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Eschatological Faith? Or Faith in Fatherly Providence? *Fear and Trembling* and the Fatherhood of God

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Abstract: Comprehending *Fear and Trembling* is no small task: the best that can be done is to pull at one thread at a time to slowly illuminate the whole. One such thread is the Fatherhood of God. Kierkegaard gave the pseudonymous *Fear and Trembling* with his left hand and the *Upbuilding Discourses* with his right hand. What can we conclude about the interplay between *Fear and Trembling* and these discourses? One outcome is a movement toward the Fatherhood of God. The anxiety of walking with Abraham to Moriah is supposed to lead the reader to maturely consider what it might mean to live in the world confident of the presence and purpose of God the Father. I propose we see Abraham holding not an “eschatological faith”, but a faith in Fatherly providence. Kierkegaard understood his own complex life as held together by the Fatherly kindness of God or God’s Governance.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; faith; Abraham; providence; God the Father; *Fear and Trembling*; governance

1. Introduction

The complexity and intrigue of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* are well-attested, as is the proliferation of ways to understand its purpose and meaning. The extraordinary richness of Kierkegaard’s exploration of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac permits many angles of inquiry and resists attempts at all-encompassing interpretations. There is good reason for this: Kierkegaard’s work was designed as a polemic against an ethical system like the Hegelian concept of *Sittlichkeit*, which saw the achievement of ethical life in modern ethical societal norms.¹ The multifaceted interpretative possibilities mean that attention to a single theme is often the best course to enrich our understanding of the whole. Kline’s suggestion is perhaps best: “I take it that, fundamentally, it is a kind of spiritual workbook, a text meant to “work on” the reader” (Kline 2012, p. 503). As such, this paper seeks to elucidate one thread that lies unexplored, the Fatherhood of God, which is brought to clarity in the *Upbuilding Discourses* which accompanied its entry into the world in 1843. The Fatherhood of God is revealed in the conversation between Kierkegaard’s works and is an aspect designed to “work on” the reader.

Understanding this thread of Kierkegaard’s thinking around fatherhood helps advance the modern discussion of the so-called “teleological suspension of the ethical” in *Problema I*. Does the sacrifice of Isaac entail Abraham to suspend other ethical considerations? How else shall we justify Abraham’s ethical actions?

The story of Abraham contains, then, a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the single individual, he became higher than the universal. . . he who walks the narrow road of faith has no one to advise him—no one understands him. (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 67; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 159)

Anthony Rudd suggests this amounts to little more than construing Abraham’s actions in terms of his relationship with God: “The call to sacrifice Isaac comes from Abraham’s personal, individual relation to God”, so “if Abraham is justified in his action, he is justified as the single individual in defiance of the universal ethical norms” (Rudd 1997,



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p. 147). Here is a rejection of Kantian rationality and socially construed Hegelian ethics (Evans 2004, p. 69). Kierkegaard's aim is unapologetically polemical. In contrast, Alistair MacIntyre suggests that Kierkegaard "misconstrued the relation between reasoning and revelation" such that revelation "extends and reinforces" but never "abrogates... the natural law" (MacIntyre 2001, p. 351). The conclusion is that there could be no such thing as a "teleological suspension of the ethical". The radical nature of the Kierkegaardian paradox misconstrues the ethical relationship between the world and revelation in Christ.

A proposed solution to the radical break of a "suspension" is found in John Davenport's "eschatological faith". He suggests this is a "trust that the highest ethical ideals will be fulfilled by God as God promises us".² God will ensure the natural law is not overturned. Here, the potential issues are deferred as God, by his power, can fulfil his promises "*within time*" or in "*the hereafter*" (Davenport 2008, p. 84). Davenport's view seems coherent with the assessment of the book of Hebrews. Abraham looked to the promise of blessing through his offspring and looked particularly to the "resurrection" as a solution to the problem (Heb. 11:17–18). Westphal's critique is that Davenport introduces a future aspect to the text, which is not present in Abraham's thinking (Westphal 2014, p. 38). Genesis does not suggest that Abraham's vision rose to the eschatological horizon. Should we construe Abraham as seeking an eschatological resolution to his ethical dilemma?

While agreeing with Davenport, John Lippitt suggests a simpler commitment to God's transcendence and goodness (Lippitt 2015a, pp. 135–36). Here, in line with Kierkegaard's discourse, "the expectancy of faith", Kierkegaard speaks of all things serving the good of the believer: "What is the expectancy of faith? Victory—or, as Scripture so earnestly and so movingly teaches us, that all things must serve for good those who love God" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 19; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 28). Lippitt refers to the shape of God's providential action as expressed in Romans 8, where all things "work together" for an overall good. Such a suggestion is more than "eschatological faith". It seeks a greater confidence in the one who holds all things together in himself. Likewise, Krishek considers how love of God needs to be accompanied by an abiding *trust* in "God's promises" and ultimately in "God's goodness" (Krishek 2015, p. 117). "The deep joy in finitude—that only faith can bring about—is based, then, on the trust of the believer in God's goodness and providence" (Krishek 2015, p. 119). Hence, it would appear simpler to say that Abraham believed in the providence of his God. I intend to argue one step further that providence in scripture is appropriated to "the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live" (1 Cor. 8:6). Rather than an eschatological hope of receiving back what was lost, Abraham was confident in the providence of God as Father and his ability to draw all things together for good.

The Fatherhood of God is a neglected theme in Kierkegaard scholarship.³ Yet, when we consider his journals, they are replete with references to a deep and abiding relationship with God as Father. He is especially clear on the relation of his earthly father to his Heavenly Father: "My father died—then I for another father in his place: God in heaven; and I discovered that my first father had properly [speaking] been my stepfather and only improperly [speaking] my first father" (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 4, p. 415 [NB 5:102] 1848; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 20, p. 414). In the years prior to writing *Fear and Trembling*, he considered how the failure of fatherhood leads people to search for "the idea of Him, the Almighty Creator of all things as well as the common Father of all".⁴ In the same year, after visiting his Father's hometown, Kierkegaard said: "I learned from him what fatherly love is, and through this, I gained a conception of divine fatherly love, the one single unshakeable thing in life, the true Archimedean point" (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 3, p. 196 [Not. 6:24–28] 1840; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 19, p. 200). Therefore, God's Fatherhood, and its relation to earthly fatherhood, is on his mind. Indeed, one entry from 1840 is the basis for a section in the discourse *Strengthening in the Inner Being* published in the same year as *Fear and Trembling*.⁵

Hence, this paper seeks to explore the thread of Fatherhood in *Fear and Trembling*: in doing so, we can clarify further that eschatological faith is best seen as a trust in Fatherly

providence. To make this argument, I will bring *Fear and Trembling* into conversation with some of the *Upbuilding Discourses* published in the same year. The question is as follows: how do we relate *Fear and Trembling* to the simultaneously published discourses? Pattison unpacks Kierkegaard's saying in his *Point of View* about the structure of his authorship: "With my left hand I passed *Either/Or* out into the world, with my right hand *Two Upbuilding Discourses* but they all or almost all took the left hand with the right" (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 36; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 16, p. 21). Pattison suggests that, although he refers to specific works, "this is to be taken as a paradigm for the relationship between the whole pseudonymous authorship and the whole of the upbuilding writings". Pattison suggests perhaps the pseudonymous writings are "a ruse to lure secular-minded readers in and, eventually, to lead them to the religious message of the upbuilding works" (Pattison 2012, p. 216).

Kierkegaard's world is a world of perpetual motion, in which we are constantly being summoned to picture or to enact the movement of repetition, of resignation, and the *double movement* of faith (Pattison 2012, p. 218). Kierkegaard's theology, then, is not an attempt to teach his readers the truth about God or to tell them what he presumes already to know about God. His theology is itself offered as a call to them to get moving and to rise up and to follow where and wherever incarnate love will lead them. (Pattison 2012, p. 228)

In all of this, what "Kierkegaard's right hand point[s] us to is, in the end, not a doctrine but a person", namely, the God who comes close to us (Pattison 2012, p. 227). Therefore, doubts are raised in the "left hand" to which answers can be sought in the "right hand" of the authorship. Kierkegaard's *On My Work as an Author* further confirms the movement that Pattison suggests. There is motion from the purely aesthetic pseudonyms through the central philosophical work of the Postscript to the final goal of the communion table with Christ.⁶ The pseudonyms are part of an elaborate journey; there is a movement through the works of Kierkegaard's corpus. In another comment, Kierkegaard states that, "in order to safeguard this concurrence of the directly religious, every pseudonymous work was accompanied concurrently by a little collection of "upbuilding discourses" (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 8; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 13, p. 14). There is a constant movement between pseudonyms and *Upbuilding Discourses*.

Therefore, we need to read Kierkegaard with this motion in mind. Jeffery Hanson admits that the pseudonym Silentio keeps the thought of God "at arm's length", acknowledging its importance but doubting how the reality of God's love can be reconciled with the actuality of existence (Hanson 2017, p. 23). Likewise, for Stephen Evans, *Fear and Trembling* raises "troubling and profound questions" about "the ethical and the religious", particularly Hegelian ethics. However, answers to these questions require an "account of the ethical life... from within the life of faith", which De Silentio cannot provide (Evans 2004, pp. 83–84). Silentio is clear: "But I do not have faith; this courage I lack!" (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 34; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 129). Therefore, if Kierkegaard gives *Fear and Trembling* with his left hand, what might be in his right hand in the *Upbuilding Discourses*? As Kierkegaard himself says, "Christ is God's right hand" (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 4, 234 [NB2:249] 1847; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 20, p. 234). God gives himself to us in his son, yet there is more here for us; the "good and perfect gift" is not "the gift of longing or love for God" as Pattison suggests (Pattison 2012, pp. 227–28). The good and perfect gift is God, God's gift of himself to us as Father through his Spirit. Or, rather, the right hand of the Father is Christ, who draws us to Himself through the Spirit. This paper suggests that one of the things *Fear and Trembling* sets us up for is to receive the Fatherhood of God revealed in the *Upbuilding Discourses*.

The substance of this article will claim that (1) God's Fatherhood is a thread which can be found in the interplay between *Fear and Trembling* and the *Upbuilding Discourses*, which were published in the same year, and, (2) on the basis of this, we can make sense of Abraham's faith as a trust in Fatherly providence. Firstly, I will consider the substance of Kierkegaard's "left hand" and how *Fear and Trembling* considers divine and human

fatherhood through an opening allusion which is then developed in the “false Abraham narratives” into the question of whether a fatherly love exists at the basis of existence. Johannes De Silentio then hints at how the double movement of faith requires confidence in a divine giver.

Secondly, I will then proceed to Kierkegaard’s “right hand”. Initially, I will consider the *Three Upbuilding Discourses* published on the same day as *Fear and Trembling*, particularly, the discourse *Strengthening in the Inner Being*, which brings the theme of fatherhood into focus. Across the course of these discourses, Kierkegaard is considering the nature of “love” and its presence in the heart. The final discourse crystallises that God’s love is fatherly in nature and that it is the Spirit who mediates God’s Fatherhood to the core of the being of the believer. I will then, secondarily, consider the three discourses on *Every Good and Perfect Gift is From Above*, based on James 1:16–17. These discourses were published in *Two Upbuilding Discourses* and *Four Upbuilding Discourses* which were published on 16 May and 6 December of 1843, respectively. In doing this, I am expanding beyond the immediate “right hand” of *Fear and Trembling*. Such a move has a precedent in Davenport and Lippitt, who similarly look beyond the immediate *Upbuilding Discourses* to build their understanding of “eschatological faith”.⁷ In addition, the repetition of the same Bible passage, James 1:16–17, before and after *Fear and Trembling* suggests that it is on Kierkegaard’s mind in 1843. Indeed, there is a deep theological resonance between the discourses which focuses upon how the believer can have confidence in a Fatherly love at the base of creation. The rich vision of fatherhood extends through the whole year. Together, when we pay attention to the thread of fatherhood, we move from the doubt of De Silentio to the possibility of trusting divine fatherly love. Finally, I will conclude we can see that Abraham’s faith was in Fatherly providence rather than a broad “eschatological faith” and consider how this also occurs in Kierkegaard’s understanding of the *governance* involved in his own life from *Point of View*.

2. Kierkegaard’s Left Hand: Is There True Fatherly Love Beneath Existence?

I will begin by considering how a thread concerning the problems of earthly and heavenly Fatherhood is woven through *Fear and Trembling*. To make clear, I am not suggesting that fatherhood is the hermeneutic key to the whole of the book. Rather, in the midst of many complex realities, fatherhood is present and perhaps underutilised. The theme of fatherhood in the book leaves unanswered questions. To begin with, there are simple allusions at the outset of *Fear and Trembling*, which places fatherhood, earthly and heavenly, on view. Divine Fatherhood is placed in the opening atmosphere through the title *Fear and Trembling* itself:

The theme of Philippians 2... is forever in the background of *Fear and Trembling*; as Christ emptied himself radically, so must the faithful believer empty herself and adopt a wholly transformed style of life, one inclusive of obedience to the will of the Father. (Hanson 2017, p. 32)

The Father also exalts Christ so that “every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11). The same Father is working in the believer as they “work out their salvation with fear and trembling” (v.12). The Father “works” in the believer “to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose” (v.13). Such an interpretation may seem to move too far beyond the allusion. But, elsewhere, Kierkegaard uses “Philippians 2:5–11, a central passage for the Lutheran Heritage” and “repeats this language” throughout *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*.⁸ He firstly refers to the idea that Christ “who was equal with God took the form of a lowly servant” (UDVS, 224/Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 8, p. 325), and “Christ humbled himself unto death and the same mind is to be in those who follow him (Phil 2:5ff)”. Thus, we too are “to be carried in obedience into death, so that the imitator [Efterfølger]” (UDVS, 221/Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 8, p. 323). David Law suggests that this emphasis upon obedience is a unique contribution of Kierkegaard’s when considering this text.⁹ De Silentio’s work begins with a key Lutheran and Kierkegaardian

allusion. Perhaps we cannot make too much of it, but it suggests both the complex ethical anxiety De Silentio will invoke and that it occurs before the Father of Jesus Christ.

Within the opening, there is a further plausible connection to God's Fatherhood through the theme of silence. The pseudonymous De Silentio is designed to "speak about faith by talking around the point, illuminating by contrast" through silence (Hanson 2017, p. 36). Kierkegaard also speaks of the communicative silence of God the Father: "You are still the same Father, the same fatherliness, whether you lead by your voice or teach through your silence" (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 11 part 2, p. 53 [Paper 340:2] 1846; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 27, p. 350). In *Fear and Trembling*, there is a silence around God's Fatherhood that invites us into further intimacy with him. The epigram completes the connection between fathers and silence at the outset: "What Tarquinius Superbus said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not". The son of Tarquinius Superbus conquered the ancient city of Gabii. Tarquinius said nothing in response to his son's messenger, his response of cutting the poppies was the message. The messenger did not understand the message regarding the poppies, but his son knew it meant he needed to kill the city's key leaders. "It seems to me quite plausible that Johannes De Silentio is himself the messenger of the book, and he communicates something that he himself does not understand" (Evans 2004, p. 63). It is the role of De Silentio to carry a message from a Father to a son without understanding its content. We are to come to know God's Fatherhood through Johannes's silence. Of course, the theme of silence, both human and divine, is richer and more complex than simply an allusion to fatherhood. Silence, an inability to articulate the complexity of Abraham's faith is also a vital part of what follows. However, it seems that, in concert with the title, we are, at the very least, being primed to wrestle with the silence of Abraham and God.

Following this, the exordium explicitly opens the question of how to relate divine and human fatherhood. In the exordium, we are presented with some pictures of Abraham at his worst and are drawn into questions about the insufficiency of earthly fathers. Curiously, these passages also raise pictures of motherhood—particularly the weaning of children—which appear to strengthen the focus on the failure of fatherhood.¹⁰ Jacob Howland helpfully demonstrates how weaning is an exegetical detail that is part of the midrash supplied by De Silentio (Howland 2015, pp. 37–38). In the chapter previous to the testing of Abraham, Sarah "weans" Isaac, demonstrating he has come of age and will live (Gen. 21:8). Sarah then despises Ishmael, the son of Abraham by her handmaid Hagar, and Hagar with Ishmael is sent away (v.14). When Hagar and Ishmael are out of supplies, an angel of the Lord appears and gives them water. It is a parallel provision of the ram to sacrifice in place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13–14).¹¹ Here, the Lord hears the cry of the boy, Ishmael. The failure of Abraham to provide for Ishmael is fulfilled by God's care for him. Earlier, after Hagar attempts to flee from her mistress's ill-treatment, the Lord demonstrates his care for Hagar and Ishmael, to which Hagar exclaims, "you are a God who sees me" (Gen. 15:13). Sarah commanded Abraham to have a child with Hagar: Abraham is passive and at the whim of Sarah when it comes to Ishmael. The failure of Abraham's fatherhood is on view in this reality of Isaac's "weaning". Yet, the Father in Heaven sees and provides for Ishmael as he does Isaac. God's provision comes into view through Abraham's fatherly failure. Remarkably and intimately, though Ishmael grows up without a father, "God is with the boy as he grew up" (Gen. 21:20).¹² Ishmael grows up with God as his father rather than Abraham.

Hence, the subject of weaning is a textual clue to read the sacrifice of Isaac, aware of Abraham's "less than fatherly" care of Ishmael (Howland 2015, p. 40). The first "false Abraham" narrative demonstrates a movement from Abraham's face, which "epitomised fatherliness", to his shocking statement: "Stupid boy, do you think I am your father?" Isaac's response is to look for a heavenly Father: "God in heaven. . . if I have no father on earth, then you be my father!" (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 10; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, pp. 107–8). The failure of his earthly father leads him to cry out to the heavenly Father, as Ishmael also found. The maternal image that follows shows the mother blackening her

breast but remaining “tender and loving” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 11; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 108). In contrast to Abraham’s failure, the mother allows the child to be weaned, to grow into their fullness, by lovingly turning her breast away. Here, we have an equation of earthly and divine fathers. “Faith in God requires us to abandon childish notions of who God is and how he works in our lives” (Hanson 2017, p. 58). Given the failure of earthly fatherhood, we are to consider the Father in heaven.

The fullness of the first narrative sets the paradigm of what follows. Abraham wrestles with how to continue in faith with a God who commanded the sacrifice. The final contrast epitomises the second narrative: “Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham’s eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 12; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 109). Abraham has not found out how to joyfully live after receiving the good again from God. Similarly, the third false Abraham was lost in despair: “he could not understand that it could be forgiven, for what more terrible sin was there?” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 13; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 110). The two maternal images that follow these vignettes concern motherly constancy in and through the sorrows of a child growing up. There is a way to feel the fullness of a child’s growth and grief while remaining in loving attachment, particularly in the face of “separations” (Hanson 2017, p. 63). The final vignette concerns Isaac’s double “loss of faith”: a loss of faith in his earthly father and also in his divine father (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 14; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 111). Again, the motherly figure provides “sustenance” for the child and enables a continued connection for them in their faith. The mother promotes a further connection to Divine Fatherhood through constancy, admitting how a child’s perception of divine and human realities are always intertwined. There are major questions here about the relation between divine and earthly fathers and how to sustain faith in a God of love in and through the trials of life. As we read, we are sensitive to “parental abandonment” and De Silentio’s unfulfilled longing for “faith as a life-sustaining intimacy with God that can weather any storm” (Howland 2015, p. 40). How, in fact, can the realities of life be a chance for maturation into a fuller intimacy with God as Father?

As *Fear and Trembling* shifts from the exordium to the next section, we see the significance of the question of God’s Fatherhood opened up. There is a shift from a narrative approach to comprehending the nature of Abraham’s actions through the use of “rhetoric” in the *Eulogy on Abraham* (Hanson 2017, p. 73). Hanson notes this passage that appears to burst out intrusively into the section (Hanson 2017, p. 74):

If human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild fermenting power that writhing in a dark passion produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair? If such were the situation, if there were no sacred bond that knit humankind together, if one generation emerged after another like forest foliage... if an eternal oblivion, perpetually hungry, lurked for its prey and there was no power strong enough to wrench that away from it—how empty and devoid of consolation life would be! (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 15; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 112)

Hanson concludes that this sets the stage by gaining our attention (Hanson 2017, p. 70). However, it more importantly unearths the greater question that lurks beneath the reality of Abraham’s story. Indeed, Vanessa Rumble directly connects it to the “trauma” of parental losses in Kierkegaard’s own family, which haunt the “weaning” references in the exordium.¹³ We “feel the jolt” of the death of Kierkegaard’s sisters and mother, and the children who survived them, and are forced to confront the “meaninglessness which it opens up” (Rumble 2015, p. 262). The nature of the demand upon Abraham and his need to navigate it sets up a query about the nature of existence and what ultimately lies underneath everything. The question of whether there is a Divine Father to adopt us, as Ishmael had, is one with great existential weight. If there is “fermenting” or “dark passion” at the base, it would lead to “despair” and drain life of any consolation. The alternative to a chaotic entropy beneath the universe is the benevolent goodness of a Father who holds

all things and all humanity in his arms. The question of the “consciousness” at the basis of reality raises the polemical nature of *Fear and Trembling* in its Hegelian context. The nature of the *Fear and Trembling*’s critique of the communal ethics of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* is less about the polarity of the collective and the individual and more about the nature of being and consciousness: “Faith arises not by virtue of the immanent movement of concepts that constitutes the dialectical work of consciousness. The possibility of faith lies in God alone” (Kline 2012, p. 507). God’s action disrupts reality and cannot be neatly ordered or systemised. Human ethical action cannot be conceived in these philosophically mediated terms. Instead, there is a need to “become entirely dependent upon and receptive to the action of God’s grace” (Kline 2012, p. 519). De Silentio cannot come to terms with this reality because it requires a lived response to the free grace of God. The consciousness at the base of reality is not revealed in human ethical discourse; it is hidden in the mind of the Father.

With this vast question, De Silentio turns to the nature of Abraham and the possibility of navigating life with the same faith. If we are to consider the rhetorical nature of the eulogy, the answer to this question about existence is “faith”. Abraham’s greatness was “by that power whose strength is powerlessness. . . that hope whose form is madness, great by love that is hatred to oneself” (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 16–17; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 113). Then follows a simple rhetorical repetition of “by faith Abraham” (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 17–21; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, pp. 113–18). The eulogy ends with a statement about “Father Abraham”, who bore witness to the “prodigious passion that disdains the terrifying battle with the raging elements and the forces of creation in order to contend with God”, which is, namely, that “in 130 years you got no further than faith” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 23; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 119). Life is not despairing emptiness because of faith and the possibility of a relation to God. Abraham’s faith in and through life’s circumstances demonstrates something about the very nature of reality. We see this question of the nature of reality and existence mirrored in De Silentio’s own wrestle concerning the nature of the love of God:

I am convinced that God is love, for me this thought has a primal ethical validity. When it is present to me, I am unspeakably happy; when it is absent, I long for it more vehemently than the love for the object of his love. But I do not have faith; this courage I lack. To me God’s love, in both the direct and the converse sense, is incommensurable with the whole of actuality. (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 34; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 129)

De Silentio’s faith fails at the point of believing in the love of God as a naked primal reality in the face of the evidence in the world. De Silentio’s wrestle with the question seems to raise the stakes of it in the discourse about Abraham. A certain anxiety is raised in the reader too: what is at the base of reality? Is there something sturdy to put faith in?

Now that we have seen how Kierkegaard develops the questions about existence and God’s Fatherhood, we come to a conclusion about what it looks like to live fully aware of God’s Fatherhood: De Silentio’s “Knight of Faith”. The substance of the “leap” made by the knight of faith involves a maturation of and deep abiding trust in God’s fatherliness.

It is supposed to be the most difficult feat for a ballet dancer to leap into a specific position in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it – but this knight does it. (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 41; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, pp. 135–36)

Hanson connects this to an “attitude of loving receptivity and joyful responsiveness” practised by the knight of faith. The knight of faith can enjoy finitude because of his knowledge of loving benevolence. He both “drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation” and yet can “delight” in life “as if finitude were the surest thing in all” (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 40; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 135). The reality is that “God is sovereign, ruler over all”, and so “the “getting back” is really a recognition that they were gifts, and thus not mine, all along”. In the “second movement. . . for the person of faith every finite thing is

construed as a gift from God" (Tietjen 2013, p. 95). Therefore, for the person of faith, life has been put in its perspective as a gift before God the Father. Faith in God transforms "one's relationship to everyone and everything else" (Tietjen 2013, p. 94). A relationship with the Father alters everything for the knight of faith.

At the heart of the paradox of Abraham's faith is a double movement of resignation and reception: Abraham is willing to give up Isaac and "to hold fast" to receive him back "after having given" him up (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 18; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 115). There are common difficulties in making sense of the nature of the "resignation" that Abraham needs to enact as a knight of faith. Anthony Cross concludes that Abraham sacrifices Isaac in the expectation he will lose him but remains confident "in the existence of an omnipotent agent who fulfils his or her promises, and who has the best interests of his or her agents at heart". Therefore, in the "absence of supporting reason", he believes he will have a meaningful life despite the loss (Cross 1999, p. 250). Lippitt suggests the opposite, that contrary to all evidence, Abraham believes Isaac will be spared (Lippitt 2015b, p. 75). Hanson is concerned that Cross and Lippitt's views are anti-intellectual. Hanson's counter-suggestion is that what is surrendered is the "ideal that the desirer has of herself" and what is received back is "the desired thing in a form the desirer cannot anticipate or imagine" (Hanson 2017, p. 126). There is a loss of the ideal for the sake of something happier and a happy life in reality. However, this movement is better construed in conversation with God's Fatherhood. Cross seems to anchor the movement in a confidence in the God who provides. The Father can also provide in an unexpected way as Hanson suggests. The maturation, through the offering and receiving of Isaac, is a fuller, more complete trust in the Fatherly goodness of God. There is a maturation in the self, a movement to a greater sense of what it means to have a Father in Heaven. In this way, there is confidence in God's Fatherly provision to spare Isaac but in an "unexpected way" rather than simply trusting "without evidence". De Silentio explicitly speaks of the one "whence come all good gifts", a clear reference to James 1:17 and the discourses on this verse (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 49; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 143). Later, he speaks of a shift in relation to becoming "God's confidant, the Lord's friend, if I may speak purely humanly, in saying "You" to God in heaven". In contrast, even the tragic hero addresses him only in the third person (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 77; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 168). Once again, he suggests that most live adhering to "ethical obligations" but letting "each day have its cares", referencing Jesus' teaching about the birds and lilies and how there is no need for anxiety when aware of the Father's care of creation (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 78; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 169). The double movement is possible, and existence is beyond despair because of the Father in Heaven who can be known.

We see the beginnings of this in Abraham's words about God's provision and overarching providence. As shown in *Problema III*, for the knight of faith to live outside common ethical or aesthetic categories, a relation to the divine must be combined in the life of faith (Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 92–93; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, pp. 182–83). It is the religious which "thinks in terms of providence and the good, or private, intimate relationship with God, rather than fate" (Hanson 2017, p. 182). Here is a vital conception of the knight of faith, a belief not in the contours of a form of necessity or fate but in the sense of a divine providential ordering of reality. Such an understanding of reality can accept life as it comes to us, but with a hope of an overturning in happiness only possible in divine power. This is the reality which Abraham's final utterance declares about his understanding of his own action: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Gen. 22:8).

Therefore he answers: God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son! From this we see, as described previously, the double-movement in Abraham's soul. If Abraham in resignation had merely relinquished Isaac and done no more, he would have spoken untruth, for he does indeed know that God demands Isaac as a sacrifice, and he knows that he himself in this very moment is willing to sacrifice him. After having made this movement, he has at every moment made the next movement, has made the movement of faith by virtue of

the absurd. Thus he is not speaking an untruth, because by virtue of the absurd it is indeed possible that God could do something entirely different. (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 119; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 4, p. 206)

Ultimately, Abraham's words belied the reality in which he lived, a sense of all things as hanging on God's providence. "So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided"" (Gen. 22:14). In the end, Kierkegaard leans on Abraham's own explanation of his action to Isaac, his dependence on the God who provides. In Hebrew, the emphasis is upon the one who "sees", yet this is a pregnant phrase; it involves the way that the unseen God makes himself known by seeing and providing what is required in a way that reveals his goodness (Hamilton 1995, pp. 113–14). The same God "saw" Ishmael and Hagar in their distress and drew near to them. Providence here is God's tending to his people for the sake of his purposes, weaving together their lives into his promises through the provision of real-life concerns.

3. Kierkegaard's Right Hand: The Fatherly Love Who Holds and Weaves Existence Together

We have seen the thread through *Fear and Trembling*, which raises the spectre of Fatherly love at the basis of existence, along with questions of the equating of earthly and heavenly fatherhood. However, De Silentio cannot confirm for us whether such love exists or how to find our way to the knight of faith's confidence. In this way, De Silentio raises questions which demand answers from another source. The *Upbuilding Discourses* published in the same year inducts us into a knowledge of Divine Fatherhood and how to access it in faith. Kierkegaard frames the *Upbuilding Discourses*, published in the same year, similarly about fatherhood. All of the discourses published in the same year are dedicated to Kierkegaard's father, Michael:

TO THE LATE

Michael Pederson Kierkegaard

FORMERLY A CLOTHING MERCHANT HERE IN THE CITY

MY FATHER (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 3, 51, 105; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, pp. 11, 61, 111).

As we have already noted, in the years before publishing these works, Kierkegaard had considered the relation between divine and earthly fathers. Kierkegaard's choice of texts similarly dwells upon God's Fatherhood. *Strengthening in the Inner Being* is based on Paul's prayer at the end of Ephesians 3, which begins: "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (Eph. 3:14–15). Kierkegaard concludes his meditation on the relation of human and divine fatherhood similarly to an earlier journal entry (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 98–101, compare with: Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 2, p.126 [HH:17–18] 1840; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 18, pp. 134–35). He directly relates what is perhaps implicit throughout: the loss of his earthly father and the gaining of a divine Father. The three discourses on *Every Good and Perfect Gift is from Above* similarly focus on divine fatherhood: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). In all his references to the first chapter of James, Kierkegaard makes sense of them through an understanding of God as the Father of heavenly lights.

First, we will look to the *Three Upbuilding Discourses* published on the same day as *Fear and Trembling*. Fatherhood is not the only theme which arises in these discourses, which we may bring into relation with *Fear and Trembling*. Fatherhood is, once again, a thread to be followed between the two without exhausting an explanation of either. The first two discourses concern more generally the nature of love and how it "hides a multitude of sins". The opening discourse declares profoundly the wonder and importance of love to being human. Love is announced to be eternal in some way, to be the one thing that outlasts all endeavours and so empowers and remakes them all. Love is "never changed even though everything is changed" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 55; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, pp. 65–66).

Here, there is a deep love in creation, something which can be found and tapped into by humanity. It is vital for love to live in the heart of someone; from there, it takes on a life of its own. It is someone's "inner being" which determines their life (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 60; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 70). In relation to this, Kierkegaard goes on to name the whole fruit of the Spirit by which God fills the heart of the believer (Gal. 5:22): the first fruit named is love (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 61; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 71). When an accusing crowd of people brings the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, he stoops down and writes in the sand; he refuses to listen to the accusation, covering her sin with his love (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 67–68; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 77). He does here what Abraham did for Sodom and Gomorrah, pleading on their behalf in love and thus averting the Lord's wrath (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 66; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 76). Here, the love in humanity comes to the inner being by the Spirit's work inside the believer and Christ's love to their soul. In the second discourse, love again has an eternal quality (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 71; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 80). It is also the armour for someone on the day of judgement, covering their sins. Yet, "the secret to earthly love is that it bears the mark of God's love" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 75; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 83). Kierkegaard looks to the gospel story of the sinful woman who visits a house while he is dining. An interaction with Jesus grants her "the grace to weep herself out of herself" and "into the peacefulness of love" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 76; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 84). Here, "the Savior's love" aided her and "made the love in her even more powerful" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 77; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 86). Kierkegaard concludes on the blessedness of when the Spirit "witnesses" the presence of the same love in someone (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 78; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 86). Love is grown inside someone by the love of the Saviour and the Spirit. Love needs to be mediated to someone into their inner being by the Son and Spirit.

Thus, there is no mention in the first two discourses of the Father, beyond some possible allusions to God as creator. But, in the third discourse, Kierkegaard unpacks the reality of the Spirit's mediation of God's Fatherly love. The eternal love named generally in the two preceding discourses is named as Fatherly in his discourse *Strengthening in the Inner Being*. The shift to a focus on God as Father happens in Kierkegaard's opening prayer to the Father—no prayers accompany the preceding discourses—whose "abundance is richer than can be grasped by human understanding" and whose "goodness is beyond the understanding of the human heart" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 79; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 87). This requires a "witness" from the Father, the chief theme of what follows. The point of departure in the discourse is Paul's life of suffering and how he can remain confident through the storms of his apostolic life. Quite simply, "[h]e had a witness superior to anything in the world, a witness that witnessed all the more powerfully the more the world went against him. . . he was mightily strengthened by God's Spirit in his inner being" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 83; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 91). We can see how Kierkegaard is playing on the themes of the other two discourses: the "witness" of the Spirit and the need for this to minister to the "inner being" of a person.

In the third discourse, we obtain a clearer picture of anthropology; for Kierkegaard, the inner being is made up of a conscious craving for an explanation, for a type of knowledge (Viden) which does not "remain as knowledge. . . but is transformed into action". However, to understand the relation of this knowledge to herself, a witness (Vidnesbyrd) is also needed. Kierkegaard speaks of knowledge that will aid the apostle in living in and through suffering because of a sense of God's work and love. In particular, the inner being craves

a witness that explains the meaning of everything for it and its own meaning by explaining it in the God who holds everything together in his eternal wisdom. . . he strengthens and confirms him in the inner being. (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 87; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 94.)

The witness answers the inner being by bringing it into relation with the creator and helping it sense how all things come together in relation to the heavenly Father. As God is spirit, such a connection can only come from the Spirit and into the inner spiritual being of a

person (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 88; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 94). Therefore, the only way that a sure sense of God's Fatherhood can be given to strengthen the inner being of a believer is inwardly by the Holy Spirit.

Only later in the discourse is the work of a witness explicitly connected to the Fatherhood of God. It begins with a simple hint of Hebrews 12:6, "the one God tests he loves", which is about God as Father.¹⁴ Straight after this allusion, "*the witness itself is a gift from God*, from who comes every good and perfect gift. . . the gift from the Father in heaven" (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 98; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 104). Vitrally, Paul "ascribes" strengthening to the "fatherliness of God"; "God's love shows itself as fatherly love in this very expression, the strengthening in the inner being". If we consider this for a moment, the witness of the Spirit comes from the Father. God's love, when it is known, is fatherly. To be strengthened in the inner being is to see this love of God as Father. To know God's Fatherhood is to know "the most beautiful, the most uplifting, but also the truest and most expressive of names" for God (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 98–99; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 104). The greatest gift that God gives is himself, through the Holy Spirit, to us as Father. God's Fatherhood is the answer to the craving of the inner being for an explanation about the nature of existence.

Pattison suggests, at this point, that Kierkegaard struggles to reconcile his own talk about God as Father; he seems to find it comprehensible and incomprehensible without providing a clear rationale for his religious preference.¹⁵ Other scholars are reticent about Kierkegaard's talk of the Father because of his "fully apophatic conception of divine self-relation" in which it is "impossible to position, name or conceptualize God objectively".¹⁶ Hence, David Law also suggests that all concepts or labels given for God do not describe him in his essence, God as "spirit" and as "Father" included (Law 1993, p. 166). However, Kierkegaard is clearer than Pattison suggests and firmer on the connection between the divine and human father than Welz and Law specify. Kierkegaard is clear on the way that the language of the father is "figurative" outside of the mediation of God's Spirit. This is perhaps the truer and fuller way to describe the reality than Shakespeare's suggestion of how the language of the father is "transfigured".¹⁷ The "inner" being is less focused on the "gifts" and upon the giving: "Then the inner being understands and is convinced that God is a Father in heaven and this expression is not metaphorical", because "God gives not only the gifts but himself with them, in a way beyond the capability of a human being (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 99; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 105).

Here, we are speaking of how God the Father can give himself to his people through the witnessing power of the Holy Spirit. The inner self, which truly receives the Father through the Spirit, knows this to be more than a metaphor. The external equation of language with the divine differs from the inward mediation of God's Fatherhood to the inner self. This is, once again, more than the transformation of words, as suggested by Shakespeare (Shakespeare 2003, p. 100). This "transformation" may be better understood as the gift of God's self through the witnessing power of God's Spirit. Instead, the Apostle Paul teaches the reality the other way around—all earthly fathers are an expression of heavenly Fatherhood:

Therefore, even though you had the most loving father given among men, he would still be, despite all his best intentions, but a stepfather, a shadow, a reflection, a simile, an image, a dark saying about fatherliness from which all fatherliness in heaven and on earth derives its name. (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 100; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, pp. 105–6)

Kierkegaard concludes by suggesting the blessedness of basing life upon the love of the Father to be able to say daily: "God in heaven was my first love". He alludes to Romans 8:37–39, which we noted he also quotes in his discourse on "expectancy": "no good fortune, no favor, no concern, no insult, no spiritual trial, neither things present nor things to come can wrench from a person" who is established in God's Fatherly love (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 101; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 106). Instead, all these things serve to renew and strengthen them. The talk of God as Father is true for the one who knows the reality of

Fatherhood in God's word and by his Spirit. The Father here is the point of reality at which the believer can point with confidence and know that there is a greater and richer story being woven from the reality of their existence.

The *Three Upbuilding Discourses* thus take us on a journey to appreciate the need for a love which will cover a multitude of sins. Such a love is fatherly when it comes to the inner being of a believer through the Spirit's mediation. De Silentio raised the possibility of fatherly love at the basis of existence. De Silentio does not know the love of the heavenly Father, in a direct and personal sense. His understanding and ability to attest to what Abraham has placed his faith in is limited. We see here why: he does not have the witnessing power of God's Spirit within him. When we move from Kierkegaard's left hand to the right, we sense that we can find a firm basis for the existence in fatherly love.

As we expand beyond the immediate discourses, we see Kierkegaard continuing to consider the mediation of Fatherhood to the inner being and the search for a love at the basis of existence. The second meditation on James 1:16–17 looks back to Adam and Eve and their decision to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the spirals of doubt that ensued. These decisions led to turmoil as the knowledge of good and evil took hold in the inner depth of humanity. The initial act of disobedience opens within humanity a question about the nature of existence:

The Garden of Eden was closed; everything was changed, the man became afraid of himself, afraid of the world around him. Troubled, he asked: What is the good, where is the perfect to be found? If it exists, where is its source? But the doubt that had come along with the knowledge coiled itself alarmingly around his heart, and the serpent that had seduced him the delectable now squeezed him in its coils. (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 127; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 131)

Kierkegaard suggests this is “repeated in every generation and in the individual”. The consequences of Adam and Eve's decision “could not be halted”. The “knowledge” from the tree of good and evil meant that “doubt became more inward” and “fettered” humanity “in distress and contradiction”. We can recognise in these words the voice of De Silentio, who appears fettered in his inward being with a want to trust the love of God, but an ultimate inability to do so.

However, in a world of doubt and trouble, good and perfect gifts come down from the Father of heavenly lights. Here, Kierkegaard decides to unpack James's words by looking to Matthew 7:11: “If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him?” He considers someone's ongoing wrestle to understand these words in their truth and depth (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 129; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, pp. 133–35). In the journey to make sense of Jesus' saying, “doubt became the stronger. . . earthly life is vanity, that even people's good gifts are weak-willed and only fill him with disquiet” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 132; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 135). Here is De Silentio's wrestle, the nature of the Father's love in relation to the actuality of existence. The route to understanding and knowing the Father's love, which is underneath all of existence, comes through pain, doubt, and meditation. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard is emphatic—doubts come from considering human equivalents of the remarkable and unique love of the Father:

What earthly life does not have, what no man has, God alone has. . . What, then, is the good? It is that which is from above. What is the perfect? It is that which is from above. Where does it come from? From above. What is the good? It is God. Who is the one who gives it? It is God. (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 134; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 137)

Jesus's saying points to the reality that all good can only come down from above. The answer to the search for good and perfection can only be found in the good giver from heaven above, the Father of heavenly lights. “Would you deny, my listener, that no doubt can invalidate this precisely because it remains outside of all doubt and abides in God?” This thought “cuts short doubt, because it disarms doubt” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 134;

Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 137). As in *Strengthening in the Inner Being*, “the condition is a gift of God” by which the reality of God the Father is received (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 137; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 139). Jesus concludes his comparison of earthly and heavenly fathers by declaring: “How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” To “need the Holy Spirit is a perfection in a human being” and the need itself is a good and perfect gift from God” along with the “prayer”, and “the communication of it”. They “all come down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change or shadow of variation” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 139; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 142). Therefore, the doubts that have been wound into humanity’s inward self since the fall are undone and remade through the Father’s gift of himself in and through the Holy Spirit. Hence, De Silentio’s questions and doubts set the reader on a trajectory toward a full and deep knowledge of the Father. De Silentio has gone on part of the journey described by Kierkegaard but is yet to receive the Holy Spirit who will answer the doubts in his inward being. Here, the Fatherhood of God, his steady, immovable love as the giver of all good gifts, is the basis of Abraham’s faith. Abraham, when facing the abyss at the divine command to sacrifice Isaac, believes that underneath everything is a deep divine love.

The providential picture of God’s Fatherly care is continued in Kierkegaard’s first meditation on James 1:16–17 in 1843, which tracks a believer’s prayerful wrestle with unanswered prayer. Here is a concession that God’s silence and ultimate answers to our prayers differ from our expectations (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 37; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 46). As the Father of heavenly lights, “God penetrates everything with his eternal clarity, that he understands people’s thoughts from afar”, and so his love “hurries ahead and prepares everything” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 39; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 48). Such knowledge is to live in a new universe where the good Father orders all things and so “to learn to understand one thing: that all things serve for good those who love God” (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 42; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 51). This meditation accompanies *The Expectancy of Faith* from which Lippitt also demonstrates a sense of God’s providence and a similar reference to Romans 8. This is the vision of the world that Abraham lives in as he declares that God will provide the sacrifice, without knowing where it will come from. It is the God who “penetrates things with his eternal clarity”; the one who *sees* can be trusted. Abraham, in Genesis, likewise speaks of the one who “sees” him and so provides a ram to die in the place of Isaac.

Therefore, the key question of the relation between earthly and heavenly fatherhood is raised in *Fear and Trembling*. There is a need to sense Abraham’s possible failures and the precarious nature of his own task as a parent under the stress of trial. The reader is to question the relation of earthly and divine fathers. Kierkegaard is deliberate here. There is to be no naive equation of the two. Questions and doubts create the ground to receive the testimony of the Spirit to the true Fatherhood of God in heaven, and so be strengthened in the inner being. Such a testimony is not something that De Silentio knows about, as he has not taken on the faith for himself. He, to use Kierkegaard’s own terminology, only looks at the equation of earthly and divine Fatherhood from the outside, and he has yet to receive the testimony of God’s Spirit. We are here already set up to receive the Father as a sure point of confidence in the difficulties of life.

Hence, it would appear simpler to say that Abraham believed in the providence of his God, attributed to the Father. It is trust in God’s Fatherly goodness, which means we can look confidently at life and the ultimate nature of good things arriving in and through life itself. The double act of resignation is centred on the Father’s goodness. Hanson helpfully points out how, in *Problema III*, the religious involves a combining of the aesthetic and the ethical in one (Hanson 2017, p. 177). How could we label those two coming together in one? Could we call the aesthetic “perfect” and perhaps the ethical “good”? The two come together, always when you know the one from whom every good and perfect gift comes. To live as a knight of faith with a sense of providence and provision is to live in the world of the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. The aesthetic is fulfilled as the father knits together all things into a poetic unity that far outstretches

any imagined conclusion. The goodness of the Father ensures the ethical nature of every gift received. It is the confidence that “the Father of lights, ever constant, at every moment makes everything good, makes everything a good and perfect gift” for those who “enough heart to be trustful” (Kierkegaard 1990, pp. 40–41; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 49).

4. Providence and Governance in Kierkegaard

I have sought to explore the thread of fatherhood which grows from the movement between *Fear and Trembling* and the *Upbuilding Discourses* published in the same year. I have suggested that paying attention to God’s Fatherhood helps us to see Abraham’s faith in the Fatherly provision of God. As Abraham says in Genesis narrative, he knows that God will provide. Such faith makes sense given Genesis 1 and the account of the orderly good creation into which the story of Abraham and his descendants come. One aspect we need to comprehend when making sense of Abraham’s moral action is to grapple with his confidence in the divine order of reality and the love of God as Father. We do not need to construe Abraham’s leap as bypassing the ethical systems at hand but rather leading us to the profound truth of the moral order of our world in the Fatherly creator’s hands.

It is a trust in God’s “providence”, which is an advance on so-called “eschatological faith”. The story of Abraham does not leave us looking forward to a final overturning. We are left wanting to trust, as Abraham does, that God sees, and that God will provide. It is less a focus on the gift and more a focus on the goodness of the one who directs all things for the good of the believer. Here is perhaps more readily where Kierkegaard desired the faith of his readers to end up: with a similar confidence in God’s Fatherhood. The discourses which accompany *Fear and Trembling* point the reader to confidence in the steady centre of reality and the goodness of all he gives. None of this makes Abraham’s faith “comprehensible” in anything close to the Hegelian sense, which was denied by De Silentio. Trust in Fatherly providence is far removed from a socially construed ethical pattern which everyone is required to follow. The Father’s perfect giving transcends the foresight or insight of human capacity. Abraham does not comprehend what God will do; he trusts he is the kind of Father who will bring the impossible to pass in an unforeseen way. Such knowledge is a relational confidence in the steady centre of all things, which removes the need to understand everything. He can be trusted and obeyed if everything good and perfect comes from him.

To reinforce this point, it is worth looking a bit broader into Kierkegaard’s writing where he equates the providential God who *sees* with God’s Fatherhood. To be a Christian for Kierkegaard is to walk “under the eye of a heavenly Father, that is, under the eye of a truly loving father” (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 7, p.471 [NB 20:133] 1850; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 23, p. 463). To look to God as “friend” rather than as “Father” is to think “we must be our own Providence” (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 7, p. 366 [19:41] 1850; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 23, pp. 358–59). The Father dwells in “unapproachable light” and yet is known through his “providence” (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 11 part 2, p. 59 [Paper 340:13] 1846; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 27, p. 256). The Father is implored to turn his “countenance” upon Kierkegaard in an echo of an Old Testament blessing, so that he might “shine anew” upon him (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 2, p. 51 [EE:161] 1839; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 18, p. 56). The Father is constantly seen as the one above the believer, looking down upon their life in love, weaving all things together in his plans. He sees all things and moves all things in accordance with his will.

This is most evident in Kierkegaard’s understanding of his own life. Kierkegaard uses both Providence (Forsyn) and Governance (Styrelse) prolifically in his authorship.¹⁸ De Silentio does not use these either, and it is the latter *Styrelse* through which Kierkegaard describes the oversight of his life. . . “It is Governance [Styrelsen] that has brought me up, and the upbringing is reflected in the writing process” (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 77; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 16, p. 56). In making sense of his own authorship, he lists the wide variety of life experiences that uniquely formed him and suggests that “another power had been watching this”, one overseeing his development into a person (Kierkegaard

1998, pp. 83–84; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 16, p. 62). Kierkegaard is careful to demonstrate the love of Governance: “Compassionate love, precisely out of love uses such a person, rescues and brings him up, while he uses all his sagacity, which in this way is sanctified and consecrated” (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 87; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 16, p. 66). Hence, although he was familiar “with the inner suffering involved in becoming a Christian”, Governance “assisted in such a way that the outcome of what I did truly benefited me” so that, like a “stringed instrument”, he “remained in tune” and “gained an extra string” (Kierkegaard 1998, p. 89; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 16, p. 68). “Kierkegaard attributes to Governance the coherence and overall direction of his work” (Rae 2017, p. 198). Such a perspective was only perceived retrospectively (Rae 2017, p. 202). The wrestle of the work in *Point of View* can be described as the struggle “to find himself before the ‘Heavenly Father’” (Furchert 2010, p. 371). Here, we see in Kierkegaard’s own life how he may have construed, like Abraham, that his authorship is an act of faith. It is not held together by him; he does not designate its structure, its coherence, or its destination. Yet, he trusts the one who oversees it. Kierkegaard has “faith that the compassionate love of God is active in all things, prevails in all things and draws all things to good for those who trust in God” (Dalrymple 2010, p. 180).

Hence, the Fatherhood of God provides an “Archimedean point” for understanding life and the subsequent action. It is a knowledge of God as Father, which is the point from which to develop and live life (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 3, p.196 [Not. 6:24–28] 1840; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 19, p. 200; Rae 1997, pp. 150–57). For Kierkegaard, the “Archimedean point is prayer alone before the Christian God” (LeFevre 1956, p. 130). The changelessness and constancy of God’s Fatherhood are known and experienced in prayer. Such prayerful knowledge is the basis on which decisions can be made in the reality of the difficulties of life, which may, at times, defy comprehension. In making these claims, I am not suggesting that all the problems and issues raised in *Fear and Trembling* can be resolved by referencing God’s Fatherhood; this would be an oversimplification. However, I assert that one core aspect of De Silentio’s doubt is to get the reader to so grapple with Abraham’s actions that they need to re-assess reality. But, through this doubt, Kierkegaard hopes we come to a surer sense of or basis on which to live life in all its complexity. Kierkegaard believed that the “Archimedean point” was to be found in God’s Fatherly love. To accomplish this, Kierkegaard frames *Fear and Trembling* as well as the *Upbuilding Discourses* around the relationship between divine and human fatherhood. Therefore, after walking the journey with Abraham to Moriah, we can leave behind naïve claims about having an earthly father in the sky. Like Abraham, in the complexity of life, we can entrust ourselves to the sure and deep love at the base of everything. This does not so much involve a leap of faith as a fall into the arms of a loving Father.

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Notes

¹ Stephen Evans considers the way that *Fear and Trembling* seeks to demonstrate the need for “more than an ethical system”. De Silentio instead suggests a life of moral striving and “faith” is needed. Evans (1993, pp. 15, 18). Oliva Blanchette similarly makes sense of *Fear and Trembling* as a means of “silencing” philosophy through the apparent absurdity of faith. Blanchette (1993, pp. 39–48).

² Davenport (2015, p. 82). Davenport makes similar arguments elsewhere: “But the teleological suspension of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* is not primarily about substituting an ethics of alterity, or any other ethics, for a rationalist ethics of universal norms or natural law. . . the main point of *Fear and Trembling*, which is to present the essence of “faith” as eschatological trust”. Davenport (2008, p. 198).

- 3 There has been some recent discussion of this as an issue; see (Aroney 2023, p. 1151).
- 4 (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 2, p. 126 [HH:17–18] 1840; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 18, pp. 134–35).
- 5 "... it is as the Scripture say, that all fatherhood on earth and in heaven is named for the heavens father, and the name of the father does not strive upward from earth to heaven but descends from heaven to earth. So even if you have had the best possible earthly father, he, too, is only your stepfather, only a reflection of the fatherly love for which he is named.—only a shadow, a reflection, an image, a simile, an obscure expression of the fatherliness from which all fatherhood in heaven won earth takes its name" (Kierkegaard 2007–2020, 2, p.126 [HH:17–18] 1840; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 18, pp. 134–35).
- 6 "... from 'the poet', from the esthetic—from 'the philosopher', from the speculative—to the indication of the most inward qualification of the essentially Christian; from the pseudonymous Either/Or, through Concluding Postscript, with my name as editor, to Discourses at the Communion on Fridays, of which two were delivered in Frue Church" (Kierkegaard 1998, pp. 5–6; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 13, p. 12).
- 7 John Lippitt seeks to bring out the nature of hope in *Fear and Trembling* through relating it to the 1843 discourse "the expectancy of faith" (Lippitt 2015a, pp. 122–23). Likewise, Davenport looks to the same set of discourses for evidence of "eschatological 'turnings'" in Kierkegaard's thought (Davenport 2015, pp. 89–90). A similar interpretive suggestion is made by Kline (2012, p. 506).
- 8 Barrett (2005, p. 270). For an extended discussion of the Philippian Hymn in the work of Kierkegaard, see (Law 2013, pp. 85–110).
- 9 "What is uppermost in Kierkegaard's understanding of the text is not the Christological problem it poses, but its significance for Christian obedience" (Law 2013, p. 73).
- 10 Perhaps the constancy of the mother in these stories and the fickleness of the father is a reflection his own parental relationships. Kierkegaard spoke sparingly of his mother, but we are told of the great affection he had for her. Hans Lassen Martensen relates his own mother's reflection: "My mother has repeatedly confirmed that she never in her life (and she had had no little experience) had seen a human being so deeply distressed as S. Kierkegaard was by the death of his mother" (Kirmmse 1996, p. 196).
- 11 Alter (2011, pp. 225–26). Here, both Isaac and Ishmael are saved from "life threatening" situations by the arrival of an angel and the provision of God. Such parallel stories are a common Hebrew technique that invites us to read one with the other in hand already.
- 12 Victor Hamilton notes that the language becomes more intimate at this point of the narrative than previously: "celestial theophany is replaced by the imminent, divine presence" (Hamilton 1995, p. 85).
- 13 Kierkegaard's sister Nicoline dies in 1832 after a stillbirth and Petrea falls ill after giving birth, and, although she can nurse, she falls ill and also dies in 1834. Kierkegaard's mother and brother Niels also died in 1834 (Rumble 2015, pp. 258–59). There is a letter which suggests it was a failure of the midwife to get rid of Petrea's milk so it "went up to her brain" causing madness and death (Garff 2005, p. 46).
- 14 (Kierkegaard 1990, p. 98; Kierkegaard 1997–2013, 5, p. 104). In Hebrews, a proverb is quoted, and then there is a connection to sonship and the believer's relation to God as Father: "... because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?" (Hebrews 12:6–7)
- 15 Pattison (2002, pp. 125–26). Pattison, in particular, contends that "Kierkegaard does not seem to give us grounds for asserting that the God who gives Himself to us, with and under everything... is really best named as 'Father'". He goes on later to suggest that this discourse, in many ways, leaves "unfinished business", which he comes back to in a later work.
- 16 Kline (2017, p. 168). Similarly, for Welz, theological terms like "Father" or "love" are approximations. While love comes from and depends on God, it "oscillates between being personal and transpersonal" (Welz 2016, p. 73).
- 17 Shakespeare considers how "the discourses are a practical exercise in exposing language and communication to what exceeds them, whilst always maintaining that it is only within human, linguistic, temporal existence that we encounter these paradoxes" (Shakespeare 2003, p. 96).
- 18 Timothy Dalrymple suggests a differentiation between Kierkegaard's use of Providence (*Forsyn*) and Governance (*Styrelse*): *Styrelse* is a special type of God's providential care of creation: "God's provision for the sake of the pious" is what Kierkegaard will ordinarily mean by "Governance" (Dalrymple 2010, p. 165).

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