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How Marion Helps Us to Understand Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling

Abstract

In the past decade, many interpretations of *Fear and Trembling* highlight the significance of the "eschatological"—the marvel of Abraham's expectation that he will get Isaac back. For these interpretations, the central issue is the contrast between the knight of faith and the knight of resignation. Merold Westphal, however, contends that these interpretations lead us away from the main contrast between the hero of faith and the tragic hero. Kierkegaard scholarship is at an impasse. I argue that Marion's phenomenology of sacrifice, together with the important idea of *veritas redarguens* that he appropriates from Augustine, offer insights that can resolve the impasse facing Kierkegaard scholars. Primary is the insight that the *ordeal of Abraham* shares central features with the *ordeal of truth* (*veritas redarguens*), both of which are ultimately ordeals of *love*. In that ordeal, Abraham's *sacrifice* of Isaac is his loving disposition to receive Isaac by returning him to givenness.

Keywords

Jean-Luc Marion, God, Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, phenomenology

Disciplines

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Comments

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In his essay, “Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of Sacrifice,” Marion proposes an understanding of sacrifice that should be welcomed by scholars of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. I will argue that Marion’s understanding not only can help us to understand *Fear and Trembling* better, but in so doing breaks an impasse that has developed among recent Kierkegaard scholars. This may be surprising, since Marion never mentions Kierkegaard by name or even by indirect reference throughout his essay. I will leave speculation on why that is for another time.

Concerning the first point – that Marion helps us to be better readers of Kierkegaard – I offer the following two comments as introduction:

- 1) Sacrifice, Marion points out, literally means, “to make sacred”; if this is so, however, then most traditional models of sacrifice fail to account for how that might be. He considers models in which destruction of the thing sacrificed is primary, as well as models of retribution and the economy of exchange. Marion provides reasons to be dissatisfied with each of these understandings. In contrast to them, Marion argues that sacrifice should be understood within the framework of the gift, suggesting that an act of sacrifice does not entail or encourage the destruction of that which is sacrificed. Neither is a sacrifice *effectively accomplished* through dispossession of a good. Sacrifice must be thought precisely in its relation to the gift. “Sacrifice presupposes a gift already given, the point of which is neither destruction, its undoing, nor even its transfer to another owner, but, instead, its return to the givenness from which it proceeds, and *whose mark it should always bear.*” This analysis is important for Kierkegaard scholars because, as we will see, they operate on an understanding of sacrifice which implies that the sacrifice is that which is either destroyed, undone, or transferred to another – in the case of Isaac, that the willingness to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God’s command means to be willing to destroy Isaac.
- 2) I suggest that Marion’s “Sketch” brings to light passages and themes in *Fear and Trembling* that have been minimized, marginalized, or downright

overlooked (Though it might be hard to imagine that any phrase in *Fear and Trembling* has been overlooked at this point). Time permitting, I will suggest that there are structural parallels between Marion's analysis of sacrifice, and the structure that guides the unfolding of the message of *Fear and Trembling*. Most importantly, though, I suggest that Kierkegaard's conception of sacrifice is closer to that of Marion than it is to Kierkegaard's interpreters.

The parallels are not easy to detect, however, for two reasons:

- 1) Kierkegaard did not have available to him the sophisticated phenomenological tools developed by Marion (and earlier phenomenologists),
- 2) *Fear and Trembling* is very much a polemical work – an “attack on Christendom” – as well as part of Kierkegaard's indirect discourse. As part of the pseudonymous authorship, it does not present Kierkegaard's own thoughts directly (as he does, for example, in his *Upbuilding Discourses*). What sacrifice *is*, is a central question of the book (and how an act of sacrifice is an act of faith). Interpreters of Kierkegaard have allowed certain assumptions about sacrifice to skew their interpretations of what faith is. I suggest that Kierkegaard does not share those assumptions, though the polemical nature of the book makes it difficult to see that.

Concerning the second point – that Marion's analyses can help us to understand *Fear and Trembling* in a way that breaks the impasse between prominent Kierkegaard scholars – let me briefly describe that impasse.

For almost 30 years now, Kierkegaard scholars have spilt ink responding to Alasdair MacIntyre's argument that Abraham's faith, on Kierkegaard's telling, is little more than blind obedience and irrational fanaticism. The interpretations that have developed, however, have, over the course of that time, fallen into two distinct camps, and have led to an impasse. This impasse threatens to undercut confidence in these interpretations as responses to MacIntyre. I will take John

Davenport, on one hand, and Merold Westphal, on the other, as representatives of the major contending interpretations.

Davenport offers what he calls an “eschatological” interpretation of FT, claiming that what he calls “eschatological trust” is the distinguishing element of faith in FT. He says,

I believe the main point that Kierkegaard hoped to convey through Silentio has been largely missed...The main point as Alastair Hannay explains, depends on the idea that Abraham’s “special greatness was that, in doing what did (**starting to sacrifice** Isaac), he did not doubt that he would get Isaac back, at least have him restored, whatever he did, even to the point of killing him.”

Later in the same article he says,

In short, Abraham’s love of God and obedience to God (which are ultimately equivalent) are vital aspects of his faith in God, but the **intentional object of that faith** is Isaac’s **surviving** to fulfill God’s initial promise to Abraham and Sarah: the core of faith is trust in divine fulfillment of an ethically ideal outcome that seems absurd or impossible to human reason, because it is beyond the human actor’s power to secure (by his or her own agency) given the circumstances.

In opposition to “higher ethics” readings (that faith is obedience to divine commands, or obligations to others transcending rational expression in universal norms) the eschatological account of faith says that faith consists primarily in trust that the highest ethical ideals will be fulfilled by God as God promises us.

The primary features of Davenport’s position is that the contrast between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith, and the knight of faith’s double movement of “giving up” and “taking back,” are central to the message of the book. Abraham’s faith is not centered in his obedience to God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, but in his trust that Isaac will be returned to him. In fact, for Davenport **the command to sacrifice Isaac** constitutes the **obstacle** that Abraham faces in his love for Isaac. Though Abraham is willing to obey, the sacrifice is an obstacle that threatens his loving relationship with Isaac. He refers to God’s command as “mysterious and terrible.” And yet, says Davenport, Abraham has

faith that sacrificing Isaac will not mean *permanently ending his life* in this world – but only because his faith is eschatologically directed toward and fulfilled by divine action.

The sacrifice, in other words, **IS** directed toward permanently ending Isaac's life in this world. But Abraham has FAITH that Isaac will nonetheless be returned to him (by God) **despite** taking steps to *sacrifice* him.

Representing the other side of the impasse is Merold Westphal. According to Westphal, Davenport's eschatological reading of faith leans too heavily on the contrast between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith to determine the main message of the book. For Westphal, *this* contrast is merely *preliminary*. The point of the book is achieved through the **later** contrast between the hero of faith – Abraham – and the tragic hero (such as Agamemnon). For the main message of the book, according to Westphal, is centered in its attack on Christendom, and in that attack the fundamental categories are “is it murder or is it sacrifice?” and not “loss and return.”

Furthermore, says Westphal, the knight of infinite resignation is a hero in the eyes of Silentio. I find this to be an incredibly odd argument, since the tragic hero is also a hero for Silentio – furthermore, Silentio identifies with the tragic hero even before he develops his account of the knight of infinite resignation. Westphal is right, however, to worry that Davenport's interpretation leads him to see sacrifice as nothing but an obstacle to his ongoing love for Isaac.

Hopefully we now have a sense of the impasse: there is a conflict in the interpretations between which contrast (the knight of infinite resignation/knight of faith, on one hand, and the tragic hero/hero of faith, on the other) should be taken as primary and central to the message of the book. In each interpretation, the opposite contrast is subordinated to what is taken as the central contrast.

But I think we are faced with a neither/nor here. **Both** contrasts are central to the “attack on Christendom” that is indeed a central focus of the book – one no less than the other. In terms of the polemic of the book, these two contrasts are

subordinate to the operative metaphor of tower-building that weaves its way throughout the book.

The tower metaphor appears already at the end of the Preface, where Silentio says, “This is not the System; it hasn’t the slightest thing to do with the system. I wish all good luck on the System and the Danish shareholders in that Omnibus, for it will hardly become a tower.” Taken alone, this seems an odd statement.

This tower-talk may seem to be merely literary flourish – Fear and Trembling is a lyric after all, even if a dialectical one. But the force of the metaphor comes home in Problema Two, when we recall that the tower metaphor is used in Luke 14 by Christ, in the context of describing the cost of discipleship. “Whoever does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Tower-building, Christ says, is not something one should undertake without sitting down to calculate the cost. Woven through all the discussion of Abraham is this metaphor from Luke 14.

Between these two instances of the tower metaphor, we find this description of the knight of faith, which, like the mention of towers in the Preface, can sound strange when taken in isolation. “On the road he [the knight of faith] passes a building-site and meets another man. They talk together for a moment, and he has a building/tower raised in a jiffy, having all that’s needed for that. The stranger leaves him, thinking, “That must have been a capitalist,” while my admirable knight thinks, “Yes, *if it came to that* I could surely manage it.” If it came to that.

What Kierkegaard is suggesting through his pseudonym Silentio, I would suggest, is that neither the knight of infinite resignation nor the tragic hero are fit for tower building.

What, then, makes the knight of faith fit? What does “if it came to that I could manage it” mean? I want to suggest that tower building requires humility, and humility’s way of collecting its materials. It does not rush forward, but

nonetheless can do it – if it comes to that – when the time is right – neither too soon nor too late – all phrases used with respect to Abraham at one point or another throughout the book. So what does this mean, and why does it require humility in particular?

To answer this I must fill in Marion's sketch of sacrifice. To repeat what I said at the outset:

Marion argues that sacrifice should be understood within the framework of the gift, suggesting that an act of sacrifice does not entail, invite, or encourage the destruction of that which is sacrificed. Neither is a sacrifice effectively accomplished through the dispossession of a good. Sacrifice must be thought precisely in its relation to the gift. "Sacrifice presupposes a gift already given, the point of which is neither destruction, its undoing, nor even its transfer to another owner, but, instead, its return to the givenness from which it proceeds, and whose mark it should always bear." Each of the phrases I stated above – "if it comes to that – when the time is right – neither too soon nor too late" – are ways of bearing that mark. How?

Sacrifice gives the gift back to the givenness from which it proceeds, returning the gift to the return that constitutes it. Sacrifice does not separate itself from the gift but dwells in it totally. Like Kierkegaard, there is a double movement: the gift is returned (even abandoned), but abandoned to the givenness from which it proceeds. It is not as though sacrifice is **one pole** of the double movement of giving up/taking back; sacrifice is the double movement itself. Sacrifice does not return the given to the giver by *depriving* the recipient of the gift; instead, it makes givenness visible, all the more so in that it makes Abraham *recover* the posture of reception.

What Abraham hears in the command to sacrifice Isaac is not simply an imperative to return Isaac but also the necessity to recover the posture of reception, which he can only do by returning Isaac. He does not suppress the gift

that is Isaac, but makes this gift newly transparent, allowing to appear the coming-over that delivers the gift into the visible.

The sacrifice is *accomplished*, then, not averted or avoided, insofar as Abraham recovers this posture of reception. Abraham continues to live in expectancy.

Is there textual evidence in *Fear and Trembling* for anything like Marion's analysis? I believe there is. Immediately prior to the descriptions of the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith, we find the following passage: "I do not burden God with my petty cares, details don't concern me. I gaze only upon my love and keep its virginal flame pure and clear; faith is convinced that God troubles himself about the smallest thing. In this life I am content to be wedded to the left hand, faith is humble enough to demand the right; and that it is indeed humility I don't, and shall never, deny."

The right hand/left hand conceit was a favorite image of Kierkegaard's, and it appears in many forms throughout his works. It appears in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* with reference to Lessing's famous parable of the choice between full knowledge of the truth (right hand) and the perpetual quest toward truth (left hand). Lessing says that "out of humility" he would choose the left hand. Humility in *Fear and Trembling* is associated with the right hand however, and Kierkegaard's own view on the matter is apparently expressed in a journal entry, in which he criticizes Lessing on this point as "really a kind of selfishness [that] can easily become a dangerous, yes, a presumptuous error" – in other words, an error of pride.

In *Fear and Trembling*, the humility of faith is understood on analogy with being wed with the right hand. The left hand/right hand conceit refers, I believe, to the old practice of the morganatic marriage, which is a marriage between people of unequal social rank, in which, according to the marriage contract, the wife (and any progeny) can make no claim on the husband's titles or rights. The "humble" station of the wife is the basis for renouncing such claims. In the wedding ceremony, the groom would hold the bride's right hand with his left hand.

However, in this passage, faith is represented by the bride that demands the right hand – and as Silentio says, “that [this demand] is indeed humility I don’t, and shall never, deny.” If faith is this demand, this courage (as Silentio also calls it), then it is a humble courage – far removed from what Marion calls the “self-appropriation of autarchy” which seeks to rid itself of a possession by destroying it and thus becoming free of it (which parallels some of the patterns of the knight of infinite resignation).

The “right hand”, one could say, is the right hand of God, and it is Kierkegaard’s way of referring, with the conceptual tools he had available to him, to what Marion calls givenness. Abraham, in sacrificing Isaac, is, in effect, placing him into God’s right hand. What on the next page Silentio describes as Abraham’s “narrow-mindedness” (the humble courage that insists it cannot live without every gift dispensed from God’s right hand), is what Marion calls the recovery of the posture of reception.

Indeed, we can now say that the sacrifice demanded of Abraham *intends* the posture of reception. So understood, sacrifice constitutes the deepest intimacy with both God and his gifts. Far from being a mysterious and terrifying obstacle that threatens to dispossess Abraham of his son, the sacrifice returns Isaac to the givenness from which he proceeds. The sacrifice, as I said earlier, is not avoided or averted at the last minute, but is completed, because Isaac is placed into God’s right hand.

For both Marion and Kierkegaard, the point of sacrifice is not to separate yourself from that which you sacrifice, for the sake of something else (which you might receive in return or in exchange, perhaps as a reward); nor is the sacrifice solely for the sake of a closer relationship with the one to whom you made the sacrifice. The point of the sacrifice is to draw you closer to both gift and giver, so that you may dwell more deeply within those relations than you ever could were you not to undertake the sacrifice.

Notes for Discussion:

Attunement – wrestling with pure obedience as destruction

Knight of Infinite Resignation – self-appropriation of autarchy (taking Isaac back again only with pain)

Tragic hero – economies of exchange or retribution

Marion's understanding of sacrifice as returning to the gift its givenness is the implicit understanding of sacrifice governing throughout the text – An understanding into which one is invited to step in – some of the invitations being by way of the metaphor of tower-building and its anchorage in the text of Luke 14.

The sacrifice makes visible Isaac's givenness, testifying to it, trusting it and even insisting upon it in the humble posture of the recipient.

As Silentio says in the Third Problema, "Should his contemporaries – if one can call them that – not say: There is an **eternal procrastinating** with Abraham; when he finally gets a son – and that took long enough – he wants to sacrifice him; he must be demented."

Of course Silentio sees and understands the tragic hero, but he doesn't want to go there, and his analyses show that the tragic hero is not Abraham in any case. He knows that as a knight of infinite resignation he is no tower-builder any more than the tragic hero is. What is it that he finds himself incapable of performing and believing? Is it that he is incapable of adopting the posture of reception? Incapable of living in the "if it came to that" and in the "eternal procrastination" of Abraham.

H lacks humble courage – in order to work up the strength necessary to offer Isaac to God he must resign Isaac completely. He cannot understand sacrifice to be anything other than an act of destruction, and once he has destroyed Isaac, then how can he take him back in joy, without pain?