

## Faith as Paradox in “Preamble from the Heart”

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### Introduction

According to Johannes de silentio, Søren Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, faith is paradoxical in that it consists of belief in the possibility of the impossible. Johannes uses the example of Abraham’s unquestioning obedience to God’s command that he sacrifice Isaac to support his position. Abraham’s readiness to kill Isaac must be demonstrative of faith, Johannes reasons, otherwise Abraham, revered as the *father of faith*, must be regarded as a willing murderer. Johannes decides that Abraham was able to comply with this divine command because he faithfully believed that he would both lose Isaac in the here and now and also retain Isaac in the here and now. As these outcomes cannot both be believed without contradiction, if one accepts Johannes’ interpretation of Abraham’s ordeal, then faith is paradoxical. In this paper, I argue that Johannes definition as faith as paradoxical, as belief in the possibility of the impossible, cannot be maintained except at the level of abstraction and cannot be performed by an agent in the world.<sup>1</sup> The problem with Johannes’ illustrations is that the paradox is not tested because his agents’ opposing beliefs do not lead to different actions. As long as the opposing beliefs lead the agent to the same action, the contradiction and paradox can be maintained. I will establish, however, once these contradictory beliefs lead to dichotomous options, the paradox dissolves.

So that he, and we, might better address the confounding<sup>2</sup> paradox, Johannes illustrates how faith is manifested using Abraham and two scenarios he creates, each featuring a knight of faith, as Johannes calls the principles. The first knight of faith is a man on his way home anticipating a delicious dinner prepared by his wife. The second is a young lad hopelessly in love with a princess. The outcomes desired by these knights are impossible, we are told, yet each knight faithfully believes that he will receive his prize. The impossible will happen, and so must be regarded as possible, yet somehow remain impossible, and therein lies the paradox. In neither case does the desired outcome actually seem impossible, but for the purpose of argument, I shall accept Johannes’ claim. I will show that these scenarios do not provide the support for the paradox of faith that Johannes asserts. I will do so by modifying slightly his first scenario, leaving the second as he presents it. I first return to Abraham and recall God’s promise that Sarah would bear him a son. As we will see, the elderly couple has a predicament that illustrates the problem of demonstrating faith.

According to the biblical account, God promised to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation and promised that Abraham's offspring would share the land of Canaan with him forever. But Abraham had no children, so God promised him a son through which these and other promises would be fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah grew old and no child was born to them, yet they maintained their faith. Abraham was nearly 100 years old and Sarah nearly 90 years old when miraculously Isaac was born.

If Abraham and Sarah believed that the impossible was somehow possible, their situation suggests an unseemly question: did Abraham and Sarah have sexual relations during the period from God's promise to its fulfillment? What course of action is the best demonstration of faith?

If we assume that they were not sexually active before the promise (sex is for procreation and Sarah was barren, and they were very old) would it be a sufficient demonstration of faith for Abraham and Sarah to continue to abstain because they have faith that a child will be delivered somehow through God's miraculous power? Or, would it be a sufficient demonstration of faith for Abraham and Sarah to engage in regular sexual relations because they are now convinced that God will ensure that their labor will bear fruit? Upon reflection, it seems that either choice can be interpreted as sufficient demonstration of faith, as the aforementioned questions provide their own answers: yes. I will leave the reader to imagine which course of action Abraham and Sarah chose.

These questions and answers illustrates that a discernible demonstration of faith seems to require alternatives that lead to different courses of action. If the agent can choose either path and faith is demonstrated, then it is difficult to distinguish between actions that are demonstrative of faith and those that are not. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac does not contain this condition because Abraham's behavior is the same whether or not he believes he will lose Isaac in the here and now. In either case he obeys God's command. For this reason I will modify Johannes' scenario of the man who anticipates dinner in order to require that the man choose between dichotomous options and select different courses of action based upon his choice. The scenario of the young lad in love with the princess contains potential for its own dichotomous options and needs no such modification.

It is not my primary concern in this essay to argue whether it is possible for Abraham or a knight of faith, as Johannes calls his representatives, to perform the mental feat of believing in the possibility of the impossible. By asserting that Abraham believed that he would lose Isaac and not lose Isaac, that Isaac would die and Isaac would not die, Johannes asserts that Abraham believed two contradictory propositions, which seems impossible as it is contrary to reason.<sup>3</sup> Johannes acknowledges that this ability is paradoxical and accomplished "on the strength of the absurd,"<sup>4</sup> but we have the problem of interpreting the meaning of that phrase.<sup>5</sup> If we regard belief as a state of mind, then we cannot know what Abraham believed as we do not have access to his state of mind. Thus, it is reasonable to seek evidence about what Abraham believed through his behavior, through his actions.

My position, however, is that whether or not we accept Johannes' enigmatic claim that faith involves this mental or psychological dexterity, this contradictory effort cannot be performed in the world once the agent is required to choose between dichotomous options. So let us proceed to Johannes' scenarios and require his knights of faith to choose one path or another based on their beliefs, and observe whether either can maintain the paradox of faith.

Johannes imagines his first knight of faith as a commonplace fellow one would never suspect is exceptional. There is nothing extraordinary or transcendent about him. He looks, Johannes exclaims, like a tax-gatherer. On his way home it occurs to this gentleman that his wife has prepared "some special little warm dish for his return," perhaps roast head of lamb with vegetables. Johannes notifies us that "As it happens [the man] hasn't a penny and yet he firmly believes his wife has that delicacy waiting for him." "If the man's wife has prepared the meal," Johannes continues, "to see him eat it would be a sight for superior people to envy and for plain folk to be inspired by." But if his wife has not prepared the meal, Johannes adds, "curiously enough he is exactly the same."<sup>6</sup>

By telling us that this man, hereafter referred to in this discussion as the *husband*, "hasn't a penny," Johannes means us to understand that it is impossible that the wife has prepared the meal, nevertheless the husband has faith that he will receive it. If the meal's existence is highly unlikely, even infinitely improbable, then the husband's expectation would not be defined as faith. It is neither contradictory nor paradoxical to believe that the meal is both possible and highly improbable: contradictory and paradoxical apply only if it is impossible that the meal exists. The husband's attitude meets Johannes' standard for his definition of faith due to the husband's ability to hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously and believe both:<sup>7</sup> the meal cannot exist, yet it does (or will) exist. The husband, Johannes tells us, "resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd."<sup>8</sup>

Let us modify this meal scenario by adding a few choice ingredients. The husband actually is a tax-gatherer and his employer would like him to volunteer to work a few extra hours overtime preparing tax documents. Because the husband would be kept late and miss his usual evening meal at home, the employer will provide a free dinner at the office if the husband volunteers for this extra duty. Let us recognize that because the husband hasn't a penny, it is rarely, if ever, the case that there is enough food for him and his wife to both have an adequate dinner. Finally, let us accept that the husband cares very much about his wife's physical and emotional wellbeing.

Under these circumstances the husband has a decision to make that will govern his course of action. If he sincerely believes that his wife has spent considerable time, energy and (their infinitesimally small) resources and somehow managed to prepare roast head of lamb with vegetables "for his return," then the considerate thing to do would be to go home and appreciatively eat the meal. But, if he sincerely believes that it is impossible that she has prepared such a meal, then the considerate

thing to do would be to remain at work and consume the dinner provided by his employer, allowing his wife to have sufficient food for a change. The considerate husband would also send a friend to inform his wife that he will be dining at the office.

Perhaps the husband during his regular work hours can believe that it is both impossible and possible that his wife has prepared his dinner, but when he must *either* remain at work to perform overtime duties *or* travel home, the paradox is broken. Johannes tells us that the husband's reaction would be the same whether or not his wife has the meal waiting, but that is because there are no dichotomous alternatives under his scenario. The husband can believe in the possibility of the impossible because whether the meal is possible or impossible, prepared or not, the husband behaves the same way: he goes home. Under conditions that force the husband to travel one path or the other based on his belief, he cannot remain in the paradox. At the end of the business day the husband must either journey home or stay to perform the work. Once he commits to either course of action the paradox dissolves.

In Johannes' next scenario he offers us a knight of faith in the person of a common lad in love with a princess. Due to the gulf between their stations, the reader is expected to accept that a union between the lad and the princess is impossible. As was the case with the husband and the meal, the union is not presented as highly improbable, because believing in the possibility of the improbable would not be defined as faith. According to Johannes faith is actually the final stage of a process and is preceded by what he calls infinite resignation.

The first stage of faith, infinite resignation, involves two stages of its own. The lad resigns himself to the impossibility of possessing the princess in the finite realm, and so renounces any claim to her in the finite.<sup>9</sup> The lad preserves his love for the princess in the infinite realm in which it achieves a transcendent, eternal, and spiritual quality that is not affected by earthly events. Johannes explains that, "From the moment he made the movement the princess is lost." Therefore, the lad "pays no further finite attention to what the princess does."<sup>10</sup>

Then the lad executes the paradoxical move of faith by declaring, "I nevertheless believe that I shall get her, namely on the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the belief that with God all things are possible."<sup>11</sup> By "get her" the lad means he will acquire her in the finite realm, the very realm in which he has renounced any claim to the princess due to the impossibility of their union. The double movement of infinite resignation and faith is paradoxical because of the lad's belief that it is both impossible (infinite resignation) and possible (faith) that he will get the princess in the finite. Moreover, the lad's declaration that he will get the princess in the finite contradicts the movement of infinite resignation in which he renounced his claim to the princess in the finite<sup>12</sup>. In fact, this renunciation in the finite is a necessary condition of infinite resignation and faith. By declaring his

desire to get what he at the same time renounces and relinquishes, the lad expresses the paradoxical nature of faith.

The lad has a problem similar to that of the husband in the first scenario. As long as the lad remains in the infinite resignation stage he can both forsake and possess the princess. He can believe their union is impossible (resignation in the finite) and also believe it is possible (acquisition in the infinite). As long as he is not required to act, the lad can remain suspended in a realm in which he need do nothing except embrace the alleged paradox. Just as the husband's belief in the existence of the meal presents alternative paths (my modified scenario)—one in which he does not believe the meal is prepared and remains at work, and the other in which he believes the meal is prepared and goes home—the lad, when he declares he will get the princess in the finite realm, must be required to choose between dichotomous alternatives and act in accordance with his belief.

If the husband has faith that the meal is prepared even though he hasn't a penny, he has to *do* something, namely, go home and consume the meal. Johannes offers nothing to suggest that the meal is going to appear miraculously before the husband at work. To the contrary, the meal has been prepared "for his return," and the husband must return to get it. If the lad believes that he will "get" the princess in the finite realm, we are offered nothing to suggest that the princess is going to miraculously join the lad. The lad has to *do* something. He has to get about the business of acquiring the princess.<sup>13</sup>

I interpret the expression "I will get her" to mean that the lad is required to be an agent aggressively pursuing a course of action intended to bring about a desired outcome. Does Johannes intend the expression to be used in the passive sense? For example, if I declare that *I will get* gifts for my birthday, I do not mean that I intend to purchase these gifts for myself, but that gifts will be given to me by others. If used in this passive sense, the lad would not be required to act, but could passively wait for the princess to be delivered. Upon examination we see that this interpretation will not hold.

There is a noticeable problem that arises from using the passive sense of get. Even if God (for whom all things are possible) were to miraculously place the princess in proximity of the lad or thrust the princess into the arms of the lad or even arrange their wedding, according to Johannes, upon performing the movement of infinite resignation the lad takes no further notice of the princess in the finite.<sup>14</sup> If the lad were to retort that his faithful declaration allows him to take notice of the princess once she has been delivered, we can hardly regard his declaration as ingenuous. At best "I will get her" would have to be revised as "I will *receive* her." If God is to play matchmaker, the most accurate revision would be, "God will get her for me."

There is a better reason that we should not interpret *get* in the passive sense, and that reason becomes clear if we remind ourselves why Johannes expressed the impossibility of a union between the lad and the princess. Johannes shares, at considerable length, the lad's love for the princess, and

though he tells us that there will be a “beautiful development” if the princess is “similarly disposed,”<sup>15</sup> he does not claim that the princess loves the lad. Because the young lady is a princess and the lad is no prince, we should be safe in concluding that the princess does not dream of marriage to this lad so far beneath her station. It seems likely that the princess does not know the lad exists, much less love him. If “get her” is interpreted in the passive sense and the lad pays no further attention to the princess in the finite realm, then it seems that the princess is to be delivered to the lad by God without regard for her feelings, or she will be made by God to love the lad. Surely, this is not Johannes intends, that the lad will get the princess whether she likes it or not. So that she may at least have the opportunity to like it and desire to be with the lad, the lad will have to take the initiative.

When we last visited Johannes’ lad he had renounced any claim to the princess in the finite realm. Clearly the lad cannot both court *and* ignore her in the finite realm. She cannot be both the object of his love *and* irrelevant to him in the finite realm. Thus, if the lad sincerely believes that a union with the princess is impossible in the finite, then the prudent course of action would be to extinguish his hope of acquiring her and choose a realistic object of pursuit.

If indeed the lad loves the princess and intends to get the princess, and he needs to take the initiative, then the lad’s performance of the movement of infinite resignation and faithful declaration is ridiculous. Let us imagine that somehow the lad finds himself in close proximity to the princess, the very princess he had declared that he will get. But this is the very princess that we are told he “pays no further attention to.” Does he ignore her? It would seem so. So the lad is going to get the princess by ignoring her? Let us imagine that the princess has no shortage of suitors and one of them is making progress at winning her heart. Let us also imagine that this suitor is suitable in terms of wealth and social position. What is the lad to do? What if the royal family announces that the princess is engaged? What does the lad do then? Does he still insist that he will get her as he pays no attention to her? Yes, the lad’s situation is absurd, but not for the reason Johannes offers.

Fortunately, there is a course of action that the lad could faithfully pursue. The lad recognizes that the impediments between him and the princess are virtually insurmountable, but his devotion to her remains steadfast. Instead of performing a nonsensical ritual and making an obnoxious declaration, the lad makes every attempt to *get* the princess despite enormous obstacles until or unless his efforts are rebuffed by her. Even then the lad could perform those respectful actions toward her available to one whose love is unrequited. Under these conditions the lad’s faith is not paradoxical and does not lead to paralysis. And though the lad may realize from the outset that his plan to get her is likely to fail, it is his faithfulness to his cause that defines him.

Johannes constructed his knights of faith as a means to understand Abraham’s ordeal as paradoxical. Now that we have established a standard for testing whether or not an agent can maintain such a paradox the final step is to see whether Abraham fares any better than his knight of faith

descendants. Johannes' interpretation enables Abraham to behave the same way even as he allegedly possesses two contradictory beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Fortunately, for Johannes' reasoning, the angel intervened at the moment of decision, so we cannot know whether Johannes is correct about what Abraham may have believed. If the angel had waited until Abraham began his downward thrust of the knife or turned away in horror we would have some empirical evidence for what Abraham may have believed.

So that we may perform our own test of Abraham's faith and Johannes' theory, let us modify the Abraham scenario in the following ways. There is no intervention, no angel, and no ram. Abraham takes out his knife to slay his son, holds it overhead and prepares to thrust vigorously downward towards Isaac's chest. Abraham is permitted a very limited amount of time to thrust the knife or discard it. Though God's command does not contain a deadline, obedience to the spirit of God's order would not allow much delay. Finally, if Abraham drives the knife into Isaac's chest, the boy will die.

Abraham's choice seems quite clear, however distressing: either kill his son or disobey God. As long as he is able to suspend the knife over Isaac, which he cannot do indefinitely, Abraham can remain in the paradox and believe that he will both gain and lose Isaac, but as soon as he must plunge the knife or discard it, then the paradox is broken. If Abraham sincerely believes that he will lose Isaac in the here and now because God ordered the sacrifice, then he thrusts the knife into Isaac's chest, killing his son. If Abraham sincerely believes that he will not lose Isaac in the here and now, then he does not plunge the knife into Isaac's chest, and does not kill his son. Once Abraham's time expires, he must act, and the paradox dissolves.

Johannes acknowledges that the biblical account of Abraham's ordeal is disturbing because it presents Abraham as praiseworthy for being willing to kill his son at God's command. Johannes asks us to consider our reaction if a member of a church congregation upon hearing a sermon were to emulate Abraham. It is problematic to condemn an act of killing as morally wrong and then accept it as somehow right when the only new information is that God commanded the act. Our unease may explain the willingness to accept the standard interpretation that God never intended Abraham to kill Isaac; the entire project was merely a test. Johannes rejects this rationalization as it implies that God was trifling with Abraham, torturing His faithful servant with the prospect of having to kill his own son, knowing all the while that Isaac would be spared. So what are we to make of Abraham's ordeal if the standard interpretation and Johannes' description of faith as paradoxical are unsatisfactory? Perhaps Soren Kierkegaard slyly informed us at the outset when he assigned this essay to his pseudonym, Johannes de silentio.<sup>17</sup> Tales such as these, if accepted as true, are incomprehensible, and the best reply, paradoxically, is to remain silent.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The inability to perform the paradox is problematic for Johannes' project, if John Lippitt is correct when he explains that, "It is worth noting at this point that Johannes is pointing to the possibility of a life—exemplified in this case by Abraham—which can be *lived* but not *thought*." John Lippitt, *The Routledge Guidebook to Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Edward F. Mooney tells us that "He [Johannes] is at most a man of resignation who admires the paradigm, but cannot, as he says, understand *what* he admires." Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation: Reading Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling* (New York: State University of New York, 1991), 55.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes' description of faith as believing contradictory propositions leads Lippitt to agree with Andrew Cross that "such an interpretation 'should be adopted only as a last resort, since adopting it means attributing a radically and patently untenable position to de silent (and, possibly, to Kierkegaard)" (74). But their avoidance evades the paradoxical nature that is central to Johannes' bewilderment with Abraham. Johannes never explicitly uses the words *contradictory propositions*, but tells us the two things Abraham believes, which are contradictory.

<sup>4</sup> Lippitt concedes that "This is how Johannes' remarks about Abraham's faith being 'on the strength of the absurd is often interpreted: it is absurd because it involves simultaneously believing two mutually contradictory propositions" (74).

<sup>5</sup> Lippitt reminds us that "Exactly what Johannes means by 'belief on the strength of the absurd' is a notorious question" (54).

<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> Mooney expresses that "The capacity of faith is neither the capacity to believe God capable of two mutually exclusive actions, nor the capacity to believe two incompatible propositions" (58). However the propositions that the meal exists and does not exist, and that Isaac will be lost and Isaac will be gained, *are* incompatible.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Mooney agrees that by, "Renouncing all claim to the princess, [Johannes] saves himself from hurt should she marry another and from hurt coming from the finite generally" (53). The question is whether the lad can maintain this attitude once he declares that he will get the princess.

<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 52.

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<sup>12</sup> Johannes states that the lad during the movement of infinite resignation does not “forget the whole thing,” and “contradict himself,” thereby expressing some anxiety about the appearance of contradiction.

<sup>13</sup> Mooney contends that “The knight of faith works to get the princess back, then, only in the sense that he guarantees that the ultimate obstacle to her return—lack of receptivity—will be absent” (54-55). But removing lack of receptivity hardly seems like *work*, and seems inconsistent with an ingenuous use of the phrase “I will get her.”

<sup>14</sup> Mooney shares that the lad would indeed suffer embarrassment upon the return of the princess (53).

<sup>15</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Lippitt agrees, that “Putting all this together, it appears on the face of it to amount to the claim that Abraham both does, and doesn’t, believe that Isaac is about to die” (46).

<sup>17</sup> Mooney goes so far as to say that “Johannes has no interest in clearing up this paradox” (53).

### **Bibliography**

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