I have so far discussed only the first part of *Fear and Trembling*, namely the section entitled 'Preliminary Expectoration'. In this section of my paper I shall discuss its second part, namely the three 'Problems'. As before, my discussion will be severely restricted: perhaps even more than before, since there is much in the 'Problems' which is not directly relevant to my aim. But I shall also try to relate what Kierkegaard says about *the paradox* here to what has gone before.

The second part of *Fear and Trembling* differs from the first in that, whereas Kierkegaard has previously considered faith as it is in itself, he now considers it in its relationship to ethics. He makes, we shall find, two presuppositions about ethics: (i) that 'the ethical as such is the universal' (p. 64), and (ii) that the universal is higher than the particular (see p. 67). And the latter presupposition can also be expressed in the claim: (iii) for human thought, 'the ethical ... is the highest thing' – or, ethical duty is absolute.

In this part, we find a series of definitions of faith, in each of which faith is described (as before) as *the paradox*. I shall now list the most important of these definitions. (1) 'Faith is this paradox, that the particular is higher than the universal ..., that the individual, after having been in the universal, now as the particular isolates himself as higher than the universal' (p. 65). This definition is substantially repeated on p. 77 and p. 91–p. 92. (2) 'The paradox is that he as the individual puts himself in an absolute relation to the absolute' (p. 72), substantially repeated on p. 122 and p. 129. (3) 'The paradox can also be expressed by saying that there is an absolute duty toward God' (p. 80), whereafter Kierkegaard immediately repeats Definition (2). (4) 'This ethical relation is reduced to a relative position in contrast with the absolute relation to God' (p. 81): this definition is clearly an implication of Definition (3). (5) 'The paradox of faith is this, that there is an inwardness which is incommensurable for the outward ...' (p. 79): this definition is also expressed in the claim: 'Faith ... is the paradox that inwardness is higher than outwardness'

(p. 79). (6) 'There is ... a concealment which has its ground in the fact that the individual as the individual is higher than the universal' (p. 91): this definition clearly links Definition (5) with Definition (1).

In the second part of *Fear and Trembling*, however, Kierkegaard also deploys the concept of *contradiction*, which I have until now left aside. It occurs as follows: if ethics is the highest thing for human beings, then 'it would be a contradiction to say that this might be abandoned (i. e. teleologically suspended), inasmuch as this is no sooner suspended than it is forfeited' (p. 65). Now this concept also appears in the first part. (1) 'The ethical expression for what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac; but precisely in this contradiction consists the dread ...' (p. 41). (2) 'It is a contradiction to forget the whole content of one's life and yet remain the same man' (p. 54) – said of the knight of faith.

The concepts of *the contradiction* and *the paradox* are linked, in the first place, as follows. First, what was said immediately above (in (2)) to be 'a contradiction' is elsewhere frequently called 'a paradox': it refers simply to the double movement involved in faith. Second, and more interesting, what was said (in (1)) in terms of the concept of *contradiction* is also said in terms of the concept of *the paradox*: 'faith is ... a paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well-pleasing to God ...' (p. 64).

This link is interesting, because it shows that Kierkegaard, when as now he is considering faith in relation to ethics, calls it a *paradox* in a sense which is quite different from, and much stronger than, the sense analysed in section 1. above. This is shown by the fact that the (ethical) predicate 'murder' and the (religious) predicate 'sacrifice' are genuinely contradictory predicates. To apply them both to one and the same act is genuinely, at last, to involve oneself in saying something which is self-contradictory. If the ethical judgement and the religious judgement are both equally valid (and correct), then two logically incompatible judgements are both valid (and correct).

This strong sense of *paradox* is, however, employed also in each one of the six definitions of faith that I quoted above. This does not emerge in the quoted passages, nor even explicitly in the reasoning that surrounds them. It emerges, on the other hand, if we supply the implicit theory of ethics which underlies them, and which I summarised in the two propositions that the ethical is the universal, and the universal is higher than the particular. Now this implicit ethical theory is not described in *Fear and Trembling*. To get an idea of it, we

are forced to turn to other Kierkegaardian sources, and in particular the second volume of *Either/Or*. Still better, we should look back at the Hegelian ethical theory of the *Philosophy of Right*.³ I cannot, of course, do the work of describing this implicit ethical theory here: that would take far too much time and space. I must, therefore, ask the reader to have faith that, according to such a theory, each one of the six definitions stated above is logically self-contradictory. For, given such a theory, it is self-contradictory to say that: (i) the particular is higher than the universal; (ii) the individual is absolutely related to the absolute; (iii) there is an absolute duty to God; (iv) ethical duty is merely relative; (v) there is an incommensurable inwardness; and (vi) there is a 'higher' concealment.

I have already remarked on some of the logical interrelationships between these six definitions. I think it is possible to divide them into two groups: first, those concerning the absolute duty to God (Definitions (2), (3), and (4)); second, those concerning the incommensurable inwardness (Definitions (5) and (6)): and then Definition (1) can be seen as the definition which links these two thoughts. Now I have suggested – not argued – that in every one of these six definitions Kierkegaard employs the concept of *the paradox* in the strong sense of *the logically self-contradictory*. This can be supported, further, by observing that the set of definitions concerning the absolute duty to God amount to precisely the same as the phenomenon already explicitly identified as a 'contradiction'; namely, a (logical) contradiction between the demands of ethics and religion. Now, if we assume that Definition (1) can be understood as a way of summing up the essential content of this set of definitions, and that it therefore entails them, we are forced to infer that Definition (1), too, must be self-contradictory. And if we add that it is equivalent, in essential content, to the second set of definitions, we can infer that these too are self-contradictory. Hence, by the aid of the suggested (but here unsupported) logical manoeuvres I have indicated, we shall have further, and direct, support for my claim that the sense in which Kierkegaard is now employing the concept of *the paradox* is the strong sense of *the logically self-contradictory*.

3. *The Paradox and The Paradox.*

At this point I can summarise the argument of my paper as follows. In the first part of *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard employs a 'weak' concept of *the paradox*, of which we know positively that it is properly used as a predicate of

the act of faith and that its use is grounded in the fact that to 'believe' is to believe something impossible precisely because it is absurd, and negatively that it is not necessarily equivalent to the predicate *logically self-contradictory*. In the second part, he employs a 'strong' concept of *the paradox*, of which we know positively that it qualifies (i) the fact that there can be an absolute duty to God and (ii) the fact that there can be an incommensurable inwardness (which may boil down to (iii) the fact that the particular is higher than the universal), and also positively that it is to be identified with the predicate *logically self-contradictory*. How, then, are we to fit together these two characteristic employments of the concept of *the paradox*?

One simple way of reconciling them would be to admit, as I have done, that nothing in the first part of *Fear and Trembling* forces us to construe 'paradoxical' as 'logically self-contradictory', but to claim none the less that this is how it should be construed. Then there will be simply no discrepancy at all between the two characteristic uses of this concept.

The other way, which is the way I adopt in this paper, is to affirm not only that nothing in the first part forces us to construe 'paradoxical' as 'self-contradictory', but also that we should positively construe it as 'odd *but not self-contradictory*' (which is vague enough). Now this interpretation immediately lands us, it appears, in the view that *Fear and Trembling* employs two *distinct and incompatible* concepts of *the paradox*. I want to argue, however, that although it employs two *distinct* concepts of *the paradox*, they are not *incompatible*, since they have quite distinct functions. This distinction can be indicated by saying that in the first part of *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard discusses the *fact* of faith: in the second he discusses the *justification* of faith.

Let me begin by comparing the general theory of *the paradox*, contained in the second part of *Fear and Trembling*, with the conceptual schema used in the first part. We have seen that in the first part *the paradox* is identified with the proposition 'Credo quia absurdum'. Now *the paradox* of the second part ('that the particular is higher than the universal') can be related to *the paradox* of the first part in either, or both, of two ways: (A) perhaps the believer has to believe 'that the particular is higher than the universal' for his belief to be true faith; (B) perhaps it has to be the case, in this particular instance, 'that the particular is higher than the universal', for the believer's belief to be true faith.

(A). Does the man of faith, in addition to believing the absurd because it is absurd, have to believe 'that the particular is higher than the universal' (that

is, to believe one of the six definitions of faith cited above)? Not necessarily. He certainly has to believe in God, and also to believe that God will do for him something that is absurd. But it does not follow from this that he has to have any one of the explicit beliefs in question. But sometimes he may have such a belief: and Abraham is a case in point. For Kierkegaard's description of the case of Abraham seems to imply that Abraham believed he had an absolute duty to God – which is one of the definitions cited above. In cases of this kind, then, the believer must believe some proposition that is a *paradox* in the strong sense, that is, a self-contradiction. Consider now the propositions, 'A believes that p , and p is self-contradictory'. This is clearly stronger than the proposition, 'A believes that p , and p is (from A's point of view) highly improbable'. Hence, if the latter is logically conceivable, it does not necessarily follow that the former is. In fact it may be argued that the former, stronger, proposition is itself a self-contradiction. But to argue thus, it seems, we have to define the concept of *belief* in such a way that the concept of *believing what is self-contradictory* itself becomes a self-contradictory concept. And we are not forced to make this definitory move. Hence I do not consider the strong proposition as self-contradictory: it is, on the other hand, very clearly *paradoxical*. And, since it is not plain that it is a *paradox* of the same kind as 'Credo quia absurdum', I shall temporarily suppose that it is a paradox of a different, and stronger, kind: one which is closer to the concept of *self-contradiction*, without however yet being as strong as this concept. (We may think of it as the 'intermediate' sense of the concept of *the paradox*).

One might, however, argue that Abraham is required not only to believe something that is self-contradictory, but to believe something that he himself believes to be self-contradictory. For does not Abraham believe that God commanded him to kill Isaac, and is not the latter proposition something that even Abraham must believe self-contradictory? If so, we are faced with the proposition, 'A believes that p , and believes that p is self-contradictory'. Now this proposition is even stronger than the stronger of the two propositions discussed above. And here I see no grounds for refusing to call it *self-contradictory*. Then, in this kind of case at least, we should have a 'paradox' which was simply equivalent to a 'self-contradiction'. But this reasoning appears to me fallacious, none the less. There are two arguments that show this. (1) Even if we suppose that Abraham believed that God commanded him to kill Isaac, we do not have to interpret this as the proposition that Abraham believed that

God commanded him to do something morally wrong. For the error in the latter proposition is contained in its confusion of ethical and religious concepts. It is equally fallacious to say, 'God can command the believer to do what is morally wrong', and 'Whatever God commands is *eo ipso* morally right': for the latter proposition, too, contains just such a conceptual confusion. At the point at which the thought 'God has commanded it' enters the believer's mind, the thoughts 'It is wrong' and 'It is right' both leave his mind. And, in the second place, it is mistaken to suppose that Abraham believed that God commanded him to kill Isaac – still more, that God commanded him to murder Isaac. At most, we should suppose, Abraham believed that God commanded him to *sacrifice* Isaac. And the latter belief, though certainly passing human understanding ('absurd'), is equally certainly not a self-contradiction. Hence, as before, it appears that even Abraham is required to do no more than believe what is absurd. (2) A stronger point, altogether, can be derived from Kierkegaard's general description of the movement of faith, as this is distinguished from the movement of 'infinite resignation'.⁴ For the whole point of this distinction is that to have faith is (i) to give up whatever is required of one ('infinite resignation'), and (ii) to believe that none the less one will 'get it all back' – and this latter is precisely *the absurd*. Hence Abraham, too, could not only have believed that God required the sacrifice of Isaac: he believed also that somehow, by God's agency, he would 'get Isaac back'. And that implies that he believed that *he would not have to sacrifice (kill) Isaac*. But this belief, too, may in its context properly be called 'absurd': for Abraham already believed that God had commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, and had therefore no rational grounds for his expectation that he would get Isaac back. But it is, as above, no more than *absurd*: in particular, it is not either self-contradictory or physically impossible. Hence I conclude that we cannot infer that the believer, in Kierkegaard's view, is required to believe something that he himself believes to be self-contradictory (or contrary to the laws of nature).

(B). Does it then have to be the case that 'the particular is higher than the universal', in order for the believer's belief to qualify as true faith? I think the answer is yes. For, on this view, what distinguishes true faith from 'false faith' (including self-deception) is that the true believer is 'related absolutely to the absolute' (see Definition (2) above). Now it is extremely tempting to infer from this that faith must be a *self-contradiction*. For are we not saying that a *self-contradiction* (Definition (2)) is both a necessary and a sufficient condition

of the state of faith? And to say this amounts to saying that to describe someone as having true faith is logically equivalent to saying that a self-contradictory proposition is true. Tempting it may be: but all the same this argument is fallacious. For what is logically equivalent to this self-contradiction is *not* the condition of faith itself, *but* the proposition that a certain mode of belief can be identified as true faith. And from the latter proposition it does not in the least follow that the belief in question is itself self-contradictory (nor does it even follow that it is absurd!)

We are particularly apt to fall into confusion, I think, because the concept of *faith* is employed ambiguously in *Fear and Trembling*. Sometimes, as largely in the first part, it is applied to the believer's *belief* ('Credo quia absurdum'). But at other times, and notably in the second part, it is applied rather to the believer's *relationship to God*. If we make this distinction clearly, we can then see that (i) the doctrine of the first part is that the believer's *belief* is a *paradox* in the weak sense discussed earlier; while (ii) the doctrine of the second part is that the believer's *relationship to God* is a *paradox* in the strong sense of a *self-contradiction*. And I have added above the possibility, in some cases, that (iii) the believer's *belief* is a *paradox* in the intermediate sense, if we suppose he believes some one of the six definitions mentioned earlier.

Now I want to consider the particular problem raised by the *justification* of faith. As this term implies, I shall here be dealing with the question of the relationship between faith and morality, about which I have already said a little above, in discussing the case of Abraham. In the second part of *Fear and Trembling*, the first 'Problem' is headed 'Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?'. This indicates that we are not primarily interested now in the general phenomenon of faith as a movement or a state: we are interested, rather, in the special problem raised by *actions* whose performance (or intention) is grounded in the phenomenon of faith. Abraham did not only possess faith: he also intended to *act* out of his faith. Hence the problem I am going to discuss should more accurately be described as the problem of *justifying acts grounded in faith*.

The paradox, in the second part of *Fear and Trembling*, sometimes takes specific form as the existence of an absolute duty to God (Definition (3)) or the reduction of the ethical to a relative position (Definition (4)). As I have explained this, *the paradox* must here be construed as a *self-contradiction*. And Kierkegaard also describes as a *contradiction* the relation between the

ethical and religious expressions for Abraham's intended act, that is, between the descriptions 'murder' and 'sacrifice'. To say that the ethical is teleologically suspended is to say that an act which, from the ethical point of view, would be called 'murder' and would be wrong is, from the point of view of faith, properly called 'sacrifice', and in some sense of the term *justified*. (I have already argued above that it is no longer conceptually possible to employ the terms 'right' and 'wrong' here, so that we cannot say that when the act is considered from the religious point of view it is 'right'. Still less, of course, can we say that it is 'morally right'. Hence I shall leave undefined my use of the term *justified*, although denying that it can be interpreted in terms of the concepts *right* or *morally right*). The argument of this section can be summarised in the following proposition: if and only if 'the particular is higher than the universal' (we are here dealing in particular with Definitions (3) and (4) of this general thesis), then an act which would otherwise be murder is (i) no longer properly called 'murder' (but properly called 'sacrifice'), and is (ii) *justified*. Therefore to say that such an act is justified is logically equivalent to saying that a *self-contradictory* condition is fulfilled. Hence, to say that such an act is justified is to say something which is itself logically *self-contradictory*. Now it is important to recognise clearly what this argument shows. It does not show anything that we have not already seen and accepted. In particular, the conclusion may well be perfectly valid from a logical point of view. For an argument of the general form, 'If self-contradiction (a) is true, then self-contradiction (b) is true', may well be perfectly valid: the fact that both the protasis and the apodosis of this sentence are themselves self-contradictory propositions notwithstanding.

But, if we suppose that the man of faith is justified in his act, by what precisely is he justified? (A) We might assume that his act is justified by his faith in the sense of his *belief*. This assumption amounts to claiming that a man is justified simply in virtue of his belief that he (as the particular) is above morality (the universal) – that latter not, of course, interpreted in a Nietzschean or Callimachean sense, but in the relevant religious sense. But this is obviously false. For his belief may itself be false: that is, his 'faith' may not be true faith. Hence, his act can at most be justified by his faith only if we presuppose that this is true faith. But this assumption immediately amounts to (B) the assumption that his act is justified by his faith in the sense of his *relationship to God*. (For it is the latter that makes his 'faith' true faith).⁵ And

this is the actual form of the argument in the second part of *Fear and Trembling*. Therefore, once again, in order to account for the *paradox* of 'the teleological suspension of the ethical' (the *paradox* of justification), we do not have to suppose that the believer himself necessarily believes something self-contradictory. We have to suppose only that a self-contradictory condition is fulfilled.

Hence the argument of this section of my paper can be summarised as follows. In the first part of *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard analyses faith as a mode of *belief*: and he calls this a *paradox* in the weak sense in which 'Credo quia absurdum' is a paradox. In the second part he analyses faith as a *relationship to God* (which underlies the belief of faith and guarantees that it is true faith, and also justifies acts performed because of this belief); and he calls this a *paradox* in the strong sense (as I have argued) of a *self-contradictory* condition. Sometimes, but not always and not necessarily, the believer himself believes that such a self-contradictory condition is fulfilled: and this, I have argued, we may properly call a *paradox* in a sense intermediate in strength between the two previous senses. (But it is to be noted that this phenomenon is not explicitly discussed in *Fear and Trembling*, and that the concept of *the paradox* is therefore not used in this work in this intermediate sense. It is something we may supply for ourselves in working out Kierkegaard's arguments).

4. *Faith, Understanding, and The Paradox.*

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard (Johannes de Silentio) remarks frequently (i) that *he* cannot himself *understand* Abraham, the knight of faith, and (ii) that *nobody else* can understand Abraham. (See, for example, p. 27, p. 36, p. 43, p. 44, p. 122, and p. 124). There are other related concepts that he uses to make the same point: that he cannot think himself into Abraham, that Abraham cannot make himself intelligible, and that Abraham cannot speak (p. 70, p. 122), for example. He also remarks that he cannot 'think' the paradox that he encounters when he encounters the thought of Abraham (p. 44), and that Abraham's life is 'so paradoxical that it cannot be thought at all' (p. 67). Again, he says it is impossible to understand that anyone can believe 'quia absurdum' (p. 69).

He also, however, says that Abraham himself 'left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him' (p. 31): and that 'faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off' (p. 64). (And this idea should not be under-emphasised, as Kierkegaard implies when he speaks of the 'dread and distress' that faith involves (see p. 41, p. 122, and p. 127, for example).

I have argued that the belief which characterises faith is a *paradox* only in the sense that it is grounded upon its own absurdity (*quia absurdum*). Correspondingly, therefore, the sense in which the man of faith 'leaves off' thinking or understanding is a weak one. He is required merely to believe what is absurd: and this means that he abandons nothing more than his *common sense*. In particular, he is not required to abandon his faculty of reason, or his trust in reason. Indeed, it is actually implied that he cannot abandon this: for if he did, how could he recognise the substance of his belief as 'absurdum'? All he is therefore required to do is to abandon the view that *God can do only what common sense expects*: to accept the view that *God can do what common sense does not expect*. And that is to accept only the view that God's actions cannot be predicted by the 'laws' of probability we use in our everyday calculations. But, so far as I can see, there is nothing inherently *absurd*, still less *self-contradictory*, in this general belief. It is *absurd* only from the point of view of common sense: but this is precisely Kierkegaard's point.

In what sense, then, is it plausible (or true) that Johannes de silentio cannot understand Abraham? It is true only in the sense that, from the point of view of common sense, it is impossible to 'understand' (make sense of) someone who abandons common sense – who abandons the common sense way of looking at things. Indeed, we can go further: from the point of view of common sense, someone who says 'I know this is contrary to common sense, but I believe it all the same', is saying something that is strictly *self-contradictory*. (For 'the point of view of common sense' is precisely that point of view within which it is accepted that one can believe only what accords with common sense). But this is, of course, a mere tautology.

The *relationship* of faith, on the other hand, is said to be a *self-contradiction*. It is immediately obviously, then, that it cannot be 'understood': indeed, this too is a tautology. If it is impossible that anyone would be absolutely related to the absolute (God), it is *eo ipso* impossible to understand that anyone should be so related.

Now let us consider the stronger case involving justification. Is the believer required to abandon his understanding here, and, if so, in what sense? I argued above that we do not have to interpret Kierkegaard as claiming that Abraham believes something he believes to be self-contradictory. He does not, it now follows, have to abandon his understanding in this strong sense. But I also argued that in certain cases we may suppose the believer does believe something that actually is self-contradictory, for example, that he has the absolute relation to God. But it is of the first importance to recognise that the believer himself need not believe this to be self-contradictory. It will certainly be 'passing human understanding'. And the believer may also believe that it *necessarily* passes human understanding. But still it does not follow that he will believe that it is *self-contradictory*. He merely requires to believe something that he also *believes impossible to understand*. And even if we add that he believes it to be *logically impossible* that anyone should understand this, it still does not follow that he believes it to be itself self-contradictory. (For there may well be propositions which it is logically impossible to understand other than that special class of such propositions, all of which it is logically impossible to understand simply because they are self-contradictory). To believe this he has only to believe that *the understanding cannot understand everything* – including, as in our case, the possibility of an individual's having an absolute relation to God. And clearly this proposition is not itself self-contradictory: it is only self-contradictory, in fact, if we make the prior assumption that the understanding can understand everything – that is, if we identify the common sense point of view with 'the absolute knowledge'. (On the other hand, as this argument shows, for someone who makes this prior identification – who both occupies the point of view of common sense and identifies it with absolute knowledge – the believer will appear to be believing what is self-contradictory).

In what sense does Johannes de silentio fail to understand Abraham? He cannot understand him because he has already made a prior commitment to the Hegelian ethics. (See section 2. above). Given this prior commitment, Johannes is committed to accepting a series of propositions concerning the relationship of the particular to the universal, etc.: and, since the believer may believe something that is the contradictory of one such presupposition, he is already committed to construing that belief as *self-contradictory*. But the belief is not *in itself* self-contradictory.

Therefore, throughout, the senses in which Kierkegaard (Johannes de silentio) and Abraham 'cannot understand' are systematically distinct. For Kierkegaard could 'understand' only by understanding a self-contradiction: but Abraham could 'understand' by understanding an absurdity. The latter is required merely to abandon his 'faith' in common sense: the former would be required to abandon his 'faith' in logic and Hegelianism.

Abraham is required merely to abandon his understanding in order to accept something he recognises as *absurd*. Johannes is required to abandon his understanding in order to accept something he takes to be *self-contradictory*. *But nowhere in Fear and Trembling is it said or implied that Johannes' point of view is the only possible, or only correct, viewpoint.* It is a tautology, of course, that *from* his point of view only his point of view is possible, or correct. But this tautology entirely fails to prove that this point of view *is* the only possible or correct point of view. Therefore the reader of *Fear and Trembling* is in no way forced to accept Johannes' account of faith, or its underlying conceptual schema. And it follows that at no point whatever in the account of faith is the reader required – as Johannes is at times – to employ the notion that faith is a *paradox* in the strong sense of being, or involving, a *self-contradiction*.

Kierkegaard makes a further point about the man of faith: for he says that Abraham cannot make himself understood (sc., by anyone else). Now what precisely cannot he make himself understood about? He cannot make anyone else understand that 'he would sacrifice him (Isaac) because it is a trial' (p. 122). That is, nobody else can understand that what Abraham is required to undergo is a 'trial'. Now from Johannes' point of view, they cannot understand this simply because to understand it requires understanding a self-contradiction – the self-contradiction that Abraham is absolutely related to God. But, we may ask, why should we suppose these others share Johannes' point of view? Why should we not suppose they, too, are individuals who have faith, as Abraham does? If so, they will not see Abraham's utterance as self-contradictory. But they will still see it as 'absurd', in precisely the same sense as Abraham himself does. For if Abraham himself regards God's command as absurd, so must these other individuals. However, this is the only sense in which they cannot 'understand' Abraham: and it is, I have argued, precisely the same as the sense in which Abraham too cannot 'understand'. Once again, and finally, therefore, the concept of the *logically self-contradictory* need not be employed in the interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*.

5. *Conclusion.*

The major aim of *Fear and Trembling* is, probably, to show that the point of view of understanding and the point of view of faith are incompatible. Kierkegaard achieves this by showing that, from the point of view of understanding, the point of view of faith involves self-contradiction. But he does not argue that, in itself, the point of view of faith involves self-contradiction: and I have argued that it involves only the acceptance of the absurd. But I also argued that it involves only a corresponding *partial* rejection of the point of view of understanding, or a rejection of the claim that the point of view of understanding is the only possible and correct point of view. Faith does not involve a *total* rejection of understanding. From the point of view of understanding, there is a logical incompatibility between itself and the point of view of faith. *But from the point of view of faith there is no logical incompatibility between itself and the point of view of understanding.* *Fear and Trembling* is written one-sidedly, and therefore its conclusion may be taken to be one-sided. (We might put this in the form of an epigram: Faith understands Understanding, Understanding does not understand Faith).⁶

NOTES

- 1 All references are to the Anchor Books edition of *Fear and Trembling*, translated with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie, Doubleday, 1954.
- 2 The great majority of the uses of the various concepts I have discussed in section 1. satisfy the schemata that I have constructed and explained. However there are a few occasions on which some of these concepts are used in anomalous ways. I have chosen to treat such uses as deviant.
- 3 I take it that there is no need of argument to prove that Kierkegaard leans heavily on Hegel in his pseudonymous writings.
- 4 The distinction between 'the movement of faith' and 'the infinite resignation' is not discussed in my paper. But it is crucial to the argument of the later parts of *Fear and Trembling* and, as I have implied by using the distinction here, illuminates the concept of 'the absurd' and therefore 'the paradox'.
- 5 To believe the absurd is obviously not a sufficient criterion for having faith. The sufficient (and necessary) criterion is rather the believer's relationship to God.
- 6 It is possible to wonder whether the kind of 'faith' analysed in *Fear and Trembling* is in fact Christian faith. For it is exemplified in Abraham, and it is possible to wonder whether Abraham counted, for Kierkegaard, as a Christian. (In one sense it is obvious that he did not: he could not have had the figure of Christ as the object of his faith).