

# Distinctions between johannes de silentio's three stages in fear and trembling



To read Johannes de Silentio's account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Fear and Trembling is to understand the paradoxical nature of the single individual and how there are internal and external forces that define the individual in the particular and in relation to everything else around them. This account explores Abraham's journey up the mountain to sacrifice his son, Isaac, because God called him to do so. During this ordeal, Abraham encounters a moral yet absurd expedition, and in the eyes of Johannes de Silentio, experiences a double movement of faith that defines the journey going up the mountain, at the moment when Abraham raises his knife in front of Isaac's line of sight, and going down the mountain. This double movement, with the knight of infinite resignation being the first movement, and the knight of faith being the second, is the process of acquiring the status of knight of faith. The knight of infinite resignation is the concern with the ethical and universal and how the knight of infinite resignation is bound by infinitude, while the knight of faith is the second movement and acquires the first movement of resignation, but comes with the greater understanding of the virtue of the absurd that Isaac will come back a second time. The difference is that by virtue of the absurd, the individual (knight of faith) as the particular will surpass the aesthetic and universal means to land back in the world of the finite, where Isaac is illustrated to be.

Abraham had to encounter three stages of the ways of life to acquire the status of "knight of faith" in the eyes of Johannes de Silentio. The first stage, the aesthetics, is the emphasis on privacy and silence. For this assumption purely, Abraham is already beyond this. The reason he was silent was "not at all to save Isaac, as in general the whole task of sacrificing Isaac for his

own and God's sake is an outrage aesthetically' (136-137). The paradox and the distress therein lies in his accidental particularity and how the next stage of life's way, the ethical, condemns him that he remain silent. It is not that he chooses not to speak, but it is that he cannot speak. Language is limiting and cannot capture the true sense of another's understanding, therefore this is where the anguish prevails. Abraham believes that sacrificing Isaac was a trial, and that saying beautiful, eloquent statements is not what he has in mind. Because this cannot be understood, "no one can but misunderstand the former" (137). The meaning of "something that cannot be said" purely means in this context that it cannot be understood. A part of Abraham's identity is that he cannot speak, so if he were to give into this, he would not be Abraham. His silence is above the universal, meaning the ethical, and for that, the temptation to speak would bring him back to that second stage of life's way, where he would be back to the knight of infinite resignation. His silence passed the tenure of the aesthetic, as aesthetics would demand the "silence of the individual when by remaining silent he could save another" (136). His purpose to remain silent is beyond this, as it was concealing his intention to kill him. God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and by some belief in the absurdity that he will get Isaac back for a second time, he transcends the ethical stage but especially the aesthetic stage, for his silence is not a means of disclosure but a means of preserving language for the fact that the absurdity of this calling will prevail and transcend any form of language.

The second stage of the way of life, the ethical, is where the universality of the knight of infinite resignation lies. Picture a world, where under the

boundaries of the world is a finite presence where Isaac resides. The first movement on the way to the knight of faith is this first movement of infinite resignation. Under this world, both the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith leap into the air into infinity leaving the world behind. The knight of faith returns to the world of finitude, while the knight of infinite resignation wavers back and forth between the world of finitude and the infinity. In faith, Abraham receives the world. He achieved relation to his child by returning back to the faith in the religious and not in the faith of the universal (Ross). The double movement of faith calls that the knight of faith also embodies the first movement of infinite resignation, for “ if one imagines one can be moved to faith by considering the outcome of this story, one deceives oneself, and is out to cheat God of faith’s first movement...” (66). Going up the mountain, Abraham embodies the knight of infinite resignation and makes movements of infinitude, going closer to sacrificing Isaac and fulfilling God’s love for Abraham and the covenant. The knight of infinite resignation is immersed in the deep sorrow of existence and experiences sentiments of pain for renouncing everything, but also to him, “ finitude tastes just as good to one who has never known anything higher...” (70). Because finitude is in relation to the knight of faith and the world of finitude is in relation to Isaac, Abraham (in Johannes de Silentio’s perspective) is considered a knight of faith. The distinct difference between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith is the belief of the absurd, for Abraham believes infinitely, yet also believes that by some strength of the absurd that Isaac will return to him. He makes the movement of infinity, but with finitude as a product of accuracy, he moves so much so that it leads to the sentiments of the knight of faith.

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The third and final stage of the way of life is the religious, which is in relation to the knight of faith. The religious stance is above the ethical and universal, which is what Abraham seemingly personifies on the way down from the mountain. The single individual comes to play here, and is in particular to the journey down the mountain, living for God. Abraham has already experienced the universal in relation to the infinity and now resorts back to the individual pursuit of God's love. Abraham comes down the mountain with abundant joy because he has not only fulfilled the covenant of God, but believes that by some absurd strain, Isaac will be returned to him (Ross). Faith is something other than obedience to God. It extends beyond that, and "the single individual as the particular stands in relation to the absolute" (144). The single individual as the particular triumphs the aesthetics as well as the religious, with a distinction of the ethical participating in the universal in relation to everything else.

There is a moment when Abraham lifts his knife in Isaac's line of sight, and that in itself alters the relationship between Isaac and Abraham. At this point, Abraham's title as a father is altered, as he actually considers sacrificing his own son. Abraham is to conceal his intentions of the reasons for sacrificing Isaac, not for the reason of saving Isaac, but to remain a knight of faith. To speak would be a temptation from God to enter back into the ethical state and not maintain a knight of faith, and for that his silence is pertinent. The knight of faith cannot be understood because its existence is reliant on the righteousness of the absurd. By some illogical, irrational explanation, the knight of faith succeeds and fills the covenant of love beyond being more than obedient to God. Johannes de Silentio considers

Abraham a knight of faith based on these judgements. Through the ethical and the religious, Abraham goes through a double movement of faith to fulfill God's request, and through the pursuit of the single individual in the particular, the universal, and the religious, uses his silence and the absurd to be identified as a knight of faith rather than solely the knight of infinite resignation.