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DESPAIR IN CHOICE:
KIERKEGAARD AND THE UNDERTAKING OF DESPAIR

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Abstract

This project's main goal is to take two distinct and separate works of the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and view them in light of one distinct idea. Namely, that despair is a choice and that this choice is necessary for faith. In *Fear and Trembling*, this choice is made by Abraham in his trial on Mount Moriah, to sacrifice his son for God. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, despair is again deciphered as an individual choice that ultimately lies in the hands of the individual to make, and that faith ultimately comes of willing to be oneself in relation to the absolute. This relation of the individual to the absolute is a common theme between these two different works, and it highlights the despair in choosing oneself knowing fully the paradox that is true faith in God.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“So then choose despair, for despair itself is a choice; for one can doubt without choosing to, but one cannot despair without choosing. And when a man despairs he chooses again – and what is it he chooses? He chooses himself, not in his immediacy, not as this fortuitous individual, but he chooses himself in his eternal validity.” (Kierkegaard, E/O vol. 2, pg. 215).

Despair as a choice appears to be paradoxical from the beginning: why would someone willingly choose despair? Søren Kierkegaard attempted to answer this question through various works he wrote during his lifetime. In committing to this attempt, Kierkegaard sought to find a definition of despair, which Kierkegaard wrote down in The Sickness Unto Death: *“If there is to be any question of a sickness unto death in the strictest sense, it must be a sickness of which the end is death and death is the end. This is precisely what despair is.”* (17). Despair is the sickness unto death, as Anti Climacus, pseudonymous author of The Sickness Unto Death, claims at the beginning of the book. What question remains, however, is why someone would willingly choose to despair.

Despair as a choice appears ridiculous, due in part to the modern assumption that despair is a form of depression, that is, it is treatable with therapy or medication. Gordon Marino specifically looks into the distinction between depression and despair:

“For one, depression is a state or mood, whereas despair is an activity that continues only so long as the individual, however half consciously, wills that it continue. Anti Climacus instructs us that it would be wrong to think of despair according to the medical model...If despair did not engage the will it would not be the sin that Anti Climacus insists it is.” (Marino, 123).

Specifically, depression exists in the body whereas despair is an act of the will. This is a fundamental difference, and in part serves as an inspiration for this work. Namely, that despair is a choice that is made, and while Kierkegaard’s viewpoint expressed through his two works Fear

and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death is primarily one of faith, faith itself is achieved by choosing despair in its highest form.

Kierkegaard as a philosopher wrote much of his works under a variety of pseudonyms, yet despite his variations across each work he manages to elucidate a somewhat clear and concise message regarding what faith is and is not. My goal with this paper and project is to show that despair, as a choice chosen by the individual, can be motivated by seeking not only the eternal self, but God as well, as Abraham does in Fear and Trembling. Making this choice allows the individual to become himself in the highest possible way, and in doing so against God, we are able to achieve the faith that Kierkegaard claims, through both Anti Climacus and Johannes de silentio, the pseudonymous author of Fear and Trembling, that is so elusive and unique compared to what many, including the Christians of his time, actually believed in.

1.1 Kierkegaard's Works: Defense of Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death

In writing this paper, I have chosen as previously mentioned to examine two fundamental works written by Søren Kierkegaard: Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death. In inquiring into the nature of despair as a religious, these two works provide very different but fundamentally sound arguments for despair as a choice for faith. I would like to take this time to briefly examine both works and their contributions to this project.

The Sickness Unto Death focuses almost exclusively on despair. This book, written by Anti Climacus, focuses on various degrees of despair and their relationship not only to each other, in part one of the book, but also to sin and eventually to faith in part two. Anti Climacus seeks to not only define despair against the self, but the willing of the self to choose despair in order to achieve faith. "Despair is a qualification of the spirit, is related to the eternal, and thus has something of the eternal in its dialectic." (Kierkegaard, SUD, 24). Thus, by positing despair as more than just an illness or mortal response, Anti Climacus assures us that despair is ultimately related to the eternal that exists outside of our finitude. This, he will go on to claim, is how Christians ultimately reach faith.

Fear and Trembling, on the other hand, does not focus on despair directly but more so through an understanding of Abraham and his decision to murder his son Isaac by God's command. Johannes de silentio writes Fear and Trembling in a much different fashion than Anti Climacus, and it becomes readily apparent why this is so. Abraham's story is focused on the definition of faith as a paradox. "Faith is exactly this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal..." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 47). Abraham's decision to murder Isaac becomes a teleological suspension of the ethical, because Abraham makes his choice singularly, without interference or others to influence him, as the tragic heroes do. Yet, Abraham is regarded as the

Father of Faith. This remains a simple part of the paradox that is Abraham and his choice to murder his own son simply because he believed in God, and by believing he chose to suspend the ethical choice in favor of a higher order.

Fear and Trembling does not directly mention Abraham's despair in choosing to murder his son; rather, he remains silent about much of the ordeal, requiring Johannes de silentio to write about the paradox and Abraham's decision from an outside perspective. However, despair still plays a major role in understanding Abraham: he chooses to murder his son for God knowing both the action he is choosing to commit and the promise God made him before Isaac was even born. He despaired in the sense that he chose his faith in God's eternal goodness despite being asked to murder his son for God.

“He knew it was God the Almighty who tested him, he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him, but he also knew that no sacrifice was too hard when God demanded it – and he drew the knife.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 18).

Abraham made this movement to kill his son in despair; not despair that he would rather do anything else, but despair in that he knew what he believed in and was willing to give to God the most precious thing he had. In choosing despair, he chose God and his faith in God. This choice in despair, illustrated by Johannes de silentio's writing and examples, is what sets Abraham apart from the tragic heroes and makes him a Knight of Faith.

Both works, Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, reveal a different and unique analysis of despair. The former does so by examining Abraham against not only against historical tragic heroes caught in the ethical, but also by inquiring into the movement of faith he made in choosing despair; in the latter work, despair is analyzed in terms of its relation to the self and the eternal, eventually through the character of sin and in order to understand faith. Both of these monumental works by Kierkegaard give us a glimpse into a theory of despair as a choice,

and while this is a religious choice, it is a choice Kierkegaard not only sought to explain in his writing and different pseudonyms, but also lived in his own complicated, unique and short lifetime.

1.2 Søren Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard's life was, like many others before and since his time, one of trouble and success. He wrote an extraordinary amount of literature in a short amount of time, but had many issues that complicated his personal life, particularly his relationship to Regine Olsen. It was because of the method of his life, however, that his works came to some notoriety in revealing the religious and philosophical trends of thought he put into each individual work as expressed by the various pseudonyms he used throughout his literary career. Despair, a popular theme early on and later in his career, came to represent not only different aspects of views of religion and philosophy he dealt with, but also a part of his life he could not fully control.

Kierkegaard was born in Copenhagen, and Alastair Hannay duly sums up Kierkegaard's young experience as follows:

“The father's strong and brooding presence had been with Søren since birth, while his brother's celebrated example continued to dog every stage of his life. It was typical that it was as ‘the younger Kierkegaard’ that Søren first achieved any celebrity of his own.” (Hannay, Biography, 31).

Kierkegaard grew up and spent most of his life in Copenhagen, and spent much of his time attempting to carve a name for himself. Growing up in a Christian household, Kierkegaard also had to contend with his father's strictness and his own developing sense of religion and identity. As a student, Kierkegaard seemed to do well enough and eventually attended the university, but his home life was never far behind. “Søren later blamed his father for messing up his life by having him raised in Christianity since childhood.” (Hannay, Bibliography, 36).

Although Kierkegaard does not make specific reference to his family in Fear and Trembling or The Sickness Unto Death, it is clear that his upbringing coupled with important events in his life had an important effect on his work.

Kierkegaard's famous conflicts with the Church of Denmark would become a major point in his journals and religious beliefs, and as a whole his dissatisfaction with Christianity as an establishment became recognizable. As one of Kierkegaard's notes from 1849 reads:

“Christianity does not really exist. The relationship to original Christianity is like that between a delicate, sentimental engagement and a marriage. They maintain a relationship of possibility to Christianity – perhaps with death in mind, but otherwise they do not put it on existentially. No one boldly ventures, to leap existentially into the ethical.” (Hong & Hong, 165).

Kierkegaard, from this journal entry, makes a distinct division between original and current Christianity, similar to what is hinted at from Fear and Trembling. Kierkegaard's criticisms of the church in this note stem from what appears to be a disengagement of the Church itself now and the Church as it was intended to be. Kierkegaard also criticizes the Christian for his lack of initiative: in this sense, the so-called Christian maintains only a social relationship to the Church, but existentially does not venture forward. This, among other sharp criticisms, became an important aspect of Kierkegaard's religious beliefs and is discussed at length in both Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death.

Aside from issues with established religion, Kierkegaard also based much of his writings off of his personal experiences in life. Of all the events, one that stands out amongst them all is his relationship to Regine Olsen.

“There is absolutely no clear indication, but the date, 8 May 1837, must surely be the day he first saw Regine...she remembered the impression Kierkegaard's lively intellect had made...he spoke ‘unceasingly,’ his words ‘poured forth’ in an ‘extremely captivating’ manner.” (Hannay, Biography, 91).

Kierkegaard's relationship to Regine was one of various levels and interactions, but as Kierkegaard himself would experience, the relationship between the two was not meant to be. He loved her, but it was not meant to be on account of Kierkegaard's breaking of their engagement later on.

“Kierkegaard says that Regine saw in his desire to break off the relationship just a symptom of the depression he was prone to... what Kierkegaard thought she failed to see was that underlying it all was a ‘religious collision.’” (Hannay, Biography, 157).

Kierkegaard’s religious standing and own questioning were a strong part of the breaking with Regine. It wasn’t that he did not love her, but on the contrary, that he loved her more than she could know, or perhaps more than he himself could express. His religious convictions, which show themselves in various forms under his pseudonyms and in his self-authored works, provide a strong foundation to his writing, and the break with Regine is no different.

Hannay refers to Fear and Trembling here, where Johannes de silentio makes reference to the ‘knight of infinite resignation,’ who gives up his love for the princess for an eternal love. In a similar sense, Kierkegaard seemed to be attempting the same feat; by giving up Regine for God, he made his love for her eternal outside of the temporal realm. As it is with the knight of infinite resignation, it appears to be so with Kierkegaard: “The love for that princess became for him the expression of eternal love, assumed a religious character, was transfigured into a love of the eternal being...” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 36). Kierkegaard, though disheartened, did this because he did fully love her and believed that by committing that love to God he was in fact loving her eternally in a way that could not be undone. This is very close, and possibly fulfills, the “movement of infinite resignation” that Johannes de silentio posits as the step before achieving faith.

It is quite possible, though not completely foreseeable, that Kierkegaard’s melancholy over Regine was because Kierkegaard made the choice in despair. After all, he did love Regine, but his love was not enough in the sense of eternal, and because of that in despair he renounced their engagement. As Johannes de silentio writes on the importance of loving God above all else:

“I can resign everything by my own strength and then find peace and rest in the pain...I can still save my soul if I am otherwise more anxious that my love for God rather than my worldly happiness triumphs in me.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 42).

Johannes de silentio makes this remark when comparing the ‘knight of faith’ to the ‘knight of infinite resignation.’ Although it would be a mistake to simply assume that Johannes’ words here mirror Kierkegaard completely, his use of the pseudonym to describe Abraham’s choice bears some resemblance to Kierkegaard’s giving up Regine for God. He willingly did so, but that did not change the action that, like Abraham, he could not necessarily reconcile with.

Kierkegaard wrote extensively after the break with Regine. Among his writings, Fear and Trembling was written prior to The Sickness Unto Death and are only two of many works he has written, pseudonymously and under his own name. “...Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God’s command. The book was ‘Frygt og Bæven (Fear and Trembling).” (Hannay, Biography, 188). This theme is a central focus of Fear and Trembling, and Johannes de silentio focuses the entire book around the conflicts that arise from Abraham’s willingness. Furthermore, “Kierkegaard sees himself as potentially poet and hero. As a poet...he should be in a position to grasp and portray the noblest of all tragedies...the story of Abraham and Isaac.” (Hannay, Biography, 189). Johannes himself begins Fear and Trembling with a comparison of the hero to the poet, and this serves as a gateway to understanding the role these two positions play in not only Fear and Trembling, but possibly in Kierkegaard’s other pseudonymous works. In particular, the role of the poet is intrinsic in The Sickness Unto Death.

Kierkegaard wrote The Sickness Unto Death under the pseudonym Anti Climacus, and as Hannay clarifies, its content and meaning apply not only to the intended audience of The Sickness Unto Death, but also Kierkegaard himself.

“Self-deception has a clear autobiographical reference. It is a remarkable feature of Sickness that while bringing Kierkegaard’s own personal dilemma into focus, it

tries to see it against a background which brings his problem conceptually into continuity with what Kierkegaard saw as the malaise of Danish society.” (Hannay, Biography, 378).

Despite the use of the pseudonym Anti Climacus in writing The Sickness Unto Death, specific elements due seem to hold true to Kierkegaard’s personal issues at the time. Despair, being the central topic of The Sickness Unto Death, is used, according to Hannay’s analysis, to describe two different but similar situations: the state of Danish society as Kierkegaard saw it, and his own perception of his own despair and issues.

Kierkegaard wrote extensively during his life, and experienced success and criticism from many different angles. In understanding Kierkegaard from here onwards, I want to make it clear his philosophical position in relation to the environment of his time. Kierkegaard was strongly opposed to the dominant form at the time, Hegelianism, and while he may have been seeking an undermining of Hegel’s dominant system, Kierkegaard through his works such as Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death seems to be more concerned with the religious affairs of the time, which stood in contrast with Hegel’s System. “Kierkegaard notes in conclusion that the Hegelian system has only three stages...while ‘life has four.’” (Hannay, Biography, 84). Although Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death do not directly attack Hegel’s philosophy, many differences arise to suggest Kierkegaard’s disagreement with many of Hegel’s System’s aspects can be discerned from his writing.

Kierkegaard’s philosophy has been considered existentialist by most who read him, and it is through this viewpoint that in even one respect Kierkegaard’s views diverge from Hegel’s. As Olivia Blanchette writes concerning Fear and Trembling: “What distinguishes it from purely Hegelian philosophy is that it insists on passion rather than reflection as the basis for movement, on an existential leap rather than mediation...” (42). Abraham’s choice rests in his love for God,

and it is through God and the suspension of the ethical that he makes this choice. He also makes this decision alone, and as I will discuss later, through choosing in despair to murder his son for God he chooses himself and God and by this, gets to keep Isaac. Although Hegel's philosophy can be found in certain ways in Kierkegaard's writings, Kierkegaard himself took up the religious view in order to not only defend his notions of faith and despair, but also to philosophically describe what he thought was missing from Danish society at the time.

Kierkegaard's writings, while much of the time coming from different pseudonyms compared to his own name, carry a number of different messages across. While only two works, Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, will be primarily covered in this paper, Kierkegaard's numerous books, papers and journals offer a detailed and often varied look into the philosophy and thoughts of this Danish Christian philosopher. Although Kierkegaard's writing contains flaws that do limit his viewpoints credibility, which will be discussed later, he nonetheless provides an intricate look into a way of thinking and living that through his various pseudonyms and works he tried to, in narrative fashion, illustrate not only for the literary community of the time, but for the world his viewpoints and varied interactions with faith, despair, and Christianity as a whole. "...and out of that preoccupation came two remarkable books, one of which...would alone 'be enough to immortalize my name as an author'." (Hannay, Biography, 188). Despair, in Kierkegaard's life and writings, remains only a token element of a bigger picture of religion and existential philosophy that Kierkegaard not only lived, but utilized in order to establish his role in philosophical history. Kierkegaard's pseudonyms played a large role in this, and in particular Johannes de silentio and Anti Climacus here have specific relevance to understanding their role in revealing despair to be a religious choice.

1.3 The Pseudonyms: Johannes de silentio and Anti Climacus

It is important to note from the onset that the views and writings written by Johannes de silentio, of Fear and Trembling, and Anti Climacus' The Sickness Unto Death do not necessarily represent Kierkegaard's views. There were specific reasons not only for the choice in names Kierkegaard picked, but also for the reason he used pseudonyms at all. Most of Kierkegaard's works are written under pseudonyms, with a few exceptions that were written under his name. I would like here to briefly explore the two pseudonyms at work in relevance to this paper, Johannes de silentio and Anti Climacus, as well as their role in the bigger picture of Kierkegaard's decision to employ pseudonyms.

Johannes de silentio maintains a distinct relationship to Fear and Trembling which is different from that of Anti Climacus' to his work. "Johannes de silentio owes his name fully as much to the fact that in many respects the book has chosen as its theme *silence*...he writes not only *from* silence, but also *about* silence." (Garff, original emphasis, 190). Johannes de silentio, John of or from silence, stands in a distinct relationship to the central theme he is writing about. It is paradoxical in considering that in talking about silence, there is so much to say outside of silence. "Despite the silence inscribed in his name...Johannes de silentio is a particularly talkative fellow...reveals how inadequately he relates himself to Abraham's silence." (Garff, 190). Johannes de silentio's relationship to the text he is writing is a special one that he is placing himself, as the writer, in a specific relationship to Abraham and his choice, a primary focus of the text.

Johannes' relationship to Abraham and his choice is revealed further on in the text, after the preliminary discussion of Abraham's choice and movement. "Abraham I cannot understand...I can learn nothing from him except to be amazed." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 31).

Johannes de silentio, as the author, cannot understand Abraham in the fullness of his choice and his movement in faith. Johannes as the author begins the book with a description of the hero and the poet, and this is how he appears to view his relationship to Abraham: as a poet to a hero, one of fascination but not of action. "...so he [God] fashioned the hero and the poet or orator. The latter can do nothing the former does, he can only admire, love, and rejoice in the hero."

(Kierkegaard, F&T, 12). Johannes de silentio stands in awe of Abraham, and as the imagery of the poet surfaces, we see Johannes write more and more about the choice Abraham has made while still remaining distant.

Anti Climacus maintains a different kind of relationship to The Sickness Unto Death than Johannes' to Fear and Trembling. Rather than follow the styling that Johannes applies to Fear and Trembling, Anti Climacus instead separates The Sickness Unto Death into two major sections, Part A 'The Despair Is the Sickness Unto Death' and Part B 'Despair is Sin.' Anti Climacus also never refers to himself in the work, as contrasted by Johannes de silentio's positioning of himself in relation to Abraham. Rather, Anti Climacus wants to make known the position of despair in a Christian sense and how deeply despair runs in relation to the self.

Anti Climacus maintains a distinct relationship to his work that differs from Johannes de silentio. At the same time, he still remains a pseudonym for Kierkegaard, and thus his words remain his own to an extent.

"In the case of Anti Climacus and 'Sickness,' the decision seems to be in fact due to last minute scruples about the immodesty and plain unrealism of supposing himself to qualify, from just his own suffering, to speak on such an elevated level on behalf of Christianity." (Hannay, Biography, 384).

The employment of Anti Climacus as the writer and force behind The Sickness Unto Death could be for a number of reasons, but it stands to reason that Kierkegaard saw it fit to posit such a distinct analysis not only of despair but of Christianity in the hands of one whose name

ironically means ‘anti-climactic.’ Whether or not he did so because he felt his own personal viewpoint would hinder the formation of such an analysis, is unclear. However, Kierkegaard nonetheless chose Anti Climacus to write The Sickness Unto Death and, as the author, to stand in the distinct relationship of author to subject matter that is distinct from others such as de silentio’s.

Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms isn’t unheard of in literature but is quite uncommon in philosophy. Although there are various theories and reasons why he did use some or might have chosen others instead of his own authorship, as it stands he has written much of his work under a pseudonym.

“Kierkegaard’s constant indecision in these matters even before the ‘Explanation’ belies the widely held view that the use of pseudonymity in itself is the implementing of some deep strategy, the application of a coherent theory of indirect communication, or the launching of a new form of philosophical literature.” (Hannay, Biography, 384).

Although it appears as though there is a strategy at work in choosing to write different works not only in different styles but under different names, Kierkegaard’s central role as the pen behind these authors remains intact. He wrote all of the works, and he applied to each writing a specific name to characterize a viewpoint from which Kierkegaard was expressing an idea. Although there are numerous reasons behind each individual choice of pseudonym, the writing remains Kierkegaard’s.

Kierkegaard’s writing in Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death differ greatly not only in their style, content, and authorship, but also in their direct message. Kierkegaard “...addresses his books to the existing individual in order to help him to come to terms with his own existence.” (Elrod, 222). Despite the variation in authorship and content, Kierkegaard is still striving to reveal something in particular. What he seeks to reveal to us is the definition of faith,

which Anti Climacus gives us at the end of The Sickness Unto Death:

“...in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula, in turn, as has been frequently pointed out, is the definition of faith.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 131).

Kierkegaard’s notion of faith takes hold in both Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, and both Johannes de silentio and Anti Climacus approach it differently. Despair is a large factor in faith, and as both Abraham and Anti Climacus know, it is necessary to despair as a choice in the self before God in order to achieve faith. In choosing despair, we make the movement towards faith, and as we shall see next, in Fear and Trembling Abraham makes this choice before even ascending Mount Moriah.

Chapter 2: Understanding Fear and Trembling

Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling is a unique work in many different regards, not only amongst his other writings but also in philosophy itself. Fear and Trembling flows from Johannes de silentio's relating of the story and Abraham and its consequences for faith in particular. He makes numerous bold claims, some of which will be addressed here, that argue in favor of showing that Abraham made his choice to sacrifice his son, Isaac, simply because God commanded him to. Johannes de silentio does not hold back anything; he allows numerous historical figures in addition to a variety of ideas and notions to populate Fear and Trembling. In doing so, he seeks to ultimately reveal the paradox of faith that Abraham, as the father of faith, sought to carry out.

Johannes de silentio begins Fear and Trembling with four different interpretations of the Abraham story. Each is entirely distinct in not only the story told, but the message meant to be taken away from each vision differs between the four. He includes, after each variation of the Abraham story, a unique analogy that compares the relationship of a child to its mother in light of the Abraham stories message. "When the child is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast, for it would indeed be a shame for the breast to look delightful when the child must not have it." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 9). In this analogy, Johannes is seeking to show how the mother attempts to disguise her breast so the child will be repulsed by it. This is just one example of the type of explanation de silentio wants to give, but is trying to reveal through more commonly understood ways that what Abraham did was simply impossible for Johannes de silentio to fully comprehend.

The next section of Fear and Trembling is dedicated to a tribute to Abraham. Johannes de silentio claims that:

“...Abraham was greater than everybody – great by the power whose strength is powerlessness, great by that wisdom whose secret is folly, great by that hope whose form is madness, great by that love which is hatred of oneself.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 14).

From this quote, Abraham’s greatness appears steeped in paradox: how is he strong in being powerless, or by a love that comes from hating himself? Abraham’s strength, according to de silentio, is simple: it was his unwavering faith in God. “But Abraham believed and did not doubt; he believed the preposterous.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 17). Abraham is great because of his belief that even in following God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, ultimately everything God had promised him would still be his. This faith is precisely what Johannes de silentio is focusing on: Abraham’s role as the father of faith based on an absurd, ludicrous understanding of what it means to have true faith in God.

Johannes de silentio wastes little time jumping into his problems concerning Abraham’s decision. He focuses the book on three problems: “is there a teleological suspension of the ethical...is there an absolute duty to God...and was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his undertaking...” (Kierkegaard, F&T, v). All three of these problems focus on a particular aspect of Abraham’s movement of faith in climbing Mount Moriah. In Johannes de silentio’s initial outpouring on Abraham, he appears at a loss in the face of Abraham’s story.

“The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he intended to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he intended to sacrifice Isaac. But in this contradiction lies precisely the anxiety that indeed can make a person sleepless, and yet Abraham is not who he is without this anxiety.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 24).

Johannes de silentio here makes one of the first references to Abraham as being a murderer in the eyes of the ethical; this will be approached in more detail further in the chapter. However, it remains important to keep this in mind when attempting to understand just how paradoxical and absurd Abraham’s situation and story are.

It is precisely because of this paradox that Johannes de silentio cannot understand Abraham. "...when I must think about Abraham, I am virtually annihilated. At every moment I am aware of that prodigious paradox which is the content of Abraham's life; at every moment I am repelled..." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 27). His goal with this section of Fear and Trembling is to orient the reader to his position to Abraham, and why his position is limited to the role of the poet as was discussed earlier. He cannot be the hero Abraham is, and can only praise him in the text while attempting to explain how Abraham's despair was simply a part of his faith in God that withstood the test God gave him.

The first problem as stated above focuses on Abraham's supposed teleological suspension of the ethical. Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac goes against any form of ethical conduct: for the father to take his son's life, Abraham is a murderer in the eyes of the ethical. "The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone..." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 46). Johannes de silentio claims that Abraham's act is outside of this ethical / universal level, unlike that of the tragic hero such as Agamemnon, because he makes a private and individual choice in deciding to sacrifice Isaac. "It is not to save a people...not to appease angry gods that Abraham does it...while the tragic hero is therefore great by his ethical virtue, Abraham is great by a purely personal virtue." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 52). Abraham defies the ethical level in order to satisfy God's will, a higher perceived calling than the human ethical standard. It is because of his despair, his choice to believe in God steadfastly that allows him to suspend the ethical.

The second problem Johannes de silentio seeks to answer is that of an absolute duty to God. Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son to God is tied into this question, such that Abraham was fulfilling his duty to God. "The absolute duty may then bring one to do

what ethics would forbid, but it can never make the knight of faith stop loving. Abraham demonstrates this.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 65). This problem introduces us to the movement of infinite resignation, and how Abraham makes this movement as a knight of faith, whereas the tragic hero cannot do this. The absolute duty to God stems from an absolute faith and love in God, which Abraham fulfills by completing the movement of infinite resignation on Mount Moriah.

The third and final problem is concerned with Abraham’s silence in speaking to Sarah or anyone else concerning what God had asked of him. To do so, he returns to a few characters to help illustrate the reason for Abraham’s silence, most notably Agnes and the merman. Johannes de silentio is attempting to show by this story how Abraham’s silence is essential to his despair in choice to sacrifice Isaac. “Abraham keeps silent – but he *cannot* speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, original emphasis, 100). Johannes de silentio further claims that Abraham, in order to remain outside of the ethical, cannot share his dilemma with anyone, including Sarah. His concealment is what allows him to make this highly personal choice; if he had any sort of input to guide him, he would only be a tragic hero the likes of Agamemnon.

Fear and Trembling attempts to deal with numerous issues surrounding the events and circumstances of Abraham’s decision to kill his own son for God’s command. Various aspects of Johannes de silentio’s discussion focus in on Abraham’s trial, and how best to understand the absurdity that surrounds the paradox that is Abraham’s choice and faith.

“Kierkegaard meant Fear and Trembling to be an encoded message to all those capable of seeing beyond its surface treatment of Abraham’s singular trial to a more universal message concerning our common failure before the stringency of God’s moral demands and our shared need for God’s grace.” (Green, 204).

Johannes de silentio cleverly does hide Green's idea under the guise of an exposition of Abraham. He claims he cannot make the movement himself, and ultimately, falls short of Abraham's ideality: "I can well endure living in my own fashion, I am happy and content, but my joy is not that of faith and in comparison with that is really unhappy." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 28). Johannes de silentio therefore commits himself to the poet he sees himself as, and praises Abraham from afar as the hero. Fear and Trembling succeeds in revealing how Johannes de silentio and Abraham both convey the experience of what it truly means to have faith.

Fear and Trembling as the first book to be examined in this project will be divided into three distinct but intertwined aspects: one of Abraham's silence, one of his choice against that of the tragic heroes (the teleological suspension of the ethical), and one ultimately concerned with faith. Kierkegaard wrote Fear and Trembling to show us a view of faith compared with the absurd story of Abraham, the father of faith. The uniqueness of his message, expressed through Johannes de silentio, manages to show us how Abraham underwent a trial by choice. He willingly chose despair in following God's will to sacrifice his son Isaac. Numerous issues regarding the ethics of this situation, including the notion of Abraham as a murderer, will be addressed shortly. First, however let us look at the distinctness of Abraham's choice, in silence.

2.1 Abraham in Silence

Abraham's ascension of Mount Moriah in the Biblical story is told by Kierkegaard and through Johannes de silentio as a story of silence and personal tribulation. Johannes de silentio claims that Abraham's silence is a key to understanding how he foregoes the ethical to make the choice placed before him by God himself. In order to further understand this, I wish to present to the audience here the only textual reference in Fear and Trembling to the Biblical text from which the story of Abraham may be found.

“And God tested Abraham and said to him, take Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering upon a mountain that I will show you.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 8).

Kierkegaard includes this text at the beginning of Fear and Trembling, during his initial sequence of the four variations of the story that was mentioned earlier in the last section. He includes the short reference before the first variation, and subsequently does not include any further information from the Biblical text aside from this. The seemingly apparent brevity and vagueness of the text here merely show God's command to Abraham, and while we know the outcome, it a very short amount of text to account for considering the scope of the attempt Fear and Trembling is making.

Kierkegaard follows from these variations into the account of admiration and praise for Abraham, as was also mentioned in the previous section. Abraham's decision to climb Mount Moriah and his apparent willingness to sacrifice Isaac are decisions he makes silently, without consulting Sarah or anyone else. Abraham's silence is best summed up by Santurri (1977):

“In short, Abraham must remain silent about his act because he is unable to categorize it; he is unable to express that act in words, which by their very nature are universal, which have application not only to a particular object but to all objects alike in relevant respects.” (231).

The understanding of language here is important, and gives a hint as to why Abraham must remain silent. According to Santurri above, by their own nature words and therefore language are a part of the universal, and as such are inappropriate for Abraham. He cannot categorize something that is outside the scope of the ability of language. Abraham's act is compared to that of Agnes and the merman by Johannes de silentio in the third problem, and I would like to take this opportunity to address briefly the story of Agnes and the Merman in order to allow further consideration of Abraham's plight.

“The merman was a seducer. He has called to Agnes and by his smooth talk has elicited what was concealed within her. She has found in the merman what she was seeking, what she was looking for down at the bottom of the sea. Agnes is willing to follow him...she trustingly abandons herself with her whole heart to the stronger one. He is already standing on the beach, bending out over the water to dive down with his prey...she entrusts her entire destiny to him with this look...nature's passion, which is the merman's strength, leaves him in the lurch...he cannot seduce Agnes...only as prey can she become his...”
(Kierkegaard, F&T, 82-83).

Johannes de silentio includes the story of Agnes and the merman as just one example to compare with the plight of Abraham and how despite similarities, Abraham's story is unique and far different in scope than any other. In this story, the merman manages to seduce Agnes, to an extent, but finds that because she believes in him, trusts him, that he is ultimately powerless. She cannot be his as a lover, only as prey, as any other girl would be. But in Agnes belief, he has lost his power.

This story is unique for its take on the choice of the merman what to do in regards to Agnes, and how this choice in particular applies to Abraham's own choice. Johannes de silentio uses this story to show how the merman's torment relates to that of Abraham and that both despair, however, differently, which in turn reveals the difference in the relationship between the two stories. “The merman stands at a dialectical apex...he can hold himself back and remain in

concealment but not rely on his ingenuity...or he can be saved by Agnes.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 86). The merman is seen here as placed between two opposing choices: to conceal himself or allow himself to be saved by Agnes by revealing himself. The result is that the merman as the single individual is caught in a paradox, one in which he can speak to Agnes, but he is not sure of what to do.

Johannes de silentio uses this story precisely to show the relationship of the individual to the universal, and the paradoxes role in this. Abraham’s silence on Mount Moriah stands to show that he had to wrestle with a similar choice to the merman, but also how very different his choice was. “So Abraham did not speak...he did not speak to Sarah, to Eliezer, or to Isaac. He bypassed these three ethical agents, for the ethical had no higher expression than family life for Abraham.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 99). Abraham’s silence was meant to conceal his trial as well as to suspend the ethical from his trial. By doing so, he was able to keep his trial personal and private between him and God, as the “...single individual who as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute...” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 98). Abraham placed himself and only himself in a relationship to God, and as such, succeeded in suspending the ethical.

Agnes and the merman as such remains one story out of many included in Fear and Trembling to help to explain the privacy and one-on-one choice Abraham made with respect to God. The merman had the choice to speak, and as such, could only hope to be saved by Agnes by disclosing who he was. As such, the merman as the individual had to repent his wrongs and hope to be saved. This is not the case with Abraham, who “...did not become the single individual through sin; on the contrary, he was the righteous man who is God’s chosen one.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 86). This is a significant part of the difference between Abraham and the merman; the merman is a seducer, who happens to lose to Agnes’ belief in him, whereas Abraham is the

chosen one of God who through his belief in him is able to do to absurd. They may be similar, but Abraham and the merman express the same problem from a different point of view. Abraham “...Abraham and the merman are counterparts, positive and negative expressions of the same problem. Both have suspended the ethical, one by obedience and one by sin...” (Green, 202). Abraham makes the movements necessary for faith, but the common element between him and the merman is that they are both the individual who suspends the ethical. Abraham’s trial bears a few similarities to the merman’s; however, it is only Abraham in his silence that completes the movement of faith.

Johannes de silentio’s name is also important for understanding the silence of Abraham, as was mentioned in the previous section covering Johannes de silentio and Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms as a whole. I would like to briefly state that John of silence introduces “...himself and his book with the pathos of distance.” (Garff, 189). This distancing is what allows the book to maintain its mark; by explaining the Abraham story, Johannes de silentio is remaining outside it specifically because he is the poet in relation to the hero. He can only praise Abraham’s work, even though he does not understand Abraham. Abraham’s silence is what keeps him outside of the ethical along with his belief in God, but Johannes de silentio has much to say about an event in which nothing was said nor could be said in the first place.

Abraham’s movement of faith in silence is only one aspect of understanding his despair in choosing to sacrifice his son. He had numerous opportunities in which he could have tried to save Isaac, but he did not, and as will be explained shortly, he made both the movement of infinite resignation and the movement of faith. “Abraham cannot speak, for he cannot say that which would explain everything (i.e. so it is intelligible), that it is a trial, of a sort, mind you, in which the ethical is the *temptation*.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, my emphasis, 101). This temptation lies

in Abraham's family being his highest ethical priority, as quoted earlier. It would be ethical to talk to Sarah, or Isaac, about his struggle with this decision. It would be outside of Abraham's relationship with God to place his choice into human, ethical hands. This is precisely what Abraham does not do, according to Kierkegaard, and as a result he maintains his belief in God and, in the end, keeps Isaac as the result of his test of faith.

Abraham's silence is just one aspect of his trial. He could not divulge what he was going to do, because ethically, as will be discussed next, he was a murderer for attempting to kill his son. He made the movement of infinite resignation and of faith because in the absurdity of the choice he was making, he fully believed that despite himself, God would not take Isaac from him. It is because of this private and silent, existentially bound trial that Abraham is who he is and maintains the title of Knight of Faith, and as we shall see, he stands in stark contrast to numerous ethical tragic heroes.

2.2 Tragic Heroes, the Movements, and Religious Choice

Johannes de silentio's analysis of Abraham's choice compares him to numerous historical and literature based figures. Among these are the tragic heroes, which Johannes de silentio argues are similar to Abraham in a few respects, but ultimately fall short in comparison.

"Abraham is therefore at no moment a tragic hero but something entirely different, either a murderer or a believer. Abraham lacks the middle term that saves the tragic hero. That is why I can understand a tragic hero but cannot understand Abraham..." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 49). This depiction of Abraham as either a murderer or a believer is specifically what separates him from the tragic hero, so let us consider the notion of Abraham as either a murderer or a believer.

The notion of considering Abraham as a murderer can be accomplished by removing the justification he carried with him in doing so: faith. "For if faith is taken away...all that remains is the brutal fact that Abraham intended to murder Isaac..." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 24). Abraham's action is only seen as righteous or astounding because he had faith. Without it, he did intend to kill Isaac, but his belief that what he was doing was for God and out of love for God is what makes him a believer and not a murderer. "God puts Abraham in a double bind, a violent chiasmus: if Abraham is faithful to the Law, he contaminates the Command; but if he obeys the Command of God (the sacrifice), he denounces, or dispels, the Law." (Walther, 758). Abraham is given a choice between disobeying God and disobeying the law, and he chooses to disobey the law and commit himself to kill his son for God.

Abraham being seen as a murderer in the eyes of the ethical is partly due to his being alone in this decision. Outside of the universal, Abraham's act was solely his own with no consequences for society at large. However, by choosing to kill his son because he believed in God, Abraham makes both movements associated with being a Knight of Faith. What

specifically differentiates him from the tragic heroes? “What distances Abraham from any Greek or Shakespearean hero is his relation to ‘the absurd.’” (Walther, 759). Abraham, unlike the tragic heroes, is faced with the absurd when he makes his choice. Simply put, he must murder his son for the God who also promised him that son and countless descendants from him. The absurdity of the situation, coupled with Abraham’s own seemingly absurd choice to do so privately, are what separates him from all of the tragic heroes and reveal him to be a believer and not a murderer.

The tragic heroes Johannes de silentio mentions are varied in place and situation, but all of their respective stories have a similar outcome for the tragic hero and society at large. Johannes de silentio’s references to Brutus, Agamemnon and Jephthah are stark examples of what defines a tragic hero, and also reveal how distinctly Abraham is not one of them.

“When that brave judge who saved Israel in the hour of need binds God and himself in one breath by the same vow...and all Israel will grieve...but every freeborn man will understand, every stouthearted woman will admire Jephthah, and every maiden in Israel will wish to act as his daughter did, for what is the use of Jephthah having conquered by means of his vow if he did not intend to keep it?” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 50).

The situation Jephthah faced above is highly similar to those of Agamemnon and Brutus: all of them had to sacrifice a child, by varying circumstances, in order to maintain their society. In Jephthah’s case, he made a vow to God to sacrifice the first thing that left his home in order to achieve a war victory, but that thing turned out to be his daughter. Yet Israel understood his dilemma and mourned with him, understood why it needed to be done. The same can be said of Agamemnon and Brutus: they both sacrificed their children for the sake of ethical good: Agamemnon, that the Greek ships could cross the sea, and Brutus, to maintain order in Rome. All three of these figures gave up a tremendous sacrifice that is both tragic and heroic in the eyes of the public.

This is, however, the crucial moment that separates the tragic hero from Abraham, or him from them. “The tragic hero still remains within the ethical.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 51). The tragic hero here is undergoing a trial but it is for the betterment of their respective societies; Jephthah made a vow to God that he must keep in order to maintain Israel’s victory; Agamemnon offered his daughter as sacrifice for winds to move the Greek ships across the ocean; and Brutus sacrificed his sons who wished to overthrow him in order to maintain balance in Rome. All of these three had in mind the ethical value of their choice; if they had decided to do so for a private struggle, none would understand them or their position. “If upon being asked why they did it these three men had answered, ‘it is a trial in which we are being tested,’ would then anyone have understood them better?” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 51). Their trials are based on their interactions with the public and ethical sphere, which Abraham suspends in his choice. His silence and his private trial are elements of his faith in God that the tragic heroes do not exemplify and as such, do not defy the ethical for.

The specificity and isolation of Abraham’s act are a significant part of what separates him from the tragic heroes.

“By his act he transcended the whole of the ethical and had a higher teleos outside, in relation to which he suspended it. For I would certainly like to know how Abraham’s act can be brought into relation to the universal, whether any connection can be discovered between what Abraham did and the universal other than that Abraham overstepped it. It is not to save a people, not to uphold the idea of the state, not to appease the angry gods that Abraham does it.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 52).

Abraham is fully isolated in his choice; he has not conscious society to inform him that what he is doing is for the benefit of many at the expense of one. He is, in effect, answering only to himself and to God. Why does he do this? “He does it for God’s sake because God demands proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 52).

Abraham's justification for murdering his son is his faith in God. He believes in God and the goodness of God and because he believes in that, he is willing to prove it by sacrificing his son at God's command. He remains isolated from everyone else; he does not confer in Sarah, Isaac, or Eliezer. He has no societal gain to accomplish by sacrificing his son to God, unlike the tragic heroes. What truly sets Abraham apart is that he does all of this by completing the two necessary movements of the Knight of faith: the movement of infinite resignation and the movement of faith.

The movement of infinite resignation is the first movement that Abraham makes, in a sense. Johannes de silentio introduces the notion of the movement of infinite resignation with the story of a knight who must give up his princess.

“He has grasped the deep secret that even in loving another person one must be self-sufficient. He pays no further finite attention to what the princess does, and precisely this proves that he has made the movement infinitely.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 36).

This movement suggests that the knight has resigned himself to love the princess so much, he is able to tear himself from her. His love for her escapes the finite, and so long as his resignation is resolute, he has made the movement infinitely. This is precisely what Abraham does. “In infinite resignation there is peace and rest; every person who wills it...can discipline himself to make this movement, which in its pain reconciles one with existence.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 38). Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son is not out of hatred for him; it is actually the greatest possible expression of love he can give him, and this is another part of the paradox that is Abraham's life.

This movement is the same movement that the tragic hero makes. He is willing to sacrifice his child because he does love them, and sees it as either honorable or necessary to do so to appease the gods, maintain a stable society, or keep a promise to God. However, all of these

heroes are praised for their actions, and as was quote before, the sacrifice of the individual would be viewed in positive light as well. Abraham does not have this societal or moral conviction; he has only his faith in God and the righteousness of his love and command. What separates him from the others, above and beyond the separation of Abraham from society, is his faith.

The movement of infinite resignation must come before faith, but it is tied to faith.

“Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that whoever not made this movement does not have faith. For only in infinite resignation for I become transparent to myself in my eternal validity, and only then can there be talk of laying hold of existence by virtue of faith.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 39).

Faith is the result of the movement of infinite resignation. Abraham resigned his love to Isaac, loved him far more than any love based in the temporal, and it is because of this love that Abraham was willing to sacrifice him. Abraham’s movement of faith is specifically tied to his belief in God’s goodness and promises. He fully believes that everything God has told him and promised him will be given to him, even as he raises the knife to kill Isaac.

“But it takes a paradoxical and humble courage next to grasp the whole of temporality by virtue of the absurd, and this is the courage of faith. By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac, but by faith Abraham received Isaac.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, 42).

It is by faith that Abraham gets to keep Isaac, as Johannes puts it, he ‘receives’ him. Abraham willingly went to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son for God, but by doing so he was not renouncing his son, but rather proving his love for him in a way that transcends the finite. He did this movement in resignation and faith, and by these, he received his son. His silence tells all, in this regard: “But from Abraham’s point of view it is certainly an irony than miraculously says what it has to say by not saying it.” (Walther, 775). The silence of Abraham’s ordeal is tied to his faith in God from beginning to end. He does not falter, and because of this, he makes a religious choice that allows him to receive Isaac.

Abraham's religious choice is anchored in despair, yet he still goes through with the plan without a word. He suspends the ethical in order to prove his faith to God.

“In Fear and Trembling... make the case that there is a justified religious interiority and that such is shown in the Akedah... outwardly Abraham would murder Isaac according to the universal while inwardly by faith he would sacrifice him.” (Perkins, 165).

Abraham's choice is distinctly religious. He does everything out of faith in God and the goodness of God. His despair stems from his having to kill his son, but it allows him to reach God, by the movement of infinite resignation, through his own transparency and relation to himself and to God. There is not social or ethical level in Abraham's choice: he is in despair because the choice is all his and his alone. He is in despair because God asks of him the one thing he had always wanted and had faith he would keep. His despair, however, is nothing compared to his faith, which allows him to make the movement of infinite resignation with ease, to complete the movement of faith, and ultimately, to receive Isaac.

Abraham's choice is complicated, but it is by virtue of his belief that he is not a murderer but is in fact the father of faith. Abraham defies the ethical by overstepping it; his faith allows him to enter into the relation as the individual with God as the absolute. His willingness to follow God's command is proof of his faith. Abraham's choice is highly personal and ultimately reflective of his faith. “Abraham's God offers Abraham not the choice of good and evil, but the choice of two evils: either he breaks the covenant or he must bind Isaac.” (Perkins, 175). The tragic hero's choice is one of ethical constraints: he can either let his people suffer or he can sacrifice one for the sake of many, who will understand and celebrate such a sacrifice for the sake of the public good. Abraham's choice is not like this; he must either disobey God or disobey the law. Without question, without a word, Abraham defies the law in relation to God to prove his love and his faith.

2.3 Faith and Despair in Abraham's Choice

Fear and Trembling is one of Kierkegaard's distinguishing works that focuses in trial of Abraham and the role of faith in his story. Faith is crucial to Fear and Trembling and justifying Abraham's decision: without faith, Abraham is a murderer. "If one denies that this form can be repeated in such a way that it is not sin, then judgment has fallen upon Abraham. How then did Abraham exist? He believed." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 54). Abraham proves himself by his belief in God. Unlike the tragic heroes, Abraham is not justified in the ethical realm. According to ethics, Abraham is a murderer who killed his son. He was alone and committed himself to this act alone. The tragic hero, in contrast, did his act in the ethical realm and as such was praised for his 'sacrifice.' However, Abraham made his choice religiously: he never faltered in his faith in God. His choice came from despair in losing his son, but by having faith in God, he was able to make the movements and successfully prove that faith.

Johannes de silentio ends Fear and Trembling with a powerful claim: "Either there is then a paradox, that the single individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham is lost." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 106). The paradox of faith appears in various levels to Abraham, yet he still follows God's command. On one level, that God would even ask of this of Abraham appears absurd. On another, more intimate level, Abraham's willingness to comply with God's command to sacrifice (in faith) or to murder (according to ethics) Isaac is seemingly absurd. Numerous questions arise from this trial: why would God command this? Why would Abraham comply? The paradox of the single individual being greater than the universal seems to defy reason, and that is precisely what Johannes de silentio is arguing for. Faith is something greater than the ethical, the universal. Faith is something extremely personal and private with God, and Abraham is the father of faith for a good reason. He had faith, and he

believed. It is through the absurdity of believing in God during his trial that makes Abraham great, and why Johannes de silentio cannot understand him.

Abraham's choice is one of despair. He had only Isaac in his older age to carry on the legacy that God promised him. Yet God asked him for Isaac, who Abraham loved, as a sacrifice. How could he not despair? Abraham's choice was made by isolating himself from the ethical, suspending it as it were, and ultimately, by following through on God's command. "Abraham cannot speak because he has nothing meaningful to say." (Santurri, 234). He remains silent and does not confide in Sarah: there is nothing to say. He firmly believes in God, and firmly believes he will get to keep Isaac despite willingly climbing the mountain to sacrifice him, even raising the knife to kill him. He still believes, without a doubt, that God's word is true and that he meant his promise to him. It is because of this faith, this belief that Abraham ultimately gets to keep Isaac.

Abraham's trial is a specific example of a particular phenomenon: choosing despair to validate oneself eternally. Abraham makes this choice by not talking to Sarah, by climbing Mount Moriah, and by raising the knife. He was committed to God, and was even willing to kill his son to prove that love. He believed in faith, and that faith that he held onto throughout is what gave him Isaac back. He did not climb the mountain to save a people or to satisfy some other ethical obligation. He climbed the mountain for God and to prove to God, fully, that despite the absurdity of the situation he would obey him. He was not a tragic hero but a Knight of Faith, and his love for his son was stronger than any other kind of love, so much that he would give him up to God because of his faith in God. This is what makes Abraham great, and allows us and Johannes de silentio to admire him.

“...he will never forget that you needed a hundred years to get a son of your old age contrary to expectation, that you had to draw the knife before you kept Isaac;

he will never forget that in a hundred and thirty years you got no further than *faith*.” (Kierkegaard, F&T, my emphasis, 20).

Abraham is great because he had faith. Despite the paradox, despite the absurdity he made both the movement of infinite resignation and the movement of faith in one leap, suspending the ethical for the sake of God. He despaired, and he got to receive Isaac back.

Abraham represents a specific example of choosing despair. In doing so, he made the movement of infinite resignation and of faith. But nonetheless, he despaired in his choice as a father who was asked to sacrifice his son to God. Despair as choice is here exemplified in Abraham, but it is also a radically different way of viewing selfhood as well. Abraham had a private and very individual relationship to God as the absolute through his choice, something the tragic heroes did not have. This relationship to the self started with Abrahams willing to be himself, which was God’s faithful servant. He loved God and believed in him every step of the way, even as he held the knife above Isaac. He chose himself and he chose God by his choice, and his ceaseless faith won him Isaac. This willing of the self, exemplified in the example of Abraham, is just a partial element of despair. As I will next explain, it is in The Sickness Unto Death that despair is fully examined in its relationship to faith. Abraham made a choice, and as Anti Climacus will show us, despair as a choice is necessary for faith.

Chapter 3: The Sickness unto Death is Despair

Kierkegaard's The Sickness Unto Death was written after Fear and Trembling, and under the pseudonym of Anti Climacus instead of Johannes de silentio. While Johannes de silentio's work focused primarily on the trial of Abraham and the role of faith in understanding that trial, Anti Climacus' work in The Sickness Unto Death is far different in writing style. Anti Climacus' work, rather than the dialectical lyric Johannes de silentio writes, is much more direct and philosophical in writing. But at the same time, it bears a similar sort of overall message to the one found in Fear and Trembling.

“It is Christian heroism – a rarity, to be sure – to venture wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being, alone before God, alone in this prodigious strenuousness and this prodigious responsibility...all Christian knowing, however rigorous its form, ought to be concerned, but this concern is precisely the upbuilding.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 5).

Even though The Sickness Unto Death differs in many ways from Fear and Trembling, not the least of them in its direction, tone and content, but at the same time, it carries with it a sense of Christian responsibility that can be seen in Fear and Trembling. This responsibility ultimately concerns faith, which is a significant aspect of despair as Anti Climacus points out. The Sickness Unto Death is directly aimed at Christians and focuses in on despair as a significant part of this.

“This is the way a person always gains courage; when he fears a greater danger, he always has the courage to face a lesser one; when he is exceedingly afraid of one danger, it is as if the others did not exist at all. But the most appalling danger that the Christian has learned to know is ‘the sickness unto death.’” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 9).

The Sickness Unto Death is focused on understanding this danger, on pointing out to Christians what it is they are most afraid of and as a result, what it means for a Christian to ultimately have faith.

The Sickness Unto Death is divided into two parts: the first part, which will be discussed shortly, focuses strictly on the nature of despair and everything that encompasses it. Part two, the primary goal of the section after that, looks closely at sin and its relationship to despair, in a way that is precisely Christian. The last section of this chapter will deal with the overall message of Anti Climacus' work: namely, that faith is the most important result of the individual resting in their own self and the power that created it. This view of faith is similar to the one pronounced in Fear and Trembling, and as such, both chapters end with a discussion of faith to highlight its importance not only in each work individually, but as a unifying element between the two works and as a crucial point of interest in understanding despair as a choice.

The Sickness Unto Death carried with it a different kind of weight than Fear and Trembling, and part of this had to do with Kierkegaard's issues with the Danish church.

"*Sickness* there has still one more addressee, indeed probably its main one. The work is an attack on Christendom laid at, if not nailed to, the door of the Danish primate." (Hannay, Biography, 390). Much of Kierkegaard's works have a religious tone and message to them, but few carry the same distinct note of warning as The Sickness Unto Death.

"Then comes a moment in their lives – alas, this is their best time – when they begin to turn inward. Then, when they encounter their first difficulties, they turn away...and so they take off and soon forget that time...they are also Christians, reassured by the pastors of their salvation." (Kierkegaard, SUD, 57).

Anti Climacus' intent is to investigate the notion of despair and its relationship to sin and to faith, as not only a choice but as distinct forms of despair which can take hold. Kierkegaard's political agenda against the church was focused on showing them how far they had strayed from the true faith, and Anti Climacus is focused on despair as a choice to reveal the specific nature of the what it means to be a Christian.

The Sickness Unto Death revolves around Anti Climacus' notion of despair and how it weaves into the idea of selfhood. This is not too separate from Abraham and his decision to ascend Mount Moriah and sacrifice Isaac. The Sickness Unto Death however takes a much different approach to this problem and emphasizes a more general viewing of despair as a choice. Part two will show us that that choice is inseparable from the Christian way of life and that faith is undeniably tied together with Anti Climacus' notion of despair. Before this, however, we need to see specifically how Anti Climacus defines despair and understand the foundation for the rest of the work by examining Anti Climacus' understanding of despair.

3.1 Despair as Three Choices

The first part of The Sickness Unto Death contemplates the nature of despair itself. The initial claim to come from part one is oriented towards the idea of the individual and why there are three distinct forms of despair.

“If a human self had itself established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to will to be oneself. His second formulation is specifically the expression for the complete dependence of the relation (of the self), the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 14).

This forms a strong part of Anti Climacus claims early on in the book and for the rest of The Sickness Unto Death. Namely, that the self as an individual was established in its relation to the thing that created it; this argument is a precursor for Anti Climacus claims of God. The self cannot despair to will to be oneself if the self is self-established, but because it is not, it can despair in will to be itself, which is one of the choices of despair. These choices are mentioned above, but are each distinct from one another. The key feature of despair, then, is its relation to the relationship between the individual and the individual’s origin.

Despair takes on various forms for Anti Climacus, but he is intent on revealing the distinct nature of despair that is apparent in each of its forms. To do this, Anti Climacus focuses on the possibility versus the actuality of despair. “Every actual moment of despair is traceable to possibility; every moment he is in despair he *is bringing* it upon himself. It is always the present tense...” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 17). Despair is a constant for the individual, in the sense that so long as he is willing himself to despair, there is not a past tense in the sense of an origin. Rather, despair in this sense is a constant possibility that, when the individual wills it, is traceable to the individual. “The Sickness Unto Death makes it plain that there are forms of despair that do not

involve mental anguish...indeed, Anti Climacus...observes that happiness is despair's greatest hiding place." (Marino, 123). As was stated in the introduction using Marino's analysis, despair is far different from depression, and in a sense, the happiest person can still despair, whereas depression this would not be the case. Despair in this sense is multifaceted; not only can it hide in anguish, but it can hide in happiness as well. Despair is a unique and powerful element of Anti Climacus' notion of selfhood, and as we shall see, in its varied forms and understandings it is far more crucial than it at first appears.

Kierkegaard's journals offer a glimpse into his views on despair outside of his mainstream, published works. Although published posthumously, the thoughts he held on despair ring clearly and soundly compared with those of his pseudonym Anti Climacus. "The fact that to despair means something else entirely, that it means to lose the eternal, not to lose the earthly or anything earthly..." (Hong and Hong, 346). This idea of losing the eternal complies similarly with Anti Climacus' distinctions between the forms of despair, including regarding death. "Thus, from a Christian point of view, no earthly, physical sickness is the sickness unto death, for death is indeed the end of the sickness, but death is not the end." (Kierkegaard, SUD, 17). Anti Climacus is here trying to distinguish despair from other variations; for Christians, death is not the end, and by understanding further how he views despair in relation to death, we can further understand his view of despair in its relation to the self and the absolute.

To illustrate how despair can take hold of an individual, Anti Climacus introduces the example of a man who wishes to be Caesar. "For example, when the ambitious man whose slogan is 'Either Caesar or nothing' does not get to be Caesar, he despairs over it. But this also means something else: precisely because he did not get to be Caesar, he now cannot bear to be himself." (Kierkegaard, SUD, 19). For Anti Climacus, this is one of the initial aspects of being in

despair. This individual man cannot be Caesar, and he despairs over that, but in doing so, he is also despairing because he cannot be himself. His desire to be Caesar saw in himself something he was not content with being, and because he could not be Caesar, he despairs over being himself. “In a deeper sense, it is not his failure to become Caesar that is intolerable, but it is this self that did not become Caesar that is intolerable...what is intolerable to him is that he cannot get rid of himself.” (Kierkegaard, 19). The self at its core is unable to be destroyed by despair, and this is an important element of despair that Anti Climacus discusses. “For it is precisely over this that he despairs...that he cannot consume himself...cannot reduce himself to nothing. This is the formula for despair raised to a higher level, the rising fever in this sickness of the self.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 18-19). The individual self is incapable of being destroyed, and despite the security this provides, some such as for the individual who cannot be Caesar this is the cause of torment.

Anti Climacus’ next goal is to describe the universality of despair. Anti Climacus makes this section of part one apparent by discussing the difference between a sickness such that a doctor could attend to, and the nature of despair.

“The common view also overlooks that despair is dialectically different from what is usually termed a sickness, because it is a sickness of the spirit...despair is not only dialectically different from a sickness, but all its symptoms are also dialectical...not to be in despair can in fact signify precisely to be in despair, and it can signify having been rescued from being in despair.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 24).

It is in this sense that Anti Climacus sees despair: it is not a passing, fleeting sickness that can be treated with medicine, a doctor’s visit, or even just over time; it is a sickness of the spirit that even when it is not present, can be present. It is universal, not simple an illness, but a true sickness with dialectical symptoms. It is through the truth of despair, however, that Anti

Climacus claims we can find God in our relation to him. "...never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that 'he,' himself, his self, exists before this God – an infinite benefaction that is never gained except through despair." (Kierkegaard, SUD, 27). Despair as a sickness of the spirit then comes full circle to explain how we as individuals are spiritually sick by being apart from God. Despair is the path to God, and this process starts with the self.

Anti Climacus ends this section on the universality of despair by highlighting exactly how the universal element functions. He ends with a dissecting view of multiple types of extremes and differences, and in doing so is crafting exactly why despair, as a spiritual ailment, can be so completely severed from the world we are accustomed to.

"What wretchedness that they are lumped together and deceived instead of being split apart so that each individual may gain the highest, the only thing worth living for and enough to live for an eternity. I think that I could weep an eternity over the existence of such wretchedness!" (Kierkegaard, SUD, 27).

Here, Anti Climacus is proclaiming that the individual is indeed necessary to gain eternity and that by being kept inside of a group, a mass that is incapable of expressing itself to the highest order, God. This ties into the claim that despair is universal; if all people are falling into this 'wretchedness,' then indeed despair is a universal, spiritual sickness that is far removed from that of any physical ailment.

The final part of part one of The Sickness Unto Death focuses on the various forms of despair and arguments for and against them. This section is useful to elucidating Anti Climacus' goal of setting up despair to eventually, in part two, bear a relationship to sin and faith. In a small part of this section, Anti Climacus comes to the issue of silence and remarks: "For by maintaining silence, a person is thrown wholly upon himself..." (Kierkegaard, SUD, 34). Silence

pushes the person, the individual, into themselves; as it was with Abraham, the private and personal is maintained through silence, and silence allows us to relate more closely to ourselves. This notion of silent selfhood harks back to Fear and Trembling's portrayal of Abraham, and here is just a small example of the ties between them. The individual is the highest form before God; as Abraham proved his faith, so does the individual, through despair, choose himself and God.

Despair as a sickness of the spirit is tied in to the general point of view Anti Climacus is arguing for: despair as necessary for the realization of the infinite self. "Kierkegaard tries to convince us that any form of behavior that falls short of standing humbly before the source of all selfhood is an attempt not to do that." (Hannay, *Basic Despair*, 30). Despite all the trappings and viewpoints Anti Climacus argues for in regards to despair, it is noticeably apparent that the main theme is that of the self realizing itself in relation to the power that established it. This relational aspect is mentioned in the very first part of the book, and is maintained throughout: "The self is composed of infinitude and finitude. However, this synthesis is a relation...relates itself to itself, which is freedom. The self is freedom. But freedom is the dialectical aspect of the categories of possibility and necessity." (Kierkegaard, *SUD*, 29). The individual self is a relation between the mortal and immortal within us, our human elements and our self elements. However, the self is related to itself and cannot despair to will to be itself fully if it does not do so by finding the power that has established it.

We have seen that despair in its myriad forms and variations appears as a distinct and powerful notion of relating the self to God. In attempting to be Caesar, the ambitious man was unable to not only be Caesar (and despair), but was in despair over himself as well.

“In a way, I suspect, he is really claiming that any *striving* after a goal of selfhood at all is despair...to strive in this self improving way is to try and be a self that is *not* that of being a God-established self, and only the latter gives you the condition in which you can be rid of despair...I understand Kierkegaard’s *main* claim to be that the fundamental form that despair takes...is that of aiming at, or willingly accepting, specifications of selfhood that do *not* have the form of a selfhood established by God.” (Hannay, *Basic Despair*, 18).

This view of despair echoes Anti Climacus’ view in a different but same light: that despair is a willing, in any form, to not be the self that is established in God. Abraham was faithful to God, and in his despair, in Fear and Trembling, he retained his self in the eyes of God. The same can be said of the individual: the individual must not strive to be Caesar, or to not will to be oneself, or to attempt to be a self not established in God. It is in God that the self reaches itself; by relating to the creator of the relation, we fully establish our individual selves against God as the absolute and as the creator. It is in light of this view of despair, that the self is still the highest form in its relation to God, which we turn to the second half of The Sickness Unto Death. Faith and sin are crucial to the Christian, and it is through despair as a choice we can come to see how faith is truly a unique undertaking for the Christian self.

3.2 Sin and Despair

Anti Climacus begins part two of The Sickness Unto Death directly by describing what sin is in relation to despair. In writing part two, Anti Climacus seeks to establish the Christian doctrine of sin against the details provided in part one concerning despair, and precisely how the Christian comes to relate to faith through sin and despair. “Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself*. Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, original emphasis, 77). Anti Climacus, with this initial definition, has placed sin alongside despair in an attempt to unite the two together on common grounds; namely, the emphasis placed on being before God. It is the self’s relationship to the creator that breaks free of despair; but it is by being before God, as the Christian is, that an attempt to will not to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself, that resolutely results in sin as an intensification of despair.

Anti Climacus diverges from this initial viewpoint to talk about the poet-existence, which bears some similarities to Johannes de silentio’s views of himself as the poet in Fear and Trembling. However, in The Sickness Unto Death Anti Climacus instead takes a view of the poet as one who strives to create poetry and eternal images of the relationship to God but without making the movement out of despair that faith requires; in this sense, he feeds off of his own anguish and suffering by being separated from God. “He would like so very much to be himself before God, but with the exclusion of the fixed point where the self suffers; there in despair he does not will to be himself.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 77). Anti Climacus uses this idea of the poet existence to show how difficult faith can be, as Abraham also showed us. It is seemingly easy to fall into sin and despair because of the intense difficulty in relating ourselves directly back to God. It is from this point of view that Anti Climacus departs in order to understand what it truly means to be before God.

In order to understand what it means to be before God as a self, Anti Climacus discusses other types of relationships in order to establish what he calls criterion. It is by understanding the relationship we can have with God that shows why being before him is so intrinsic to Anti Climacus' definition of faith.

“A cattleman who...is a self directly before his cattle is a very lowly self...a criterion is lacking. The child who previously has had only his parents as a criterion becomes a self as an adult by getting the state as a criterion, but what an infinite accent falls on the self by having God as the criterion! The criterion for the self is always: that directly before which it is a self, but this in turn is the definition of ‘criterion.’” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 79).

Anti Climacus' argument here lies on the limitlessness of God; while a cattleman whose selfhood is determined by his cattle is low, as is an adult in relation to the state. By relating our self to the power that created it, the highest possible being, we can summarily define ourselves in relation to that being, God. As part one stated, it is by being in a relationship to the creator that we escape despair. Abraham managed to do this, because he trusted in God and never lost hold of the faith he had, nor wavered when God asked the absurd of him. Anti Climacus is emphasizing early on in part two that the self is most perfectly a self in being before God, and it is by being before God that we escape sin and despair.

Anti Climacus continues The Sickness Unto Death by exploring the spiritual nature of sin and of faith. His emphasis on standing before God comes from his understanding and belief of God as the creator and as the infinite, in which there can be no higher relation than to him. “A definition of sin can never be too spiritual...for sin is specifically a qualification of spirit.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 81). Anti Climacus seeks to reveal to us that sin is a qualification of spirit against God, and that this includes physical sins precisely because our will defies God in committing these things. Sin is defiance against the self God created, and by committing sins

both physical, mental, and spiritual, we are not realizing our God-given self in the eyes of the creator.

The next section of The Sickness Unto Death explains the story of a laborer who receives an outstanding request, and because of the sheer remarkableness of it, is stuck in whether or not to believe it and possibly be mocked, or to believe it and be rewarded. Anti Climacus' uses this situational story to explain the similarities this situation holds for many Christians because of the nature of God. "The person lacking this courage would be offended; to him the extraordinary would sound like a gibe at him...such a thing is too high for me, I cannot grasp it..." (Kierkegaard, SUD, 85). For the day laborer in Anti Climacus' story, the offer the emperor makes him seems too good to be true; why would he of all people, all citizens of the city, be chosen to be the son-in-law to the emperor? This request seems to be too outstanding, and the day laborer dismisses it as folly. A similar thing can be said about God; his love for us despite everything seems so impossible for us to understand, and as a result, we lose the very faith that is necessary to reach God, as it would be also with the day laborer. "Christianity teaches that this...individual human being exists *before God*...this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God!" (Kierkegaard, SUD, 85). Despite how remarkable this request appears, it is easy to push it aside as a joke or as too high to be grasped by us and the day laborer. However, all that is needed in order to accept God's love and for the day laborer, that he will be the son-in-law, is faith.

Anti Climacus continues The Sickness Unto Death with a small exploration of the meaning of Socratic ignorance with respect to sin. For Socrates, and his Greek position, sin is seen as an ignorance, which Anti Climacus takes some issue with. "The defect in the Socratic definition is its ambiguity as to how the ignorance itself is to be more definitely understood, its

origin, etc.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 88). For Anti Climacus, ignorance is a sin but is not entirely sin. Aside from the fact that Socrates was not a Christian, the realm of the Christian view of sin is entirely removed from his solid view of sin as ignorance. “If, however, it is assumed that he was clearly aware of what he was doing when we began to obscure his knowing, then the sin...is not in the knowing but in the willing...” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 88). For Anti Climacus, sin is not simply an ignorance of what is right and what is wrong before God but also consists in willing anything that would be and is against God. Sin is a combination of knowledge and action in the sense that the Socratic definition does not account for.

It is from this idea of action and knowledge that Anti Climacus establishes his belief in sin as a position. “I steadfastly hold to the Christian teaching that sin is a position – yet not as if it could be comprehended, but as a paradox that must be believed.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 99). Sin exists as a position in relation to God; it is a part of what not only keeps God and man separate. At the same time, it is by the paradox of faith that we come to cross over the gulf between man in God by establishing our self in relation to God as our creator. This relationship is the highest we can have and we do so by getting past despair and sin in faith. There are warnings, however, that Anti Climacus wants us to consider when we look at the relationship between God and man, and the idea of sin as a position is necessary to understand in relation between the individual and God. Anti Climacus wants to show us in the second part of The Sickness Unto Death how sin is indeed a position between the individual self and God alone.

Sin was defined previously by Anti Climacus as both an intensification of despair and as a position. In light of these two definitions, it appears as though most issues have been addressed. However, a major issue remains for Anti Climacus and that is of the Christian individual’s relationship to God.

“If order is to be maintained in existence – and God does want that, for he is not a God of confusion – then the first thing to keep in mind is that every human being is an individual human being and is to become conscious of being an individual human being. If men are permitted to run together in what Aristotle calls the animal category – the crowd – then this abstraction, instead of being less than nothing, even less than the most insignificant individual human being, comes to be regarded as being something – then it does not take long before this abstraction becomes God.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 117-118).

Anti Climacus’ issue here is that man can very easily convince himself that man is God. This blurring together for Anti Climacus is blasphemy, and rightly so: it is one thing to dissolve individual men down into a common pool of mankind, but another for this abstract category to take on the features of God. This is precisely why Anti Climacus claims that sin is a position and that despair is an individual choice; by creating an abstract common denominator, we take the very significance of God’s handiwork in our individual selves out of creation and create only a model for man to fill. This is a strong offense against God and certainly a sin; it is only by relating ourselves as individual selves to God and recognizing, as Christians, the role of sin as a position between ourselves and God that we can come to know ourselves infinitely as God intended us to.

Anti Climacus ends The Sickness Unto Death by looking at how denying Christianity, in all its forms, be it Christ or the Holy Spirit, is indeed the worst kind of sin. It is one thing to defy ourselves in relation to God, but it is an entirely different situation to deny the existence of all that is God altogether. It is precisely by revealing to us how this sin, and all sin, is so intrinsic to Christianity that Anti Climacus ends The Sickness Unto Death by revealing to us the definition of faith. “...in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula in turn, as has been frequently pointed out, is the definition of faith.” (Kierkegaard, SUD, 131). It is through faith that we know God, and we do so precisely by relating ourselves to ourselves, and willing to be ourselves as God intended, and

doing all of this in relation to the power that established us, God as the creator. It is this definition of faith that Anti Climacus has been hinting at the entire book, trying to achieve by revealing how despair takes hold of the individual and how the individual must find rest in God. Sin as a position, an intensification of despair, is a Christian notion which explains the difference between God and man, which, consequently, can only be crossed as far as we can go through faith. Anti Climacus has tied all the ends together by ending his book with a definition of faith, and we shall briefly cover in the next section, it is precisely faith that comes from and before despair that allows us to achieve our infinite self as Abraham did.

3.3 Faith from Despair

As the last section previously covered, sin was viewed as both an intensification of despair and a position. Despair and sin are both intrinsically linked to Christianity, and it is uniquely through faith that the self can come closest to God. I would like here to return to the final definition Anti Climacus' gives to faith: "...in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula in turn, as has been frequently pointed out, is the definition of faith." (Kierkegaard, SUD, 131). Faith has been an intrinsic factor in The Sickness Unto Death, and although Anti Climacus' has focused more on the definitions and distinctions in understanding despair and sin, faith emerges at the end of the book to be the unifying thread of hope for Christians who want to be closer to God through their God-given selves.

In Fear and Trembling, faith took on a similar position but in the story of Abraham. Abraham, who God had promised not only a son but also many descendants, commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. The absurdity surrounding God's command as well as the paradox of faith commanded of Abraham (that he suspend the ethical by agreeing to God's command) culminates in faith, because Abraham is willing to accept God's command over the ethical demand that he not kill his son. His faith in God, that he would not actually take Isaac from him even as he raised the knife to take his life, was ultimately rewarded. Abraham became the father of faith and received Isaac again. Faith, in this story, is intrinsic to Abraham's self and its relation to God; he chooses God above all else and himself in relation to God. By doing so, in faith he is rewarded by receiving Isaac back.

In contrast, The Sickness Unto Death does not follow a specific story, but instead explores the themes of despair and sin from a Christian standpoint. Anti Climacus highlights the pitfalls of each of these and what ultimately must be understood to reach his view of faith as the

relating of the self to itself, while doing so and resting in God. Faith is crucial to the relationship between God and man; without faith, we sin in the face of God and in doing so, separate us further from him and fall only more backwards into despair. It is a Christian faith that allows the individual to get as close to God as is possible by becoming their God-intended self in relationship to God. This, as exemplified through Abraham and in Anti Climacus' discourse, is the definition of faith.

In the conclusion to this project, I would like to highlight criticisms that exist in regards to the idea espoused here, with the hopes of illuminating not only its issues but its strengths too. I also intend to conclude the project by restating the main thesis and how, over the course of viewing both The Sickness Unto Death and Fear and Trembling, that Kierkegaard has created a unique and powerful view of faith that is both personal and Christian. It is through faith, and faith alone, that we can reach both our infinite selves and that self in God, and it is also because we can choose despair as a choice from the onset that we can do so in order to more fully recognize and come to terms with our human existence in the eyes of God.

Chapter 4 Criticisms

Kierkegaard's works seem to take a strong philosophical and religious view, and while this is not necessarily unique to philosophy, it naturally comes with some issues that must be addressed in arguing in favor of certain views, especially the ones that not only produce a very specific viewpoint, but also those that include a religious and therefore biased background.

Although Kierkegaard's works create a varied and unique approach to the problems he faced and believed existed during his time, they are by no means universal solutions. The weakest link in the works of Kierkegaard examined here, and possibly elsewhere, lies specifically in its limited scope and viewpoint.

Kierkegaard's greatest strength and his greatest weakness is his inclusion of Christianity in his work. By examining the various aspects of what it means to have faith, Kierkegaard, from a Christian standpoint, is able to produce a uniquely Christian religious and philosophical argument to explain his views on faith, sin and despair. Kierkegaard is a Christian surely had taken issue with the lack of faith in his time: "Surely, one of the reasons for Kierkegaard's vigorous rejection of Hegelianism was his conviction that Hegel, by viewing the state as the ultimate ethical authority...had eroded the majesty and authority of the divine." (Evans, 13)." Kierkegaard stood up for his faith and sought to defend it against all means of attack and corruption, from both outside the Church and in it. However, when looking at his philosophical and religious works at a whole, it also becomes apparent that his viewpoint, while steadfastly Christian, is also limited to being just that.

Anyone of a different faith or belief system, be it a variation of Christianity or an entirely different religion such as Islam, Judaism, or Daoism, will not necessarily fall into the philosophy or beliefs of Kierkegaard. His view is strongly Christian, and as such, limits the scope that any other faith can identify with when it comes to his message. He argues strongly for a faith based

in Christianity, and using the text of Anti Climacus and the story of Abraham, forcefully defends his view. However, his view is not a universal one, but rather, is limited to Christianity precisely because of the faith in God that is unique to it. In light of this, Kierkegaard's writings immediately take on a smaller, more narrow focus that provides plenty of insight for Christians and into Christianity, but unfortunately does not provide the answers people of other faiths might seek.

Although Kierkegaard's view is broad, simplified to faith being necessary to know God, the issue also arises when compared to atheists such as Jean Paul Sartre, another existentialist like Kierkegaard but who did not put forth anything similar to a Christian viewpoint. Kierkegaard's greatest weakness and greatest strength is that he is a Christian. It is in being a Christian and specifically arguing for that point of view that he manages to make a convincing argument for faith in Christian terms. At the same time, he immediately disallows himself from providing answers to people of other faiths. While some may argue philosophy is meant for the betterment of mankind, Kierkegaard's existential philosophy is primarily aimed at Christianity and as a result, has a very limited viewpoint in the history of vague, often mankind oriented philosophy.

Kierkegaard knew his audience, however, and it is a superb strength of his that he devoted so much of his life, work and character in pursuit of what he believed in. It is true that, despite his volumes and papers of work, he is limited in his Christian viewpoint and could not understand that of one close but not quite the same, such as Judaism or Islam, which also believe in Abraham as the father of faith, and God (albeit Allah in Islam), and yet are vastly different from Christianity. This scope is not covered in Kierkegaard's work, and it was not meant to be. Kierkegaard sought to provide a strictly Christian viewpoint in his writing because he sought to

turn the Church away from the vices he saw it being engulfed in. Kierkegaard cannot account for other views outside his own, and he is not trying to. He wrote specifically for the Danish church and philosophical community in Denmark, as well as Regine to an extent, and it is precisely in doing so that he stayed closest to his roots. “Kierkegaard’s polemical concern was to reveal this feature of society and to diagnose it in the terms he had chosen. These were Christian terms directed against Christendom...” (Hannay, *Basic Despair*, 28-29). Kierkegaard’s writings sought to transform what he considered to be the vices and misunderstandings of Christianity in Denmark during his time, and in doing so, he narrowed his focus to fully examine not only the faults of Christianity but also the blessings and the role they played in his own life as a writer, a Danish citizen, and as a Christian.

Conclusion

Throughout this project I have attempted to show how two of Søren Kierkegaard's works, Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death, illustrate that despair is a choice that can be made by the individual. Abraham exemplified this for us in Fear and Trembling: forced to choose between sacrificing his son and disobeying God, he suspended the ethical and obeyed God's command. His despair comes from the paradox of faith, that he as the single individual is higher than the universal or ethical, and as such, that in despair he chose to prove his faith to God by climbing Mount Moriah and by raising the knife. "Faith is the highest passion in a human being. There are perhaps many in every generation who do not even come to it, but nobody goes further." (Kierkegaard, F&T, 108). In describing Abraham's choice as one of despair, faith comes to light as the most important passion an individual can take, and precisely, is the goal of a Christian.

The Sickness Unto Death provided us with a departure from Johannes de silentio's poetic and lyrical understanding of Abraham's story. Anti Climacus instead offers a more streamlined and straight forward view of despair and sin. His view of despair takes on the individual as the center, and how the individual must come to grips not with a self he is not, nor the self he wants to be, but the self God intended us to be. From here, Anti Climacus looks at sin and its distinctly Christian standing, as a position and intensification of despair. All of this, to arrive at the conclusion that faith is ultimately the relating of the self to itself, and doing so in God. This definition of faith is not so different from the one provided in Fear and Trembling, and unites the two very different works under a common theme.

Despair as a choice seems, at first hand, an unorthodox and potentially hazardous choice to make. However, it is ultimately in light of faith that we would make such a choice in the first place. Kierkegaard sought to define faith in both of these works, and did so by arguing for the

choices of the individual. The power to choose despair lies in the individual, and for Kierkegaard, the Christian individual chooses despair in order to reach closer to God, by realizing themselves in their eternal selves as designated by God. This choice is one of tremendous importance for Christians, but also for everyone else: that by choosing ourselves eternally, and not necessarily the selves we are not or others want us to be, we have chosen rightly. For Johannes de silentio, if you can get faith, then you can go no further and do not need to. For Anti Climacus, faith in God is the highest possible position we can attain, by relating ourselves to ourselves and doing so, transparently in him. For Kierkegaard, faith is an undertaking that not everyone can accomplish, but everyone should aim for. For everyone, despair is a choice, and in Christian terms, despair as a choice can get you faith and you can do no better than that.

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