The Review of Politics 83 (2021), 375–397.

doi:10.1017/S0034670521000115

# Kierkegaard's Socratic Alternative to Hegel in *Fear and Trembling*

***Matthew Dinan***

**Abstract:** Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* has traditionally attracted interest from scholars of political theory for its apparent hostility to political philosophy, and more recently for its compatibility with Marxism. This paper argues for a reconsideration of Kierkegaard's potential contributions to political theory by suggesting that the work's shortcomings belong to its pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, and are in fact intended by Kierkegaard. Attentiveness to the literary development of the pseudonym allows us to see a Kierkegaard who is a deeper and more direct critic of Hegel's political philosophy than is usually presumed. By creating a pseudonym whose argument ultimately fails, Kierkegaard employs Socratic irony in order to point readers to the need to recover Socratic political philosophy as the appropriate adjunct to the faith of Abraham, and as an alternative to Hegelian, and post-Hegelian, political thought.

Søren Kierkegaard knew *Fear and Trembling* would make him famous.[1] Given his prescience, and keen awareness of his audience, he would probably be unsurprised to learn that in the academic study of ethical and political theory this notoriety has amounted to sententious hostility. Emmanuel Levinas, for instance, derides Kierkegaard's "hard and aggressive style of thinking" which is "associated with the most unscrupulous and cynical forms of action" and provides "a kind of justification for violence and terror."[2] In a comment to Hegelian Jean Hippolyte, Levinas's judgment of

Matthew Dinan is associate professor in the Great Books Program at Saint Thomas University, 51 Dineen Drive, Fredericton, NB, Canada, E3B 5G3 (mdinan@stu.ca).

This paper was first presented as a talk at College of the Holy Cross and St. John's University. Vivien Zelazny, Mary Nichols, Jeffrey Bernstein, Mary Townsend, Derek Duplessie, Chase Padusniak, Tim Rice, Philip Lee, Andrea Schutz, Andrew Moore, and Matte Robinson all helped shape its argument and refine its prose.

[1]Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, vol. 1, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 221.

[2]Emmanuel Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 31. But for an

*Fear and Trembling* holds little back, suggesting that Kierkegaard's "reckless" style presages the "verbal violences" of National Socialism and the "ideas that it promoted."[3] Similarly, in *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre identifies Kierkegaard's writings as the low point of Western ethical and political philosophizing. He argues that Kierkegaard's apparent fideism reduces ethical decision-making to nihilistic willfulness, "an expression of criterionless choice . . . for which no justification can be given."[4] Perhaps such a stance toward a champion of the "single individual" could be expected from the communitarian MacIntyre, but liberals like Richard Wolin express a similar view. Wolin's *The Seduction of Unreason* locates in Kierkegaard the common intellectual origin of the decisionism of Carl Schmitt and the ecstatic disregard for reason, law, and institutions of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, the "fathers" of deconstruction.[5]

Hesitations about Kierkegaard indeed extend to some of the most influential twentieth-century political thinkers. In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt identifies Kierkegaard as perhaps *the* prominent representative of the modern turn to inwardness that has impoverished our capacity to conceive of an "objective" world, a public sphere for action. Modern inwardness of the sort Kierkegaard defends destroys not only authentic forms of the *vita activa*, but the viability of religious faith as well: "For what undermined the Christian faith was not the atheism of the eighteenth century or the materialism of the nineteenth . . . but rather the doubting concern with salvation of genuinely religious men [e.g., Pascal and Kierkegaard], in whose eyes the traditional Christian content and promise had become absurd."[6] Even more surprisingly in light of his numerous shared theoretical concerns with Kierkegaard,[7] Leo

attempt at a rapprochement between Levinas and Kierkegaard see J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood, eds., *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), esp. Merold Westphal's contribution, "The Many Faces of Levinas as a Reader of Kierkegaard."

[3]Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," 34.

[4]Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 47. As with Levinas, there has been an attempt to draw out affinities between Kierkegaard and MacIntyre, in John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd, eds., *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue* (Chicago: Open Court Books, 2001), although MacIntyre's own contribution to the volume does little to alter his original assessment.

[5]Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 238.

[6]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 319. Despite this critique, Arendt's characterization of Socrates in *The Life of the Mind* owes much to Kierkegaard's *Johannes Climacus*. See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Books, 1971). My thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for pointing this out.

[7]On the similarities between Strauss and Kierkegaard see Leora Batnizky, "Leo Strauss," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2016 ed.,

Strauss also condemns his baleful influence on modern political life and philosophy. For Strauss, Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel is a proto-Nietzschean assault on authentic *theōria* that also undermines practice,[8] while his deployment of Socrates is little more than an opportunistic rhetorical sally against Hegel.[9]

The common thread uniting these criticisms is the claim that Kierkegaard's defense of religious faith in *Fear and Trembling* and elsewhere is incompatible with a philosophical analysis of politics. Thomas Pangle's *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* addresses this concern directly by arguing that Kierkegaard's emphasis on the paradoxical and "absurd" elements of faith in *Fear and Trembling* means "philosophic rationalism rooted in Socrates can never grasp the moral and human meaning of faith as paradigmatically exhibited in the story of Abraham on Mount Moriah."[10] Pangle concludes that despite Kierkegaard's attempt to partition faith from reason, by the end of *Fear and Trembling* he is "drawn back to a recognizably traditional or 'pre-Kierkegaardian,' Socratic, understanding of faith."[11] For Pangle, by sealing off faith from inquiry, Kierkegaard undermines political philosophy in its distinguishing feature: its capacity to weigh the contending visions of the good human life offered by reason and revelation. If this is so, *Fear and Trembling* aims to vitiate the very possibility of political philosophy as inaugurated by Socrates.

This article agrees with Pangle's final claim—that *Fear and Trembling* ultimately furnishes a Socratic account of faith—in order to contest his broader argument about the text's relationship to political philosophy. I agree that there are serious problems with the defense of religious faith presented in *Fear and Trembling*; I differ by arguing that these shortcomings can be ascribed to its pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, and not Kierkegaard. Far from rendering Socratic political philosophy impossible, *Fear and Trembling* recovers the conditions under which it might be possible by contesting the key elements of Hegelian political philosophy. Hegel views the ethical life of the modern state as the consummation of reason in history; traditionally higher pursuits like religious faith and philosophy therefore find their

ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/strauss-leo/; Arthur Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 216; Grant Havers, "Kierkegaard, Adorno, and the Socratic Individual," *European Legacy* 18, no. 7 (2013): 833–49; and Matthew Dinan, "Strauss, Kierkegaard, and the 'Secret of the Art of Helping,'" *Idealistic Studies* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 249–62.

[8]Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 321.

[9]Leo Strauss to Eric Voegelin, June 4, 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 88–89.

[10]Thomas Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 172.

[11]Ibid., 181.

fullest expression in the life of the citizen. Silentio suggests that insofar as Socratic philosophy resists mediation by the political community in a way similar to Abrahamic faith, Socrates poses as much of a problem for Hegel as Abraham. Silentio shows this by inviting consideration of the peculiar role played by Socrates in Hegel's own account of the development of infinite subjectivity in Christianity and the modern state.

Ultimately, however, Silentio implicates himself in the same Hegelian logic he contests through an attempt to use religious and philosophical paradox to inspire passion. Having shown the difficulty of confounding Hegelian mediation, Kierkegaard—who is more silent than Silentio—deploys Socratic irony in order to preserve the possibility of Socratic political philosophy as an alternative to Hegel. In making this case, my argument contests a recent turn in scholarship which emphasizes the continuity between Kierkegaard and Hegelian—and post-Hegelian, including Marxist—political thought. Departing from readings which portray Kierkegaard as an alternative to liberalism and communitarian approaches to political theory,[12] or as an early practitioner of deconstruction,[13] Michael Burns, Alison Assiter, Martin Hägglund, and Jamie Aroosi all build on Slavoj Žižek's contention that Kierkegaard is separated from "dialectical materialism proper" by a "thin, almost imperceptible line."[14] In so doing, these scholars all fail to recognize the depth and nuance of Kierkegaard's rejection of Hegel. Such attempts to recruit Kierkegaard as an ally for Marxist thought or critical theory seek to extract a systematic political theory from his writings but must downplay or ignore the role of the pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's authorship in so doing. Against both the older criticism of Kierkegaard as anathema to political philosophy as such, and the newer absorption of Kierkegaard into critical theory, this essay suggests that his contribution to political philosophy cannot be easily extracted from the perspectives of the pseudonyms he creates. Thus,

[12]See Martin Matuštík, "Kierkegaard as a Socio-political Thinker and Activist," *Man and World* 27 (1994): 211–24 and "Kierkegaard's Radical Existential Praxis, or: Why the Individual Defies Liberal, Communitarian, and Postmodern Categories," in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin Matuštík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 239–64; and Alison Assiter, *Kierkegaard, Metaphysics and Political Theory: Unfinished Selves* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

[13]Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

[14]Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, trans. Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 75. See Michael Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Alison Assiter, "Lukács, Kierkegaard, Marx, and the Political," in *The Kierkegaardian Mind*, ed. Patrick Stokes, Adam Buben, and Eleanor Helms (London: Routledge, 2019), 423–34; Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019); and Jamie Aroosi, *The Dialectical Self: Kierkegaard, Marx, and the Making of the Modern Subject* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

contrary to the characterization of *Fear and Trembling* put forward by his prominent critics and contemporary scholarly defenders alike, Kierkegaard does not attempt to destroy political philosophy, nor is he a crypto-Hegelian. Kierkegaard's aim in *Fear and Trembling* is to direct political philosophy to an analysis of the salutary, if competing, visions of human life offered by Abraham and Socrates, which answer to erotic needs that political life cannot fulfill. I thus agree, in a qualified way, with David Walsh's positioning of Kierkegaard as a thinker articulating a "nonapocalyptic" vision of modernity centered around the task of existence; though, with Jacob Howland, I view Kierkegaard to be less ambivalent about the potential of classical political philosophy to respond to modern concerns than Walsh does.[15] *Fear and Trembling* does not furnish a comprehensive political science like Hegel or subsequent thinkers but shows that any such science must be aware of the fundamental alternatives available to the good human life, and thus must be aware of the limits of politics. The scope of this paper is consequently limited to the suggestion that in his instructive retrieval of Socrates, Kierkegaard's project in *Fear and Trembling* should itself be considered a propaedeutic work of Socratic political philosophy.

I begin with an analysis of the opening sections of *Fear and Trembling*, arguing that its pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, is profoundly invested in the theoretical problem of *erōs*, and that this informs his interest in Abraham and Socrates, as well as his objections to Hegel. The second section turns to Silentio's controversial assertion that the "single individual is higher than the universal," showing the grounding of this contention in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Silentio shows that Hegelian political thought must "lose" not only Abraham, but Socrates as well; this loss, in turn, throws Hegel's account of the development of the modern state into question. The third section considers Silentio's meditations on silence and irony in *Fear and Trembling*'s third problem. Both Socrates and Abraham, in Silentio's telling, employ irony as a way of guarding paradox against the demands of ethical disclosure. The success of this irony indicates that both philosophy and faith understood as erotic ways of life resist absorption into a universal philosophy of history like Hegel's. The fourth section shows how in the Epilogue, Silentio's enthusiasm in deploying Abraham and Socrates against Hegel leads him to make his arguments for the purposes of revivifying political life, leading to the failure of his argument on his own terms. I conclude by analyzing the significance of the pseudonym's failure and suggesting that Kierkegaard's contribution to political philosophy in *Fear and Trembling* amounts not to a systematic account of political life, but to a recovery of the questions informing the traditional contest between the lives of philosophy and faith.

[15]David Walsh, *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

## Johannes de Silentio on Hegel and the Problem of Passion

Much scholarly analysis of *Fear and Trembling* focuses on the text's "dialectical" "puzzles" or "problems" (*problemata*) to the near-exclusion of the extraordinary "lyrical" scaffolding which frames them—including, puzzlingly, the fact that the book's author is the pseudonymous Johannes de Silentio and not "Kierkegaard." In such texts as *The Point of View* and "On My Work as an Author," Kierkegaard repeatedly draws attention to the indirect character of his authorship and the reasons for his creation of the pseudonyms. He argues that his pseudonymous authorship is necessary both to encourage passion or *erōs* through the creation of literary puzzles, and because those under "an illusion" need to be "approached from behind."[16] Recalling Plato's *Second Letter*,[17] and writing in his own name in the "First and Last Account" to Johannes Climacus's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard maintains that within the pseudonymous authorship "there is not a single word by me."[18] Scholars therefore increasingly recognize that the straightforward attribution of works like *Fear and Trembling* to Kierkegaard can no longer be maintained.[19] At the same time, prominent scholars like Jon Stewart argue that *Fear and Trembling* engages not directly with Hegel but with Danish epigones like Hans Lassen Martensen.[20] In this section I show why these misreadings are connected: not only does Silentio thoughtfully engage with Hegel's thought, but in so doing he shares details about his biography which make him an apt—if also problematic—pseudonym for the job.

[16]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 43.

[17]Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, 9.

[18]Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 625–26.

[19]For a good overview of the nature of, and various approaches to, the pseudonymous authorship see Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24–45, and Matuštík, "Reading 'Kierkegaard' as a Drama," in *The Point of View*, International Kierkegaard Commentary 22, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 411–30.

[20]Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 245–47. But see Clare Carlisle, "Johannes de Silentio's Dilemma," in *Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling": A Critical Guide*, ed. Daniel Conway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 44–60; Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (College Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1991); Mark C. Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Olivia Blanchette, "The Silencing of Philosophy," in *"Fear and Trembling" and "Repetition,"* International Kierkegaard Commentary 6, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 29–66.

Kierkegaard directs readers of *Fear and Trembling* to pay close attention to the development of his character in the Preface, as he emphasizes that it contains "the individuality-lines of a poetically actual subjective thinker."[21] Silentio indeed intersperses autobiographical details throughout the four prefatory sections of *Fear and Trembling*—surely a dig at Hegel, whose preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* famously questions the practice of preface writing in philosophical texts. The garrulous Silentio tells us all about himself, but much of what he says curiously has to do with what he is *not*, rather than what he is. Jocular and oracular, he is neither a philosopher nor a poet, but a "free-lancer" (5).[22] While he has clearly read Hegel closely enough to understand "the System . . . with ease," Silentio denies that he numbers among Hegel's "Danish admirers" (5): he is both inside and outside Hegelianism. Silentio claims to be "not unfamiliar with everything that is great and magnanimous in the world" (27), but aspires to greatness only in commemorating the noble deeds of others (13). Perhaps most notably, despite his deep admiration for Abraham, he confesses that he lacks religious faith (7, 29). Silentio believes that "God is love" because "this thought has for [him] a primordial lyrical validity," but a loving God is also "incommensurable with the whole of actuality" (28). Silentio admits that he can "very well describe the movements of faith" but cannot make them (31). He likes the *idea* of religious faith but is no believer. Johannes de Silentio is not devoted to any particular endeavor with intensity.

Consequently, while he can *think* himself into belief, he cannot make the "movement" of faith; his encounter with God is speculative, not personal. *Fear and Trembling* is, after all, not a tribute to the living God, but to Abraham (12). He presents himself as an erotically frustrated connoisseur of *erōs*, stuck between the competing accounts of the good human life and praiseworthy human activities he surveys. Like the "associate professors" he will later describe, he is alienated, "insulated from the earthquakes of existence" (55). Silentio maintains this distance through his introductory "Attunement" which introduces an exegete's attraction to the *Akedah*, before showing four different ways in which irruptions of the ethical into the story could keep Abraham from becoming the father of faith. As Howland observes, a careful reading of the Attunement section indicates that this is not, as many scholars assume, a story about Silentio himself, but a work of traditional *midrash* about *another* exegete, whose "longing" is awakened by the "shudder of the thought" contained in the story of Abraham and Isaac (7–11).[23] Silentio admires Abraham, but does not desire to *be* Abraham.

[21]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 626.

[22]Citations to *Fear and Trembling* are to Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Sylvia Walsh and C. Stephen Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and will be given parenthetically in-text.

[23]Jacob Howland, "*Fear and Trembling*'s 'Attunement' as *midrash*," in Conway, *Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling,"* 27–28.

Twice removed from the real thing, he fervently admires Abraham's fervent admirers.[24]

This is where Silentio's autobiography intersects most provocatively with his description of religious faith. Silentio says that although faith eludes him, he is capable of "the movements of infinity" or "infinite resignation" (31). Infinite resignation is the process of emptying oneself of "the deep sadness of existence," of "renouncing everything, the dearest thing [one] has in the world" for the sake of the higher, infinite things, such that one becomes a "stranger in the world" (34). It is the movement which, according to Silentio, precedes the infamous "leap of faith," by which one gains the world back on the strength of the absurd (42–43). Given Silentio's alienation and the unworldly character of infinite resignation, it would be tempting to equate it with a kind of life-denying asceticism; Silentio, however, is clear that the Knight of Infinite Resignation is a lover: "He feels a blissful sensual pleasure in letting love palpitate through every nerve, and yet his soul is as solemn as that of one who has drained the cup of poison and feels how the juice penetrates every drop of blood—for this moment is one of life and death" (35).[25] Infinite resignation is a passionate engagement with the world, the result of which is to leave one abstracted from it. Silentio can embody no particular way of life because, having been passionately devoted to discovering the good life, he sees through finitude, and has resigned himself to the impossibility of happiness. He gains a certain spiritual independence at the cost of the ability to commit.

Silentio's situation is recursive. He is passionately committed to the theoretical problem of *erōs*. To be passionately interested in passion is to lack a true object for your passion. It is to recognize "eternal consciousness" in a "purely philosophical" way (41). But faith, Silentio tells us, is the miraculous fulfillment of passion. The Knight of Faith is the person who, having given up the possibility of making peace with actuality, "gains it back on the strength of the absurd" (39). Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac, even, perhaps, raises the knife, but on account of his faith gets to keep his son and have descendants who will number as the stars. The Knight of Faith, whose relation to actuality is mediated by God, displays no incommensurability with worldliness such that she may even give off a whiff of "bourgeois philistinism" (44).

[24]Ann Ward argues that Silentio objects to the diminution of human greatness implied by Hegel's reduction of human greatness to "world-historical individuals," whose greatness is a result the mediation of Spirit in world history instead of virtue. In Ward's reading, Kierkegaard aims to counteract the life-denying effects of the belief that one lives at the end of history. Ann Ward, "Abraham, Agnes and Socrates: Love and History in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," in *Love and Friendship*, ed. Eduardo Velasquez (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 297–337.

[25]"Infinite resignation" bears a close family resemblance to Hegel's account of "infinite personality" or "infinite negativity," as discussed below. For more on Hegel's account of infinity and *Fear and Trembling* see Taylor, *Journeys to Selfhood*, 270, and Blanchette, "Silencing of Philosophy," 46–47.

Silentio *wants* to be able to be more fully integrated into the world but finds himself unable to do so. Abraham and the Knight of Faith appeal to him because they are at home in the world without becoming unreflectively conventional or dispassionate. This is why Silentio objects so strongly to Hegel, who purports to solve the problem of how humanity's infinite subjectivity can be mediated by the finite institutions of political life. Hegel, indeed, claims to synthesize Christian faith and philosophical reflection in the ethical life of the modern state. For Silentio, however, such a synthesis is to "make others believe that faith is a lowly or it is an easy matter, whereas it is the greatest and the hardest" (44).

Silentio signals his engagement with Hegel by using this Preface to parody the key Hegelian text under consideration in *Fear and Trembling*, namely, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.[26] Hegel's defense of the ethical life of the modern state begins with a condemnation of the influence of German Romanticism on philosophical reflection about politics. In Romanticism we find philosophy reduced to "subjective feeling" such that "everyone, whatever his condition, can be assured that he has [the philosopher's] stone in his grasp." Philosophy is thereby treated with the "utmost contempt" since thinkers believe they can "take possession of it outright [through inspiration]." Such a valorization of subjective feeling consigns the rationality of the political to the realm of "arbitrariness and contingency," and, to make matters worse, taking the "guise of false piety," "presume[s] to gain the supreme [divine] justification for despising the ethical order." The "right kind" of piety, Hegel continues, abandons inwardness and moves toward "a reverence for the laws and for a truth which has being in and for itself and is exalted above the subjective form of feeling."[27] Hegel accuses the Romantic intellectuals of his day of "going further" than philosophy, distorting religion and politics alike. The Romantics, demonstrating the "aesthetic" relation to faith and the ethical also attacked by Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*, propose to marshal the divine as a way of rising above politics. But in the two decades since Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of objective spirit, matters have changed, and many of those Romantics—especially in Silentio's Copenhagen—are now Hegelians: "Every speculative score-keeper who conscientiously keeps account of the momentous march of modern philosophy, every lecturer, tutor, student, every outsider and insider in philosophy does not stop at doubting everything but goes further" (3). Hegel's Romantics start with philosophy and go further; Silentio's Hegelians, not content with doubting everything, move beyond faith as well: "In our age, nobody stops

[26]As Daniel Conway puts it, Silentio "is at his lyrical best when granted the freedom to blur the boundaries and tweak the categories established, supposedly, by the imperious System." Conway, "Particularity and Ethical Attunement: Situating *Problema* III," in Conway, *Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling,"* 209.

[27]G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 14.

at faith but goes further. . . . In those olden days it was different; then faith was a lifelong task because it was assumed that proficiency in believing is not achieved in either days or weeks" (5). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel indeed lauds the use of Cartesian doubt in the new philosophical science because it "renders the Spirit for the first time competent to examine what the truth is" by clearing away the false authority of "phenomenal knowledge."[28] For Hegel doubt is then only a temporary, "speculative" moment.

Silentio contrasts Hegel's approach to doubt with that of Descartes and Socrates. While Silentio's contemporaries view doubt as a mere starting point, Descartes, we are told, understood doubting everything to be a daunting task. He equates Cartesian doubt with that of "those old Greeks" who took doubt to be "the task of a whole lifetime, doubt not being a skill one acquires in days and weeks" (4). Socrates, Silentio reminds us, maintained a "balance of doubt" throughout his entire life, "fearlessly rejecting the certainties of sense and thought" through his knowledge of ignorance (4); but "nowadays, that is where everyone begins" (19). Hegelian philosophy allows one to pass through doubt as an intellectual "moment," rather than a life-altering trial. In this way, philosophy becomes more of a mental exercise than a way of life. Silentio arranges the possibilities available to his contemporaries like so: Descartes, Socrates, and faith on the one hand; Hegel on the other. The difference is that Socrates and Descartes were committed to philosophy as a way of life, an orientation sharply at odds with the speculative turn in Hegelian thought, and one which led them to run afoul of their respective political communities. By positioning Socrates alongside faith, Silentio encourages us to notice that both religious faith and the Socratic understanding of philosophy are threatened by the propensity to reduce life-shaping alternatives—like the decision to doubt everything—to mere "moments."[29] Hegel's Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* warns that the Romantic demotion of philosophy is bad for religion and politics alike; *Fear and Trembling*'s Preface sees the same problem arising from Hegel. Indeed, Silentio foregrounds the need for faith and philosophy to be understood and pursued as erotic orientations for human life; otherwise "everything is had so dirt cheap it is doubtful whether in the end anyone will bid" (3). By

[28]G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), §78.

[29]Silentio's praise of Descartes contrasts with the approach taken by another Kierkegaardian pseudonym, Johannes Climacus. Kierkegaard's unfinished biography *Johannes Climacus* shows the difficulties encountered by Climacus in actually trying to doubt everything. Climacus's book, *Philosophical Fragments*, distinguishes Socratic doubt from Cartesian and Hegelian doubt. Silentio is more optimistic about the prospects of modern philosophy than Climacus, at least. Søren Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus, or* De Omnibus Dubitandem Est*: A Narrative*, in *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 118–72. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this contrast.

foregrounding the problem of passion or *erōs*, drawing our attention to Hegel's political thought in the *Philosophy of Right*, and showing Silentio's specifically fraught relationship to these problems, the opening sections of *Fear and Trembling* are a "lyrical" preparation for the more "dialectical" examination that follows it.

## Hegel's Socrates, Christianity, and the Modern State

The three puzzles that make up most of the second half of *Fear and Trembling*—"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 understanding from Sarah, from Eliezer, from Isaac?"—are, as Silentio admits, all aspects of the same dilemma, whether the single individual is higher than the universal (71). The "universal" in question is the ethical universal of the modern state as described in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. For Hegel, the modern state brings about the transformation of the conflict between particularity and universality into the unity of rational freedom. Individual citizens recognize the fulfillment of their subjective wills in the objective, concrete rationality of the state, while the state achieves *its* end through this fulfillment: "The effect of this is that the universal does not attain validity or fulfillment without the interest, knowledge, and volition of the particular, and that individuals do not live as private persons merely for these particular interests without at the same time directing their will to a universal end acting in conscious awareness of this end."[30] In this way, the ethical life of the modern state appears to combine the distinctive insights of the ancient and modern worlds: the Aristotelian notion of human beings as rational beings whose natures are fulfilled within the political community with the Lockean emphasis on rational personal liberty. Since the entire purpose of the modern state is its capacity to mediate the subjective will—or even caprice—into objective rationality, and the *content* of this rationality is the consummation of subjective freedom, "the destiny of individuals is to lead a universal life"; one's "highest duty is to be [a citizen] of the state."[31]

As Silentio puts it, this means "whenever the single individual feels an urge to assert himself as the particular after having entered into the universal, he is in a state of temptation, from which he can extricate himself only in repentantly surrounding himself as the particular to the universal" (46–47). He points out that any such breach of the ethical universal is "evil," but suggests that if this all holds, "Hegel is wrong in speaking about faith," as Abraham, by these criteria, "ought to have been remanded and exposed as a murderer" (47). Abraham's ethical duty to his son cannot be abrogated by God: his duty to God *is* his ethical duty (59). Faith, for Silentio, is thus the paradox that the

[30]Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §260.
[31]Ibid., §258.

particular is higher than the universal: "If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost and faith has never existed in the world precisely because it has always existed" (47). Otherwise, "God becomes an invisible vanishing point," his "power being only in the ethical, which completes existence" (59). Hegel, who "after all . . . had studied the Greeks," should "not have concealed this" (47). To understand faith, Silentio suggests, is to share the view that it responds to particular incursions of God in history rather than understanding history as the particular form by which God intervenes. But Silentio criticizes not only Hegel's historicism as a formal method, he challenges the specifics of his interpretation of history as well.

In the first puzzle Silentio directs us to Hegel's discussion of "The Good and the Conscience" in the *Philosophy of Right*. In once again pointing us to this text, Silentio underscores the political character of his intervention and invites consideration of Hegel's interpretation of Socrates.[32] For Hegel, as for Kant, morality and evil are formally similar. Both involve self-conscious reflection on one's infinite subjectivity; evil is "the individual's most distinctive property" because it posits its specificity and arbitrariness over and against reason.[33] Evil makes no real argument beyond the capricious assertion that *I* knowingly affirm that the rules do not apply to *me*. Hegel refers to the "supreme form" of evil as "irony," once again taking aim at the Romantic subjectivism of Schlegel and Fichte, whose theories of irony purported to be Platonic in origin. In Hotho's Addition to this section it is clarified that "only the name [i.e., 'irony'] is taken from Plato, however, for Plato used it of a method which Socrates employed in personal dialogue to defend the Idea of truth and justice against the complacency of the uneducated consciousness and that of the Sophists; but it was only the consciousness which he treated ironically, not the Idea itself."[34] For Hegel, Socrates uses irony in personal conversation to defend rationality itself against unreason, while modern irony not only is empty of ethical content but, in its assertion of the will over reason, also negates the will's potential fulfillment in ethics. In knowing its affirmation of itself, the modern ironist's will is a perfect inversion of the self-conscious rationality of the ethical life of the modern state. Hegel's opening complaint about the Romantics here comes full circle.

Socrates plays an axial role in this development of Spirit, according to Hegel. The "problem" of Socrates is not simply his irony, but the fact that he represents universality in a singular way. He defends reason, but his irony means that his defense is tarnished by his own contingent, personal

[32]Kierkegaard was deeply engaged with this element of Hegel's thought, including an analysis of Hegel's view of Socrates as an appendix to his Magister's dissertation. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 219–37.

[33]Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §140.

[34]Ibid., Addition, p. 180.

attributes. In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel puts it thus: "[Socrates's] philosophy, which asserts that real existence is in consciousness as a universal, is still not a properly speculative philosophy, but remained individual; yet the aim of his philosophy was that it should have a universal significance. Hence we have to speak of his own individual being."[35] Hegel admits that Socrates does not allow us to speak about his insights speculatively, but only in the context of the life of this particular philosopher. Nevertheless, Hegel, like so many of his interlocutors and the Athenians at large, does not find Socrates endearing: his "celebrated" irony is "only a subjective form of dialectic," while his famous knowledge of ignorance is only "knowledge" in the must dubious way—"it may actually be said that Socrates knew nothing, for he did not reach the systematic construction of a philosophy."[36] Even so, Hegel calls Socrates the "turning point" of world history because of his "invention" of the realm of *Moralität*, or subjective morality. Richard Velkley describes it well: "The Socratic origin of free or infinite personality, as Hegel understands it, is not just an anticipation of modern moral-political freedom but the disclosure of philosophy's essence as freedom—and conversely, of freedom as in some crucial way philosophic."[37] Socratic individualism disrupts the naive unity of Athenian customary morality, but reveals the connection between freedom and philosophy. Socrates's positioning of himself as an "I" against the unity of the Athenian ethical sphere is consequently the ingress through which human beings become aware of the infinite character of subjectivity.[38] Hegel's Socrates thus introduces an insight that is made universal in Christian revelation. Knowing oneself as the particular object of divine grace provides one with infinite value and an awareness of the infinite character—and thus the freedom—of one's personality. If, for Hegel, Christianity is not quite "vulgar Platonism," it is at least a sort of democratic Socratism. The real achievement of the modern state, as noted above, is that it recognizes the infinite subjectivity of human subjects *as* its own objective content, a content "which arose in an inward form in the Christian religion."[39] Socrates's recognition of infinite

[35]G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy to Plato,* trans. E. S. Haldane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 398.

[36]Ibid., 399.

[37]Velkley's thoughtful account of the role of Socrates in the *Philosophy of Right* has helped develop my thinking throughout this section. See Richard Velkley, "On Possessed Individualism: Hegel, Socrates' Daimon, and the Modern State," *Review of Metaphysics* 59, no. 3 (March 2006): 579.

[38]For a thorough explication of Hegel's account of infinite individuality and its relationship to his political thought, see Jeffrey Church, *Infinite Autonomy: The Divided Individual in the Political Thought of G. W. F. Hegel and Friedrich Nietzsche* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), esp. chap. 3. Church's account generally defends the integrity of the individual in Hegel more than mine does here.

[39]Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §185A.

personality becomes the province of the Christian believer and, eventually, the grounding of the concrete rationality of the state—it is another form of freedom's movement from one, to many, to all.[40] The state, then, is "the organization and actualization of moral life" and "religion is the very substance of the state";[41] religion and politics "merely differ in form."[42] Philosophy, in turn, is the reconciliation of subjectivity with objectivity through rational mediation.

Silentio is then correct in his admittedly sibylline pronouncement that unless there is a *telos* higher than the Hegelian ethical "faith has never existed because it has always existed" (47). If Socrates discovers the infinite personality that underwrites modern ethical life, then Christianity is merely a moment in the dialectical process whose endpoint is the *Sittlichkeit* of the modern state. For Hegel, indeed, "all of history. . . is coming to terms with the Socratic Revolution."[43] And indeed if there is no higher end in human life than the ethical universal of a political community, then revelation is unnecessary, as what would be revealed is available through human effort: "If faith is nothing beyond what [Hegelian] philosophy passes it off to be, then Socrates has already gone further, much further, instead of the converse. . . . His ignorance is infinite resignation. This task is already adequate for human strength, even though it is disdained in our age" (61).[44] It is therefore not the case that "Kierkegaard takes it for granted that the ethical rationalism originated by the Greeks and above all Socrates reaches full maturity in the thought of Hegel";[45] rather, in drawing attention to the role Socrates plays in the Hegelian story, Silentio shows that his defense of Abraham is also a defense of Socrates. More, given the importance of Hegel's account of infinite subjectivity to his political thought, for him to be mistaken in this matter would suggest the need to rethink the relationship between religion, politics, and philosophy.

[40]G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 124–25.

[41]G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline and Critical Writings*, ed. Ernst Behler (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1995), §552.

[42]Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §270R.

[43]Velkley, "Possessed Individualism," 586.

[44]Silentio shares with Socrates a dedication to "infinite resignation." Faith is a gift bestowed by God's grace and cannot be achieved by human effort as can Socratic knowledge of ignorance or infinite resignation. Silentio does not adjudicate the content of this gift—Christian revelation—focusing instead on its human significance. This is surely one of the notable limitations of *Fear and Trembling*, and an important reason why it is not Kierkegaard's last word on the problems Silentio here addresses. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this clarification.

[45]Pangle, *God of Abraham*, 172.

## Silence and Irony

*Fear and Trembling*'s final puzzle—"Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer, from Isaac?"—considers the question astir in Hegel's interpretation of Socrates and Christianity: What is the nature of subjectivity? In this third problem, Silentio argues that the "Hegelian philosophy assumes no justified concealment, no justified incommensurability"—individuals must be mediated by the universal rationality of the state (71). Silentio suggests that if there is no justified concealment, then our subjectivity is not, when all is said and done, subjective: subjectivity must become "objective," and thus capable of rational mediation. This is a problem for Abraham, Silentio avers, because the paradox of God demanding the sacrifice of Isaac is "so complete that it simply cannot be thought." Were Abraham to speak his intentions aloud he would be forced to recognize his duty as a father, "and return repentantly to the universal" (68).

Silentio chooses to explore this question by contrasting Abraham with the idea of the tragic hero, and by exploring a series of "poetic personages" who illustrate Abraham's singularity.[46] He works especially hard to disambiguate Abraham from the classical tragic hero. Simply put: "The difference between the tragic hero and Abraham is [that] . . . the tragic hero stays within the ethical" (52). The tragic hero reduces the relationship between father and son (for example) "to a sentiment that has its dialectic in its relation to the idea of the ethical life" (51). Moreover, the tragic hero is heroic precisely because he sacrifices one sphere of the ethical, the family, to a higher one, the political community: he "upholds the idea of the State" or "appease[s] the angry gods" (52). Abraham has no such motive: "his entire action stands in no relation to the universal, it is a purely private undertaking" (52). Since Abraham—or the person of faith more generally—is actually a participant in the ethical life, he knows "that it is beautiful and beneficial to be the particular individual who [like the tragic hero] translates himself into the universal, one who, so to speak, personally produces a clean-cut, elegant, and insofar as possible flawless edition of himself, readable by all" (66). But it is the ethical itself and its concomitant guarantee of commensurability that is the temptation for Abraham. Abraham therefore "resigns" the world of ethics and makes another movement to return to his own subjective particularity, as it is this particularity that is addressed by God. As indicated above, the modern state purports to make subjectivity commensurable with objectivity. The rational state can accommodate all sorts of subjectivities, except for those which destroy the possibility of objectivity itself. The achievement of

[46]Both Ward, "Love and History," and Conway, "Particularity and Ethical Attunement," persuasively show the ways in which Silentio's "aesthetic" approach to the third problem enlivens his discussion and lends nuance to his consideration of Abraham.

the Hegelian *Rechtsphilosophie* is how the "universal is the mediation of the particular." In this sense, Silentio rightly observes that Hegelian political philosophy assumes "no justified concealment, no justified incommensurability" and is "therefore consistent in demanding disclosure" (71). The only purpose a rational subject could have for concealment would be "irony" in the Hegelian sense of moral evil, as discussed above.

Abraham's concealment is noteworthy because it moves beyond silence. In the biblical narrative he tells Isaac that "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son!" (Gen. 22:8). Since Abraham has faith he believes that God *will* provide the lamb, because he knows that God keeps his promises, and that he has been promised to be the father of descendants that number as the stars.[47] Abraham thus has two pieces of private knowledge—that he will be the father of many generations and that God now demands the sacrifice of his only son—but since he has faith in a God who keeps his promises, he is willing to surrender himself to the paradox, believing that even if he should kill Isaac he will still become the father of faith. His speech to Isaac reveals none of this; it is not really a *logos* because it frustrates, rather than enables, mediation. Silentio suggests that Abraham is, like Socrates, an ironist: "[Abraham's] reply to Isaac has the form of irony, for it is always irony when I say something and yet do not say anything" (105). Irony has the same definition for Silentio as it does for Hegel, while meaning something like the opposite: I posit my subjectivity as above the universal by speaking in a way that is not speaking. To be ironic is to speak in a way that discloses *and* conceals. In the case of Hegel's irony-understood-as-evil, I conceal my arbitrary will while pretending to make ethical utterances; for Silentio, irony is the choice of speaking in order to indicate that there *is* something concealed and therefore something that one submits to an inner *telos*, not to the *telos* of the universal. Hegel describes this irony as existing only with the content of evil; Silentio posits a subjectivity "beyond" good and evil.

The word "silence" has a similarly "ironic" structure: it is a word that signals the absence of what it represents. Similarly, any attempt by Abraham to speak himself into the ethical would necessarily fail, because

[47]Ultimately God provides a ram, not a lamb. The precise character of what Abraham knows is the subject of scholarly controversy. Michelle Kosch outlines three separate possibilities for the "unsayability" of Abraham's private knowledge: "either what Abraham cannot say is unsayable by anyone, or it is sayable in principle, but not by him," to which she adds a third, that Abraham himself does not fully understand his situation, and therefore *cannot* explain it (Michelle Kosch, "What Abraham Couldn't Say," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 82 [2008]: 59–78). I agree with John Lippitt both that Kosch's interpretation is unlikely and that Mulhall's is most compelling. See Stephen Mullhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 379–83; John Lippitt, "What neither Abraham nor Johannes de Silentio Could Say," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 82 (2008): 79–99.

the source of his knowledge cannot be meaningfully shared: "[Abraham] cannot say anything for what he knows he cannot say" (105). Faith is knowledge of a paradoxical sort—if it is knowledge that cannot be rationally mediated, faith is the experience of knowing one does not know what one knows. While Hegel archly criticizes Socrates's knowledge of ignorance as only "technically" accurate—since Socrates's approach to philosophy is not yet "scientific"—Silentio suggests that Abraham resembles Socrates not only in his *erōs*, but in their ironic self-presentation, and paradoxical knowledge of ignorance. Hegel's requirement of mediation resolves paradoxes, but without paradox, Silentio suggests, the apexes of the lives of faith and reason are both destroyed.

Accordingly, during his final litigation of the last problem, Silentio brings back Socrates for a memorable curtain call. As Silentio strives to discern how Abraham differs from the tragic hero, he once again shows how Socrates looks like Abraham. Socrates belongs to a "border category" between the ethical and the religious; he is the "most interesting human being" who has ever lived (72); an "intellectual tragic hero" (103). Unlike the regular tragic hero, the intellectual tragic hero consummates his heroism in "having and retaining the last word" (103). The intellectual tragic hero resigns himself to death, but then transcends death to focus on his final words. Silentio notes that this is especially important for Socrates because "it would have weakened the effect of his life and aroused a suspicion that the elasticity of irony in him was not a world power but a game" (103). For Hegel, Socrates's irony is indeed little more than a personal quirk—"a game." But for Silentio, through his ironic speech, Socrates becomes "immortal before he dies." His immortality consists in his refusal of recognition; if, like the usual sort of tragic hero, he allows his actions to speak for themselves, then the source of any worldly immortality is in the hands of the political community. But Socrates's indication that his was a good life for a human being even *without* the recognition of Athens preserves the possibility that the single individual is higher than the universal.

Socrates's final words therefore take on considerable importance for Silentio:

> I propose the following: The verdict of death is announced to him and at the same moment he dies, simultaneously overcoming death and fulfilling himself in the celebrated response that he was surprised to have been convicted by a majority of three votes. No loose and idle talk in the marketplace, no foolish remark of an idiot could he have jested with more ironically than with the sentence that condemns him to death. (103 note i)

Socrates's ironic response to his death sentence shows that the significance of his life is not controlled by the fact of his death. Like Abraham, Socrates seems to gain his life back in the form of immortality on the strength of the absurd.[48]

[48]Ward, "Love and History," 328–29.

He asserts his infinite personality over and against the universal by speaking without speaking. Indeed, his entire defense speech—his apparent response to the Delphic oracle, his assertion that the unexamined life is not worth living, his articulation of his knowledge of ignorance—constitutes a series of paradoxes which serve as an invitation to the erotic pursuit of philosophy instead of an attempt to cling to life. If the life of philosophy is permanently antinomian, then Socrates could *never* justify himself to the ethical universal of Athens—nor, indeed, to the modern Prussian state. The disproportion between philosophy and the city is permanent.

But while Abraham and Socrates cannot speak so that their intentions will be mediated by the political community, their ironic speeches nevertheless communicate a particularity that is above the ethical. Just as in the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*, where Socratic doubt seems to stand next to Abrahamic faith, Socrates and Abraham are once again aligned near its conclusion. In both instances, irony works to preserve paradox. Any attempt to mediate the motivations for the lives of faith or philosophy beyond irony will distort the phenomena by suggesting that they can be understood in the form of the ethical universal. Bringing that which is concealed to the surface makes it a part of the surface. Irony inspires *erōs* by showing the need to undertake the lives of philosophy and religious faith as single individuals in order to understand what they really are. Socrates and Abraham are alike in their resolute refusal to resolve the paradoxes according to which they remain singular.[49]

## Silentio's "Pardonable, Perhaps Questionable Stratagem"

The dramatically high stakes and literary panache of the third puzzle make it easy to miss that Silentio does not in fact answer the question it poses. The answer is that what Abraham—and perhaps Socrates—does is *not* "ethically" defensible. That, after all, is the point.[50] By explaining Abraham's choice not to explain himself, Silentio repeats the mistake he ascribes to Hegel. Put another way, Silentio wants to translate the paradoxical knowledge of faith so that it can be mediated into certainty. But, as he has shown, the integrity of faith rests on a paradox that cannot be sublated. Just as Socratic philosophy retains its zetetic character through Socrates's knowledge of ignorance, so does religious

[49]Edward F. Mooney also notes the limited ways in which Socrates transcends the realm of the ethical but does not go as far as I do in suggesting that Socrates resembles Abraham in this final section. See Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 139–41.

[50]I thus agree with Pangle who argues—"(as Socrates would have predicted)"—that *Fear and Trembling* "would appear to be incapable of steadfastly sticking with [the] attempt to attribute the faith of Abraham, or of anyone, to the absurd or indeed insane specific contradiction originally claimed" (Pangle, *God of Abraham*, 181).

faith in the Abrahamic model never truly move beyond fear and trembling: it is this character of each life which allows it to remain erotic. Thus the very best Silentio can do in attempting to give the paradox a public face is a final hypothetical—what Jacques Derrida calls a surprisingly "evangelical" ending: "Either there is then a paradox, that the single individual as the particular stands in absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham is lost" (106).[51] This is an appeal which only works if one is already committed to "saving" Abraham; but as an inducement toward faith, it fails utterly. Hegel, moreover, would confidently argue that there is not such a paradox, and, as Merold Westphal points out, had no compunction about "losing" Abraham.[52]

This unsatisfying conclusion to the dialectical part of *Fear and Trembling* gives way to an urgent Epilogue which, as Conway puts it, makes Silentio "once again the voluble social critic whom we recall from the 'Preface.'"[53] He reflects on a story about some Dutch merchants who purportedly dumped their cargo of spice at sea in order to drive up the price back home, a move he calls "a pardonable, perhaps a necessary stratagem." He then asks: "Are we so sure of having attained the highest that there is nothing left to do except piously to delude ourselves that we have not come so far in order still to have something with which to fill the time?" (107). In other words, can we cynically employ religious belief as a way of propping up the ethical life? Silentio wonders whether a pious delusion—convincing ourselves we need paradox as a political strategy—might be precisely what we need. He seems to think that faith posited as something higher than the political community is useful for overcoming the malaise of postmodern life. In admitting such a political motivation for writing, however, Silentio places the *telos* of his work firmly within the universal. Reflecting on the conclusion to the third puzzle, we see that Abraham's silence is ethically justified for Silentio only inasmuch as it helps maintain the integrity of the ethical realm itself. Faith cannot be mediated, but Silentio's *use* of faith to inspire the "present generation" is readable to all. It is one thing to have an absolute relation to the absolute; it is quite another to recommend such a relationship because one believes it produces good citizens.[54]

[51]Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 81.

[52]Neither Silentio nor Kierkegaard appears to have had access to Hegel's early theological writings in which he published what Westphal calls a "bitter polemic" against Abraham. Nevertheless, the existence of these writings confirms Silentio's reading of Hegel. See Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society*, 76n52.

[53]Daniel Conway, introduction to *Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling,"* 2.

[54]Conway raises the possibility of the interpretation I offer here, but suggests that he will leave its development for "another occasion" (Conway, "Particularity and Ethical Attunement," 218).

Since we have spoken about Abraham and Socrates's final words, it is useful to note that Silentio's final words confirm this reading:

> "One must go further; one must go further." This urge to go further is ancient in the world. Heraclitus . . . has said: "One cannot pass through the same river twice." Heraclitus the obscure had a disciple who did not stop there; he went further and added: "One cannot do it even once." Poor Heraclitus, to have such a disciple! By this improvement the Heraclitian thesis was amended to an Eleatic thesis that denies motion, and yet that disciple only wanted to be a disciple of Heraclitus who went further, not back, to what Heraclitus had abandoned. (109)

The "disciple" who went further is Cratylus,[55] but this description could equally apply to the "obscure" Hegel, whose understanding of the progression of Spirit in history is very much akin to being unable to pass through the same river twice. Silentio understands himself and his predicament well enough to know that he has failed in going further than Hegel.[56] His argument that there are things that cannot be mediated by the ethical life is made on behalf of the ethical life itself. Faith translated into knowledge becomes wisdom—a comprehensive account of the whole. Just as Socratic *philosophia* implies an active love of wisdom that is never consummated, so must faith retain an element of "fear and trembling" if it is to remain faith. Pangle argues that the "specific" absurdity described by *Fear and Trembling* could never be said to be experienced by any believer, but Silentio forces us to consider that religious faith must always remain discrete from knowledge, even in cases less dramatic than that of Abraham. Silentio's failure to answer his final question is then not a failure in this sense: it is simply necessary that if he is right in his thesis about Hegel, he could not straightforwardly demonstrate that he is right. Silentio fails not because he is insufficiently political, as many critics of *Fear and Trembling* insist, but because he is *too* invested in leveraging his arguments for the purposes of politics. Silentio's own personal dilemma—his alienation from the world—is caused by his skepticism about whether the paradox can be lived out in actuality. As Mulhall puts it, "Silentio's supposedly anti-Hegelian account of the religious realm remains implicitly indebted to Hegel's understanding of the ethical realm (as his reliance upon the characteristically Hegelian operation of negation to power his supposedly anti-Hegelian dialectic would anyway

[55]My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

[56]Aroosi views this reference to Heraclitus as Kierkegaard's attempt to show that accepting the world as flux can lead to "Socratic detachment" which "helps remedy our anxious desire to dominate" (Aroosi, *Dialectical Self*, 96). This may well be so, but Aroosi then links Kierkegaard's purported fluxism with Marx's contention that modern capitalism makes "all that is solid [melt] into air" (96). Aroosi's omission of the pseudonymous authorship of *Fear and Trembling* leads him to wrongly absorb Kierkegaard into the immanence of Hegelian thought by way of Marx.

suggest)."[57] But Johannes de Silentio's real problem is that he cannot resist attempting to earn his place in the world by using his anti-Hegelian argument for Hegelian purposes.

## Conclusion

But if Silentio fails to overcome Hegel in *Fear and Trembling* does this not suggest that scholars who view Kierkegaard to be compatible with Hegelian and Marxist analyses of political life are correct? If Kierkegaard's point is to show that an attempt to use faith to revitalize political life will destroy faith and philosophy alike, does *that* not in fact vindicate those who view him as hostile to political philosophy? The answer to both questions hinges on the purpose Kierkegaard intends for Silentio's failure. While we have considered last words at length, we might here pause to think about first ones. The epigraph to *Fear and Trembling* famously features a quotation from Johann Georg Hamann, author of *Socratic Memorabilia*, a text which uses the figure of Socrates to critique Kant's approach to Christianity: "What Tarquin the Proud communicated in his garden with the beheaded poppies was understood by the son but not by the messenger" (2). As many have observed, this quotation might describe the filial silence between God and Abraham or Abraham and Isaac, while the "messenger" who fails to understand is clearly Silentio himself.[58] The silent messenger is the garrulous John of Silence, who does not understand the significance of his own communication. While God does not require the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, Kierkegaard "sacrifices" Silentio to Hegel, that angry deity, in order to vindicate the existence of a subjectivity that resists mediation into the universal. Writing is an art of silence, and by writing the sacrifice of Silentio, Kierkegaard is able to "speak" while remaining silent. He thus speaks without speaking, which is irony in the mode of Abraham and Socrates according to *Fear and Trembling* itself (105). Kierkegaard then mounts an ironic defense of irony.

What is the purpose of Kierkegaard's irony? Silentio's "questionable strategy" of defending faith to buttress political life fails, but his failure is instructive because it shows how the modern state depends on higher erotic pursuits which the ethical life alone cannot sustain. Through Silentio Kierkegaard

[57]Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, 382. See also Carlisle, "Johannes de Silentio's Dilemma," 59–60.

[58]Ronald Green gives the classic answer to this question: *Fear and Trembling* lacks a discussion of sin. See Green, "Deciphering *Fear and Trembling*'s Secret Message," *Religious Studies* 22, no. 1 (March 1986): 95–111 Scholars are rightly fascinated by the "secret" message in *Fear and Trembling*; the exchange between Kosch and Lippitt is instructive in surveying the terrain. See Kosch, "What Abraham Couldn't Say," and Lippitt, "What neither Abraham nor Johannes de Silentio Could Say." My reading is closest to Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*.

observes that modern political life, when allied with a speculative approach to philosophy and skepticism about the supernatural elements of revelation, attempts to annul paradox, undermining *erōs*. Hegel's thought is the most confident and comprehensive articulation of the modern belief that the most intractable problems of political life can be solved through dialectic and intelligent institutions—a perspective shared, in an altered form, by Marx. By showing the failure of any such program on human terms without fully justifying his critique with reference to the horizons of the city, Kierkegaard's Socratic irony punctures the modern state's claims to universality. Kierkegaard also challenges the role played by Socrates and Christianity in the historical narrative Hegel sketches of the development of Spirit, and on which his defense of the modern state depends. So, if, as Silentio suggests, Socrates's distinctiveness is the result neither of revelation nor of a one-time contingency of Spirit, then the particular may indeed be higher than the universal on the terms of philosophical rationalism properly understood. "Infinite subjectivity" is not substantially different in different historical moments, as Hegel insists it is. If we view our passionate tasks to be in principle the same as those of Abraham and Socrates, we can also see that no city will satisfy our *erōs*. It is only once we understand the limitations of political life that we can begin to recover its truly political tasks.

Kierkegaard's complex, ironical strategy in *Fear and Trembling* thereby challenges his readers to see the promises of reason and revelation on their own terms, and not in their relation to the ethical universal of the modern state, nor as mediated by historical consciousness. Kierkegaard's instructive retrieval of the erotic intrigue of the lives of faith and philosophy, of Abraham and Socrates, points to the human longings which resist absorption into a universal philosophy of history. Kierkegaard therefore does not aim to destroy political philosophy, but to restore its attentiveness to paradox and thereby its analysis of the salutary, if competing, visions of human life offered by Abraham and Socrates.[59] For all these reasons, *Fear and Trembling* is not a definitive work, but a propaedeutic, designed to remove the barriers to analysis erected by Hegelian, and post-Hegelian, thought. Indeed, another of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, goes so far as to call *Fear and Trembling* "a noble lie."[60] Since this is so, those scholars attempting to use this text to contribute to a systematic account of political life in the Hegelian tradition fall victim to the precise error Kierkegaard predicts and controls for through his use of Socratic irony.

[59]Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, 216–18.

[60]Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 262. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out. The nature of how these options are viewed in light of the specific claims of Christian revelation can be explored only by other pseudonyms—thus the "contest" between Socrates and Christ in *Philosophical Fragments*—but the possibility of such an investigation is established through the critique of Hegelian historicism laid down in *Fear and Trembling*.

If Silentio is like the disciple of Heraclitus who, in wanting to "go further," ends up going back, Kierkegaard shows us that the only way one *can* "go further" *is* by "going back"; that is, by recovering classical political philosophy. One way of doing so would be to reconsider the basic questions of human life as explored in Plato's depiction of the life of Socrates. Another is a litigation of the claims about the good life made by revealed religion on its own terms, and Christianity in its historical specificity. If the modern state is not understood to supersede the roles given to these distinctive human ways of life—if the paradoxes of faith and philosophy alike can be understood as compelling and life affirming—then human beings can be awakened to the task of a serious and comprehensive, erotic, search for the good human life. Such a strategy on Kierkegaard's part *is itself* Socratic because it is an attempt to recover the prediscursive or "simple" character of human existence.[61] To borrow a phrase, if this is not the case, then Johannes de Silentio is done for, and there has never been anyone to go further than Hegel.

[61]Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 17.