

# Fear and Trembling – Søren Kierkegaard

## Overview

- Written in 1843 under the pseudonym **Johannes de Silentio**.
  - Central theme: the story of **Abraham and Isaac** (Genesis 22), where Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son.
  - Explores **faith, paradox, ethics, and the individual's relation to God**.
  - Core concept: the "**leap of faith**" – moving beyond reason and ethics into absolute trust in God.
- 

## Structure of the Book

The book is organized into:

1. **Preface**
  2. **Exordium** (short poetic retellings of Abraham's trial)
  3. **Eulogy on Abraham**
  4. **Preliminary Exhortation**
  5. **Problemata (Philosophical Problems)**
- 

## Key Themes and Concepts

### 1. The Story of Abraham

- Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, the son of promise.
- From an ethical standpoint, this is **murder** and absurd.
- From the standpoint of faith, it is obedience to God's absolute command.
- Abraham becomes the "**Knight of Faith**", a model of radical trust in God.

---

## 2. The Exordium (Four Retellings of Abraham's Story)

Kierkegaard presents **four variations** on Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah. Each version highlights a different possible *psychological* response:

1. Abraham doubts but hides his anguish.
2. Abraham despairs, believing God is unjust.
3. Abraham rationalizes the command.
4. Abraham cannot reconcile the paradox.

These illustrate how impossible it is for the human mind to fully comprehend Abraham's faith.

---

## 3. The Eulogy on Abraham

- Abraham is praised for his **greatness in faith**, not worldly power.
  - He is "the father of faith" because he trusted the absurd — that by losing Isaac, he would still gain him through God's promise.
  - Abraham's greatness lies in **his inward relation to the divine**, beyond reason and ethics.
- 

## 4. Preliminary Expectoration

- Introduces the concept of the **"teleological suspension of the ethical"**:
  - Normally, ethics (the universal moral law) is the highest duty.
  - Abraham suspends ethics for a higher telos (end): obedience to God.
  - Faith requires transcending the universal in order to obey the absolute.
  - Distinction:
  - **Tragic hero** (e.g., Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia) — acts ethically for the greater universal good.
  - **Abraham** — acts for God alone, appearing ethically incomprehensible.
-

## 5. Problemata

Kierkegaard frames three philosophical problems:

### ***Problema I***

*Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?*

- Yes: Abraham suspends the ethical (moral law) for the sake of his absolute duty to God.
- This makes him appear a murderer to the world, yet a man of faith before God.

### ***Problema II***

*Is there an absolute duty to God?*

- Yes: The duty to God is higher than any ethical duty.
- The individual stands in direct relation to the Absolute, above universal morality.
- Faith is thus **paradoxical and lonely** — no one else can understand Abraham's action.

### ***Problema III***

*Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his purpose from Sarah, Eliezer, and Isaac?*

- Silence is essential to faith: Abraham cannot justify his action in universal/ethical terms.
  - Communication fails because faith transcends rational explanation.
  - Faith is therefore both **isolating** and **incommunicable**.
- 

## Key Figures in Kierkegaard's Language

### **Knight of Infinite Resignation**

- Gives up everything in the finite world.
- Lives ethically, but cannot move beyond resignation.
- Example: a tragic hero.

### **Knight of Faith**

- Gives up everything (infinite resignation) **and receives it back by virtue of the absurd.**
  - Trusts God against all reason.
  - Example: Abraham receiving Isaac again.
- 

### **Central Paradox**

- Faith is the **paradox of existence**:
  - The finite and infinite.
  - The ethical and the religious.
  - The universal and the individual.
  - Abraham embodies this paradox: he believes by virtue of the absurd.
- 

### **Conclusion**

- Faith cannot be mediated by reason, philosophy, or ethics.
- It is a **passionate inward relationship to God**, requiring total surrender.
- Abraham's greatness is that he believed against the impossible.

*"Faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off."*

– ***Fear and Trembling***

---

### **Study Questions**

1. Why does Kierkegaard use Abraham instead of another biblical figure?
2. How does the "teleological suspension of the ethical" challenge traditional

moral philosophy?

3. What is the difference between the tragic hero and the knight of faith?
  4. Why does Kierkegaard emphasize silence and incommunicability in faith?
  5. How does this book critique Hegel's philosophy of the universal and the ethical?
-