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In Daniel W. Conway (ed.), *Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: a critical guide*

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Learning to hope: the role of hope in *Fear and Trembling*¹

John Lippitt

INTRODUCTION

Kierkegaard's work contains rich discussions of several virtue-terms: faith; courage; trust; patience; gratitude; humility; hope. Several recent interpretations of *Fear and Trembling* have connected Abraham's faith with some related such terms: for instance, a series of recent articles by John J. Davenport has treated faith as "eschatological trust",² while Clare Carlisle places courage centre-stage.³ I find myself increasingly attracted to the "faith as eschatological trust" reading. My purpose here is to try to complement Davenport's account, by putting more emphasis than is typical on the role of *hope* in Abraham's faith. (Although it plays a significant role in the eschatological trust interpretation, Davenport does not discuss hope in detail.) I aim to flesh this out by reading *Fear and Trembling* against the background of the 1843 discourse "The expectancy of faith", one of the discourses in which – as both

¹ A version of this article was presented as a keynote address at the conference "Kierkegaard in the World" (Australian Catholic University, Melbourne: August 2013). I would like to thank Patrick Stokes and Jeffrey Hanson for the invitation to speak at that valuable and enjoyable event and those in the audience whose questions and comments helped me to complete the final version. Thanks also to Dan Conway, whose feedback also helped me greatly with the final rewrite.

² See especially Davenport (2008a) and (2008b). Davenport acknowledges that it is "not entirely 'new', since it is indebted to past readings by Mooney, Evans, Hannay, Lippitt, and others" (Davenport [2008c]: 879-908 at 885n8).

³ Carlisle (2010).

Robert C. Roberts and William McDonald have noted - Kierkegaard discusses the concept of hope in most detail.⁴ Then, after a brief outline of the “eschatological trust” reading of *Fear and Trembling*, I’ll discuss two possible objections thereto, arising from “The expectancy of faith”. Both, I’ll suggest, can be resisted. The second can be addressed by comparing Abraham’s hope with the “radical hope” discussed by Jonathan Lear in his book of that title. This reading will, I hope(!), clarify, in more detail than hitherto, the importance of hope in existential faith. It will also throw some light on what Johannes de silentio calls “the courage of faith”, and why he describes that courage as “humble”.

Hope doesn’t exactly leap off the page as an important theme in *Fear and Trembling*, and at one point Johannes contrasts faith with a “paltry [*usle*] hope” (FT 30/SKS 4 132).⁵ The hope that plays a key role in Abraham’s faith must be hope of a particular kind. I shall argue that it is akin to what Kierkegaard in the discourses calls “expectancy” [*Forventning*].

THE EXPECTANCY OF FAITH

In the *Works of Love* deliberation “Love hopes all things”, Kierkegaard claims that to hope is to relate oneself in expectancy to the possibility of the good (WL 249/SKS 9 249). The topic here is not merely “episodic” hope, but rather a hopefulness that is, as Roberts glosses it, a “formed disposition of the person of faith”.⁶

Davenport briefly discusses this discourse in his reading of *Fear and Trembling*. But commenting on this connection, Alastair Hannay remarks that “the faith that is the topic of

⁴ Roberts (2003); McDonald (forthcoming).

⁵ In this article I quote from the following editions: *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard (2006)- hereafter FT - and *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, Kierkegaard (1998) - hereafter SKS 4.

⁶ Roberts (2003), p. 187. Stan van Hooft contrasts “episodic” hope with hopefulness understood as “a character trait that marks a person’s way of being for significant lengths of time, if not their whole life” (van Hooft [2011], p. 50). On the importance of hope at times of spiritual trial, in the face of anxiety and potential despair, Kierkegaard’s early sermon at JP 4: 3915/Pap. III C 1 is not to be missed.

the discourse is surely closer to Abraham's attitude or state of mind before he received God's command than to the pathos-filled way he saw matters after receiving it".⁷ I don't think this is true. Rather, on an "eschatological trust" reading, Abraham could respond – even in the face of the *akedah* experience – in the way "The expectancy of faith" discourse suggests. That is what I shall argue in this section.

Aside from the fact that this discourse was published on May 16, 1843 (precisely five months before *Fear and Trembling*, published on October 16 of that year), there are several points in its discussion of faith that invite comparison with the later text, as we shall see.

What is faith's expectancy? Expectancy is clearly occupied with the future (EUD 17/SKS 5 26), and such occupation is "a sign of the nobility of human beings; the struggle with the future is the most ennobling" (EUD 17/SKS 5 27). Our ability to project ourselves imaginatively into the future is one of the things that separate us from the animals. Faith has already been presented in this discourse as "the only power that can conquer the future" (EUD 16/SKS 5 25), and make one's life "strong and sound" (EUD 17/SKS 5 27). But this battle with the future is really a battle with oneself (EUD 18/SKS 5 27), insofar as the only power the future has over us is that which we give it. (Compare this with *Fear and Trembling*, where in distinguishing the tragic hero from the knight of faith, Johannes says "to struggle against the whole world is a comfort, to struggle with oneself is frightful" (FT 100/SKS 4 201).) The way to win this battle, the way to face the future, is compared to the tactic of the sailor who orients himself by looking up at the stars,

because they are faithful; they have the same location now that they had for our ancestors and will have for generations to come. By what means does he conquer the changeable? By the eternal. By the eternal, one can conquer the future, because the

⁷ Hannay (2008), p. 242.

eternal is the ground of the future, and therefore through it the future can be fathomed (EUD 19/SKS 5 28).

So: one conquers the future, oneself, by means of something constant, “the eternal”. But the “eternal power in a human being” (EUD 19/SKS 5 28) is precisely faith. And faith expects “victory”, interpreted as that God is working all things together for good.⁸ So is it this trusting expectancy or confidence which is at the heart of Abraham’s faith?

Kierkegaard goes on to make several key comparisons that might remind us of the cast of characters in *Fear and Trembling*. First, we encounter a figure we might label *the naïve hoper*. This person’s default attitude of hope, which “expects victory in everything” (EUD 20/SKS 5 29), is simply the result of inexperience. The naïve hoper’s real position, Kierkegaard suggests, is to expect “to be victorious without a struggle” (EUD 20/SKS 5 29). Life will educate this person in the error of his ways, and he will learn that his expectancy, “however beautiful, was not the expectancy of faith” (EUD 20/SKS 5 29). The naïve hoper makes a brief walk-on appearance in *Fear and Trembling*, in the guise of those “[f]ools and young people” who make the mistake of chattering “about everything being possible for a human being” (FT 37/SKS 4 138). Johannes warns that what they fail to recognise is that whereas “Spiritually speaking, everything is possible ... in the finite world there is much that is not possible” (FT 37/SKS 4 138). What “fools and young people” fail to recognise, like the naïve hoper, is that it is only *with God* that all things are possible.⁹

Kierkegaard contrasts the naïve hoper with *the troubled person* (EUD 20/SKS 5 29). This person *lacks* hope: he “expects no victory; he has all too sadly felt his loss, and even if it

⁸ Kierkegaard’s text here glosses victory as “that all things must serve for good those who love God” (EUD 19/SKS 5 28), an echo of Romans 8: 28.

⁹ Similarly, compare Kierkegaard’s contrast between youthful and Christian hope at CUP 2: 70 (JP2: 1668)/Pap. VI B 53: 13; also EUD 437-8/Pap. IV B 151: 3 and SUD 58/SKS 11 173-4.

belongs to the past, he takes it along, expecting that the future will at least grant him the peace to be quietly occupied with his pain” (EUD 20/SKS 5 29). To the reader of *Fear and Trembling*, this character sounds like one dimension of Johannes’ description of infinite resignation, in which “there is peace and rest and consolation in the pain” (FT 38/SKS 4 140). Davenport argues that this person is not resignation *simpliciter*, but resignation explicitly combined with *the rejection of hope*. This is that variety of despair described in *The Sickness Unto Death* as not wanting (and thus refusing) “[h]ope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible” (SUD 71/SKS 11 185).¹⁰

Both are frowned upon by *the man of experience*, the voice of “common sense” (perhaps a cousin of the worldviews that Kierkegaard sometimes calls “finite worldly wisdom” or “sagacity”). On this person’s view, common sense suggests that one needs to take the rough with the smooth, such that neither naïve hope nor the complete absence of hope is justified:

If one has almost every good one could wish for, then one ought to be prepared to have the troubles of life visit also the home of the happy; if one has lost everything, then one ought to consider that time reserves many a priceless cure for the sick soul, that the future, like a fond mother, also hides good gifts: in happiness one ought to be prepared to a certain degree for unhappiness, in unhappiness, to a certain degree for happiness (EUD 20/SKS 5 29).

Both the naïve hoper and the troubled person are willing to “lend an ear” to the man of experience, and to organise their lives accordingly. But such apparent common sense contains a threat. The man of experience’s phrase “to a certain degree” (EUD 21/SKS 5 30) “ensnares” his hearers. The initially happy person is troubled by the thought this “certain

¹⁰ Cf. Davenport (2008a), p. 226.

degree” of unhappiness could apply just as easily to that one thing she cannot bear to lose without becoming unhappy as it can apply to those things she can far more readily give up. In this way, Kierkegaard warns, experience engenders *doubt* (EUD 21/SKS 5 30).

Thus experience has the same potentially damaging effect as the words of *Fear and Trembling*’s “frogs in life’s swamp”, who tell the lad of Johannes’ famous story that his love for the princess is foolishness, and that “the rich brewer’s widow is just as good and sound a match” (FT 35/SKS 4 136). Note how much courage and resolution even the “knight of resignation” lad needs to resist their “common sense” negativity. Having checked that the love really is “the content of his life”, and “let it steal into his most secret, his most remote thoughts, to let it wind in countless coils around every ligament in his consciousness”, he

feels a blissful sensual pleasure in letting love palpitate through every nerve, and yet his soul is as solemn as that of one who has drained the cup of poison ... - for this moment is one of life and death. Having thus imbibed all the love and immersed himself in it, he then does not lack the courage to attempt and risk everything. He surveys the circumstances of life and gathers the rapid thoughts which like well-trained doves obey his every signal; he waves a wand over them and they scurry in all directions. But when they now all return as messengers of sorrow and explain to him that it is an impossibility, he becomes quiet, dismisses them, remains alone, and then undertakes the movement (FT 35/SKS 4 136-7).

All three figures – the naïve hoper; the troubled person; and the man of experience - may be contrasted with *the person of faith* [*den Troende*], who says: “I expect victory” (EUD 21/SKS 5 30). Yet against such a voice, enter now the voice of a cousin of the man of experience, “the earnestness of life” (EUD 22/SKS 5 31), who teaches “that your wishes would not be fulfilled, that your desires would not be gratified, your appetites would not be heeded, your

cravings would not be satisfied ... it also taught you to come to people's aid with deceitful words, to suck faith and trust out of their hearts, and to do this in the sacred name of earnestness" (EUD 22/SKS 5 31). However, Kierkegaard says, life could have taught a very different lesson: faced with just the same experience, two people may draw very different conclusions. Kierkegaard's example is of two children being praised, reprimanded or punished, comparing their possible reactions of proper pride or haughtiness; humility or indignation; a willingness to be healed by suffering or resentment. Now: all this points forward to what *Works of Love* says about hope and despair; trust and mistrust. Both have access to the same evidence. When obliged to judge in the wake of ambiguous evidence, the existential choices that we tend to make reveal something important about our character.¹¹

Similarly, Kierkegaard adds, in the manner so typical of the discourses, "so also with you" (EUD 22/SKS 5 31). We need to learn silence in the face of our doubts: "We do not judge you for doubting, because doubt is a crafty passion, and it can certainly be difficult to tear oneself out of its snares. What we require of the doubter is that he be silent. He surely perceived that doubt did not make him happy – why then confide to others what will make them just as unhappy?" (EUD 23/SKS 5 31-2).

The key thing is that the expectancy of faith is able to triumph over this doubt. Doubt has a good go at unsettling the faithful person, attempting to convince her that "an expectancy without a specified time and place is nothing but a deception" (EUD 23/SKS 5 32). And it is true that "the person who expects something particular can be deceived in his expectancy". But – Kierkegaard insists – "this does not happen to the believer" (EUD 23/SKS 5 32).

¹¹ Cf. WL 231/SKS 9 233.

Genuine hope, open as it is to the future, cannot be disappointed.¹² Despite the challenges of life, the person of faith is able to say:

There is an expectancy that the whole world cannot take from me; it is the expectancy of faith, and this is victory. I am not deceived, since I did not believe that the world would keep the promise it seemed to be making to me; my expectancy was not in the world but in God. This expectancy is not deceived; even now I sense its victory more gloriously and more joyfully than I sense all the pain of loss. (EUD 24/SKS 5 32)

Consider this in light of the 1844 discourse in which Kierkegaard glosses being victorious as *God* being victorious (in line with the Lutheran idea of one's "centre of gravity" being transferred to God).¹³ Is it not so with Abraham? *Pace* Hannay, I want to say that the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling* can say precisely this. What is crucial to the position Kierkegaard describes in this part of the discourse is the idea that *the only appropriate object of such faith is God*. He stresses that faith in human beings is always susceptible to disappointment (EUD 24/SKS 5 33) - though as *Works of Love* goes on to insist, this is no

¹² Kierkegaard reaches the same point from a different angle in the *Works of Love* deliberation "Love hopes all things", with his claim that hoping for something for which it is shameful to hope amounts to not really hoping, as genuine hope "relates essentially and eternally to the good" (WL 261/SKS 9 260-1). Wishing, craving and merely temporal expecting (that is, an expectancy which is not that of faith) can all be "put to shame" – but true hope cannot (WL 262/SKS 9 261). It seems clear, therefore, that the hope described at the opening of *Repetition*, for instance - which is associated with youthfulness, cowardice and superficiality, and which is described as "a beckoning fruit that does not satisfy" (R 132/SKS 4 10) - is not genuine hope as Kierkegaard understands it. Perhaps this is another version of the hope that *Fear and Trembling* judges as paltry? Compare also the contrast between hoping and wishing in "An Occasional Discourse" (UDVS 100-1/SKS 8 204-5). On openness to the future, see Gellman (2003), chapter 8.

¹³ "One who prays aright struggles in prayer and is victorious – in that God is victorious", the last of the *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*. On the "centre of gravity" point, see Hampson (2013), p. 22.

excuse for cynicism or mistrust. But God alone is our rock.¹⁴ We now read words that, once again, Abraham might very well have said to himself during his trial:

if you had faith in God, how then would your faith ever be changed into a beautiful fantasy you had better give up? Would he then be able to be changed, he in whom there is no change or shadow of variation? Would he not be faithful, he through whom every human being who is faithful is faithful; would he not be without guile, he through whom you yourself had faith? Would there ever be an explanation that could explain otherwise than that he is truthful and keeps his promises? (EUD 25/SKS 5 33)

Abraham's hope is hope in the steadfast love of God. Kierkegaard then contrasts such a position with the "fair weather" faithful, for whom "When everything changes, when grief supersedes joy, then they fall away, then they lose faith, or, more correctly – let us not confuse the language – then they show that they have never had it" (EUD 25/SKS 5 33-4).¹⁵ Again, the claim is that, like hope, genuine faith cannot be disappointed.

So perhaps part of what is meant by *Fear and Trembling's* repeated assertions that "Abraham did not doubt" and that "Abraham had faith" is that Abraham was graced the ability to resist the snares of this "crafty passion". What I want to stress is that one could hardly do so without *hope*. Importantly, Kierkegaard goes on to stress that such faith and its concomitant hope is compatible with grief and sorrow: he has the person of faith say that "the hard times can surely bring tears to my eyes and grief to my mind, but they still cannot rob me of my faith" (EUD 26/SKS 5 34). Again *pace* Hannay, I cannot see why the same as Kierkegaard here says about grief and sorrow cannot be said of the "pathos-filled"

¹⁴ Thus I think Kierkegaard would view Clare Carlisle as fudging the issue somewhat when she describes the "courage that belongs to faith" as consisting in part in "accept[ing] the beloved back in the form of a gift – a gift from God, a gift from life, a gift from death, or a gift from love as it is incarnated in each living being" (Carlisle [2010], p. 195).

¹⁵ On this point, compare the discussion of loss of hope at EUD 94-5/SKS 5 100-1.

Abrahamic *Angest* which Johannes stresses. Abraham's *Angest* is compatible with hope, which is a key weapon faith has against the dangers introduced by doubt.¹⁶ But it is crucial to see that the hope at work here is not just a sunny optimism. Rather, I am suggesting – along with Paul in the epistle to the Romans – that to live in hope is not to be spared from “groaning” along with the rest of creation.¹⁷

So: such hope is not mere wishing – it *expects* victory (construed as *God's* victory). For this reason, it differs from “everyday” hope in that – although it is compatible with *Angest* - it is claimed to be ultimately unshakable against the snares of doubt.¹⁸

But finally, we should note that the discourse “The expectancy of faith” goes on to outline two ways of *not* having faith. One is unsurprising: to expect absolutely nothing. But the other is both less obvious and more significant for our purposes: to expect *something particular* [*noget Enkelt*]. Kierkegaard claims: “not only the person who expects absolutely nothing does not have faith, but also the person who expects something particular or who bases his expectancy on something particular” (EUD 27/SKS 5 35). Hence a key question: is Abraham's faith that he will “get Isaac back” about “something particular”? The discourse makes a claim that, at first glance, might seem to be in tension *with Fear and Trembling*: “The person of faith demands no substantiation of his expectancy”; he says that “it is not the case that the particular can substantiate or refute the expectancy of faith” (EUD 27/SKS 5

¹⁶ Further light is shed on this by an 1850 journal entry in which Kierkegaard discusses how a person who lacks a *concrete impression* of God's love can nevertheless cling on to the *thought* that God is love, and that this is part of a “rigorous upbringing” in faith that will eventuate in a concrete God-relationship (CA Suppl. 172-3 (JP 2: 1401)/Pap. X 2 A 493).

¹⁷ Romans 8: 22-27.

¹⁸ Though perhaps “everyday” hope sometimes has more resilience and greater flexibility than Kierkegaard here gives it credit for. One form of this flexibility is hope's ability to engender new constitutive hopes, as Luc Bovens puts it. For a discussion of this, see Lippitt (2013), pp. 136-55, especially pp. 152-54.

35). Precisely what does this claim amount to, and is it in tension with the *Fear and Trembling* portrayal of faith? We shall return to this shortly.

DAVENPORT ON FAITH AS ESCHATOLOGICAL TRUST

First, let me sketch an outline of the “eschatological trust” reading argued for by Davenport.¹⁹

On this account, existential faith is “a type of eschatological hope. Eschatology in its most general sense refers to the final realization of the Good by divine power in this temporal order or its successor.”²⁰ Compare this to the interpretation of “victory” in “The expectancy of faith”: God is working all things together for good.

On the eschatological trust reading, “the *telos* toward which Abraham suspends his ethical duties to Isaac is the absurd possibility of Isaac’s survival despite God’s requirement that he be sacrificed.”²¹ What ultimately matters about the story is Abraham’s trust in the “absurd” promise, based on this “eschatological hope”.

The following key elements are involved:

1. An **ethical ideal** that must be recognised and willed; it is not rejected or transcended as a moral imperative. Abraham must continue to love Isaac “with his whole soul [*Sjæl*]”.²²

¹⁹ Space limitations mean that it can be no more than a sketch. For the full picture, see Davenport (2008a) and (2008b).

²⁰ Davenport (2008b), p. 174. (Cf. [2008a], p. 200.)

²¹ Davenport (2008b), p. 173.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 174, citing the Hong translation (Walsh has “heart” for *Sjæl* [FT 74/SKS 4 165]).

2. An **obstacle** thereto: “the human agent is prevented from achieving his or her moral ideal” by some circumstances “that make it practically impossible for the agent to secure it by his or her own powers”.²³ God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

3. **Infinite resignation.** Having concentrated his “entire identity in commitment to” the ethical ideal, the agent accepts that it is “humanly unattainable” because of the obstacle. So the agent either stops pursuing the ideal by his own endeavours (elegiac resignation) or continues out of principle, without any hope of success (Beowulfian resignation).²⁴ On Davenport’s view, Abraham is resigned in the first sense,²⁵ and “he accepts that he cannot save Isaac if God demands him”.²⁶

4. An **eschatological promise** (requiring revelation rather than natural reason alone²⁷) that the ideal “will be actualised by divine power within the created order of existence” within time.²⁸ God has promised Abraham that Isaac will become “the father of a holy nation to bring the Word to all peoples”.²⁹

5. **The absurd:** “the content of the eschatological promise, which is only eschatologically possible given the obstacle (and thus appears unintelligible outside of faith)”.³⁰ The

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For more on these two types of resignation, see Davenport (2008a), pp. 228-29.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 229.

²⁶ Davenport (2008b), p. 174. There are elements of Davenport’s discussion of infinite resignation that I might want to qualify, but this is beyond the scope of the present paper.

²⁷ Davenport (2008a), p. 203.

²⁸ Davenport considers a second possibility (“either within time, or in the hereafter as a new temporal series (rather than as a Platonic *aeternitas*)” ([2008b], p. 174.), that need not concern us here.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

possibilities that, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, Isaac will not have to be sacrificed, or that, despite being sacrificed, he will survive to fulfil his promised destiny.³¹

6. **Existential faith:** defined in terms of 1-5: “the agent infinitely resigns [the ideal], yet trusting entirely in the eschatological promise, stakes his/her identity on the belief that [the ideal] will be actualized by God”.³² Even at the point of willingness to sacrifice, Abraham believes that he will get Isaac back “by virtue of the absurd”.³³

In terms of hope specifically, this fits the thinking, in the “Tribute to Abraham”, that “each becomes great in proportion to his expectation”, such that “the one who expected the [humanly] impossible became greater than everybody” (FT 13/SKS 4 113). Abraham is “great by that hope whose form is [“humanly” understood] madness [*Vanvid*]” (FT 14/SKS 4 113).³⁴

Let us consider two possible objections to such a reading: first, Johannes de silentio’s statement that the story of Abraham is not about “the outcome”, and second, that “getting Isaac back” sounds like “something particular” in the way criticised in “The expectancy of faith”.

In his discussion of how “the single individual” assures himself that he is “justified” in standing “in an absolute relation to the absolute” (FT 54/SKS 4 155), Johannes appears to criticise the view that “One judges it according to the outcome”. This is what a “hero who has

³¹ In the summary of his position in (2008b), Davenport stresses only the second possibility (which is that apparently envisaged in Hebrews 11: 19). But much of *Fear and Trembling* (and several of Davenport’s comments thereon) are also compatible with the first.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ To grasp his position in more detail, see especially Davenport’s gloss on Tolkein’s notion of eucatastrophe ([2008a], pp. 203-05), and his summary of how the teleology at issue in *Fear and Trembling* differs from *telos* in Aristotle’s sense (*ibid.*, pp. 214-15).

³⁴ Compare such hope to that specifically Christian hope which Kierkegaard describes, from the perspective of our natural understanding, as “lunacy [*Galskab*]” (FSE 83/SKS 13 104).

become an offense or stumbling block to his age” might cry to his contemporaries (though our age produces no heroes). However, Johannes warns:

When someone in our age hears these words, “it will be judged according to the outcome”, then it is clear right away with whom one has the honor of speaking. Those who talk this way are a numerous lot whom I shall designate by the common name of “associate professors”. Secured in life, they live in their thoughts; they have a *permanent* position and *secure* prospects in a well-organised state ... *Their task in life is to judge the great men and to judge them according to the outcome.* (FT 55/SKS 4 155-6, my emphasis)

Is this a problem for the eschatological trust reading? When push comes to shove, is it not saying that Abraham is to be judged “according to the outcome”? After all, in a brief discussion of Jewish readings of the *akedah*, Davenport explicitly sides with the view that it is about the “happy ending”, rather than the original command, or both of these aspects.³⁵

Too much can be made of the significance of Johannes’ comments here. As Davenport notes, Brand Blanshard errs in this way when he asserts that “the fact that at the last moment [Abraham] was relieved of the need to strike is irrelevant (sic) in appraising him”.³⁶ Few put it as bluntly as this, but several seem to work on a similar assumption, talking of “Abraham’s sacrifice” as if the sacrifice had actually taken place.³⁷ In fact, I do not think that this passage is the problem for the eschatological trust reading that it might at first appear to be. For what Johannes is objecting to here about the “outcome” is merely sitting in judgement on “great

³⁵ Davenport (2008a), pp. 198-99.

³⁶ Blanshard (1969), p. 116, cited in Davenport (2008a), p. 213.

³⁷ See, for instance, Agacinski (1998), pp. 129-150, especially p. 139.

men”, and not applying anything learned about them, to our own lives. The passage quoted above continues:

Such conduct towards the great betrays a curious mixture of arrogance and wretchedness – arrogance because they feel called to pass judgment, wretchedness because they do not feel their lives are even remotely related to those of the great. (FT 55/SKS 4 156)³⁸

There is thus a response available here to the eschatological trust reading. I take it that Davenport’s focus on faith as eschatological trust as a means through which “the individual is singularized”, coming as an “essentially particularistic attitude toward God as Thou”, is precisely an attempt to avoid the disinterested judgementalism Johannes condemns.³⁹ So what is it that we are to learn from Abraham? The short answer is: what it means to trust and hope.⁴⁰ My further suggestion is that Abraham serves as a precursor of the love that *Works of Love* describes as “believing all things” (a deliberation essentially about trust) and “hoping all things”.⁴¹ In the *Works of Love* deliberation “Love builds up”, which precedes these deliberations on trust and hope, Kierkegaard famously argues that to love is to presuppose love in the one loved. If that is so, then for Abraham to love his God, he must presuppose God as loving. Imagine, then, a version of the discussion between mistrust and love (cf. WL

³⁸ Compare also Johannes’ distaste at “flirting esthetically with the outcome”: “no robber of churches who toils away in irons is so base a criminal as the one who plunders the holy in this way, and not even Judas ... is more contemptible than the one who peddles greatness in this way” (FT 56/SKS 4 156).

³⁹ Davenport (2008a), p. 217. “This singularising relation is existential faith: the absolute duty to love God singles us out because it includes a “duty” to *have faith* in God as the ultimate person.” (Ibid.)

⁴⁰ As I have previously argued, the sub-Abrahams of “Tuning Up” demonstrate that mere obedience to God cannot be what makes Abraham exemplary (Lippitt [2003], pp. 22-29). On the theological importance of this emphasis on faith as trust as opposed to other possible emphases, see Levenson (2012), pp. 81-82.

⁴¹ This seems consistent with Davenport’s general treatment of existential faith as the broader category of which Christian faith is a sub-category (Davenport [2008a], pp. 233).

228/SKS 9 230) applied to the *akedah* case. Mistrust will say: “All is lost! God is a deceiver!” But love will see God’s apparent “badness”, the “test”, as mere “appearance” (WL 228/SKS 9 230).⁴² Love, we are told, knows all that experience knows – and yet trusts. If this loving trust is recommended for our relations to other people, how much more must it be so for our relation to God? It is the same with respect to hope. Kierkegaard puts these words into the mouth of the truly loving person: “Hope all things: give up on no human being, since to give up on him is to give up your love for him” (WL 255/SKS 9 255). Again, if this is so of humans, how much more so of God? To give up on his trust and hope, then, would be for Abraham to give up his love for God.

We turn to the second objection. Is faith in “getting Isaac back” faith in “something particular” in a way judged illegitimate in “The expectancy of faith”? It certainly sounds like “something particular” in one sense. After all, God has made Abraham a specific promise. But compare the “tax collector” knight of faith whom Johannes imagines fantasising about a sumptuous meal. He hopes against the available evidence (“he does not have four beans, and yet he firmly believes that his wife has that delectable dish for him” (FT 33/SKS 4 134)), yet if he doesn’t get this particular something, then “oddly enough – it is all the same to him” (FT 33/SKS 4 134). Should we then extrapolate from this example? Is faith’s hope a genuine trust in God in a more general sense, perhaps after the fashion of Julian of Norwich’s “all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well”?⁴³

⁴² The companion discourse to “The expectancy of faith”, “Every good and every perfect gift is from above”, insists that the idea that God would tempt a person is a “terribly mistaken belief” (EUD 33/SKS 5 42).

⁴³ This possibility is touched upon by Pattison and Jensen (2012), p. 9. Kierkegaard sometimes presents hoping “for this or for that” as “merely” temporal hope (CD Suppl. 373/Pap. VIII 2 B 100: 2) and he seems ambivalent about the relation between “eternal” and “temporal” hope. In this passage (from the margin of a draft), they are presented as at war, but elsewhere it is noted that they grew up and played together in childhood as peers (UDVS 113/SKS 8 215), while in his 1848 notes towards a never completed follow-up to *The*

To show why faith in “getting Isaac back” is not “something particular” in a problematic sense, I think Davenport’s reading can usefully be supplemented by Jonathan Lear’s discussion of “radical hope”.⁴⁴

RADICAL HOPE

Lear’s *Radical Hope* discusses the fate of the Native American Crow Nation, and the reaction of their last great Chief, Plenty Coups (or Many Achievements), to the collapse of their traditional way of life. But Lear is interested in extrapolating from this discussion some more general lessons about radical changes in a people’s future. I want to argue that the “radical hope” that Plenty Coups’ attitude embodies, on Lear’s account, contains some important lessons for understanding Abraham as an exemplar of existential faith. If, as I think is the case, Abraham’s hope is “radical” in Lear’s sense, this dispels the worry that Abraham’s faith manifests “something particular” in the sense Kierkegaard is troubled by in “The expectancy of faith”.

I’ll first outline Lear’s account of Plenty Coups’ likely reasoning. We shall then see how this can be applied to Abraham case, and the way in which this illustrates existential faith.

Sickness Unto Death, abandoning “hope for this life” and “the hope of eternity” are both amongst the dangers to be counselled against (SUD Suppl. 165 (JP 6: 6280)/Pap. IX A 500).

⁴⁴ Lear (2006). The only other attempt I know of in the secondary literature to bring *Fear and Trembling* into dialogue with Lear on radical hope is towards the end of Carlisle’s book. However, the primary focus of Carlisle’s discussion is the link between faith and courage, whereas I want to explore the link between the two texts specifically through a more detailed exploration of what Lear means by “radical hope”.

Plenty Coups had to face up to the potential collapse of life as he knew it, in which changed circumstances threaten to render meaningless the shared conception of what it is to live an excellent Crow life (in terms of its norms, values, ceremonial customs, established social roles, etc.) Yet Lear speculates that his reaction would make sense if we suppose him reasoning as follows. He recognises that there is much about the future that we don't understand. Yet he considers himself to have a hopeful message (in his case from a dream vision) that purports to come from a divine source – and he further considers this to be “something to hold on to in the face of overwhelming challenge”.⁴⁵ (A key part of the dream is to learn from the chickadee, “least in strength but strongest of mind of his kind”, who learns by listening, and from whom Plenty Coups takes the message that “It is the mind that leads a man to power, not strength of body”.⁴⁶)

To survive and possibly once again to flourish, the Crow needed to be willing to give up almost everything they had understood about what constituted the good life: “not a choice that could be reasoned about in the pre-existing terms of the good life. One needed some conception of – or commitment to – a goodness that transcended one's current understanding of the good”.⁴⁷ (Here Lear makes an explicit, if passing, reference to the “teleological suspension of the ethical”.) Lear reads Plenty Coups as “someone who experienced himself as receiving a divine call to tolerate the collapse of ethical life. This would include even a collapse of the concepts with which ethical life had hitherto been understood.”⁴⁸

(Note that it is this which makes such hope “radical”. It is not simply that Plenty Coups hopes for a future that is not entirely within his own control. While the latter might be argued to be a feature of most “mature” hope, most such hope does *not* require us to abandon

⁴⁵ Lear (2006), p. 91.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 70-71.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 92.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

and then rebuild concepts such as the good with which we aim to orient ourselves in the world.⁴⁹)

Lear then sets out a detailed account of what might plausibly have been Plenty Coups' reasoning.⁵⁰ I focus here on key aspects of this that in important respects parallel the Abraham case:

1. A divine source tells us that an accepted way of life is coming to an end.
2. Our conception of the good is tied up with that way of life – precisely the way of life that is about to disappear.

Thus:

3. “in an important sense we do not know what to hope for or what to aim for. Things are going to change in ways beyond which we can currently imagine.”⁵¹

Still,

4. “*There is more to hope for than mere biological survival. ... If I am going to go on living, I need to be able to see a genuine, positive and honourable way of going forward. So, on the one hand, I need to recognize the discontinuity that is upon me – like it or not there will be a radical shift in form of life. On the other, I need to preserve some integrity across that discontinuity*”.⁵²

However, there are grounds for hope because:

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Dan Conway for pressing me to clarify this point.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 92-94.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 93-94, my emphasis.

5. “God ... is good. My commitment to the genuine transcendence of God is manifest in my commitment to the goodness of the world transcending our necessarily limited attempt to understand it. My commitment to God’s transcendence and goodness is manifested in my commitment to the idea that *something good will emerge even if it outstrips my present limited capacity for understanding what that good is.*”⁵³

6. “I am thus committed to the idea that while we Crow must abandon the goods associated with our way of life – and thus we must abandon the conception of the good life that our tribe has worked out over centuries.⁵⁴ *We shall get the good back*, though at the moment we can have no more than a glimmer of what that might mean.”⁵⁵

My suggestion is that *mutatis mutandis*, this general schema seems to apply also to Abraham *qua* exemplar of existential faith. Regarding 1) and 2): With the *akedah* command, something radical has changed in Abraham’s understanding of God’s covenant and thus what the future holds. Consequently, we can imagine Abraham reasoning as in 3). It is in this sense that Abraham’s situation is beyond all “human calculation” (FT 30/SKS 4 131). Perhaps such reasoning is what lies behind his ambiguous “final word” (“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son!” (FT 102/SKS 4 203, citing Genesis 22:8)). 4) does not map on precisely, but is relevant in the sense that more is at stake than the mere biological survival of Isaac, as the second to fourth sub-Abrahams of “Tuning Up” illustrate. Isaac survives in all three stories, but none illustrate faith, since in the second case, Abraham “saw joy no more” (FT 9/SKS 4 109) as a result of his ordeal; in the third, he blames himself for violating his duty to his son, considering himself to be beyond forgiveness; and in the fourth, Abraham draws his knife in despair and Isaac loses his faith (FT 10-11/SKS 4 111).

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 94, my emphasis.

⁵⁴ A form of infinite resignation?

⁵⁵ Ibid.

5) seems a good description of the possible thinking behind Abraham's despair-resisting hope. It is this – especially the italicised passage - that enables Abraham to say, with a flexibility that looks the very opposite of “something particular”, “Surely it will not happen, or if it does, the Lord will give me a new Isaac, namely by virtue of the absurd” (FT 101/SKS 4 203). This is indeed a statement of “radical hope” in Lear's sense. And 6) is akin to the notion of “getting Isaac back”, which Davenport describes as “an eschatological possibility in which we can only have faith”.⁵⁶ I think the overall line for which I am arguing here is consistent with that of C. Stephen Evans, for whom Abraham's trust in God amounts to a confidence that “God will keep his promises” – without knowing *how*.⁵⁷

Lear concludes that Plenty Coups' hope was a remarkable achievement in no small part because it managed to enable him to avoid despair.⁵⁸ Likewise, we can add, Abraham. But, as we stressed earlier, what makes the hope radical “is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is”.⁵⁹ Thus, Lear concludes, “hope becomes crucial for an ethical enquiry into life at the horizons of one's understanding”.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Davenport (2008a), p. 220.

⁵⁷ See Evans' “Introduction” to Kierkegaard (2006), xviii. Note that such a reading does not commit us to the idea that Abraham holds contradictory beliefs (that he both will and won't sacrifice Isaac) – an interpretation that I was also at pains to avoid in earlier work (see Lippitt [2003], especially pp. 66-76). Nor does it present Abraham as having sussed God's real intentions and called his bluff. Rather, as Evans puts it, “Abraham simply rests unwaveringly in his trust in God's goodness; he believes that God will keep his promises, *even though he does not know exactly how God will do this*, and realizes that from the perspective of human experience, it looks impossible.” (Evans, “Introduction” in Kierkegaard [2006], xix, my emphasis). What I am suggesting is that drawing on Lear can enable us to gloss the italicised phrase – but also to show that Abraham's hope is more radical than this way of putting it may at first make it appear.

⁵⁸ Lear (2006), p. 100.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Now, if Abraham's hope is "radical" in something like Lear's sense, then this enables us to see that hoping to "get Isaac back" is not "something particular" in the sense condemned in "The expectancy of faith". Lear discusses the way in which Plenty Coups was able to give his people "a basis for hope at a time when it was systematically unclear what one could hope for. Plenty Coups' dream held out for the Crow the hope that if they followed the wisdom of the chickadee (whatever that would come to mean) they would survive (whatever that would come to mean) and hold on to their lands (whatever that would come to mean)".⁶¹ Similarly, I suggest, Abraham's faith in God enables him to believe that all will be for the good (whatever that would come to mean) and that he will get Isaac back in this life (whatever that would come to mean). In this way, his faith is not in "something particular" in the problematic sense.

Moreover, there is nothing particularly quirky about such a view of hope. John Macquarrie makes a similar point about both hope in the Old Testament and Christian hope. Discussing Abraham in particular, Macquarrie remarks that human promises tend to be "sufficiently specific" to know whether or not they have been kept. However, he adds,

no such simple criteria seem to operate when we are thinking of the promises of God. His basic promise is to give us more abundant life. But we cannot specify the conditions of such a life in advance. It is only in the unfolding of history and the actual deepening of human life that we can say whether the promise is being fulfilled. This could well mean that it is fulfilled differently from the way we had at one time expected, for our expectation could be framed only in terms of what we had

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 141.

experienced up to that point, whereas the fulfilling of the promise might bring with it something new.⁶²

Finally for this section, let me return briefly to “Love hopes all things” further to suggest how hope there seems to work at the same level of generality as the eschatological trust reading. Love, we are told, takes upon itself the work of hope (WL 248/SKS 9 248); hope is nothing without love (WL 259/SKS 9 258). To “hope all things” is the “eternal” register of what is expressed temporally by talking of hoping “always” (WL 249/SKS 9 249). But the help of the eternal is further equated with the help of the possibility of the good (WL 250/SKS 9 249-50) – expressed in precisely the same level of generality as we drew on Davenport and Lear to describe.⁶³ Anything that does not deal with the eternal – that is, the possibility of good - is not genuine hope (WL 251/SKS 9 251), and – expressed temporally - “the whole of one’s life should be the time of hope” (WL 252/SKS 9 251).⁶⁴ This is what Abraham embodies insofar as he does not fall into the snares of doubt.

EXISTENTIAL FAITH “IN THE WORLD”

Finally, I want briefly to suggest some connections between Abraham’s hope and both courage and humility, to try to shed some light on Abraham’s “paradoxical and humble courage” (FT 41/SKS 4 143).

⁶² Macquarrie (1978), p. 53. For more detail on how this might be seen as operating in the case of the *akedah*, see Levenson (2012), pp. 84-85.

⁶³ One can see something of the “infinite frailty” (WL 251/SKS 9 251) of possibility that Kierkegaard talks about here by trying to imagine oneself in Abraham’s situation. The dialogue between hope and despair (WL 254/SKS 9 253-4) is also worth reading with the *akedah* in mind. Perhaps the fourth sub-Abraham – and also the second? – has listened too much to despair.

⁶⁴ This is also illustrated in the case of the prophet Anna, discussed at length in the discourse “Patience in expectancy”.

1. HOPE'S LINK WITH COURAGE

For Lear, radical hope plays a crucial role in a courageous life. But in line with what we have so far said, the Crow conception of courage had to change. Hence Lear's suggestion is of more general interest for our purposes:

Might there be a certain plasticity deeply embedded in a culture's thick conception of courage? That is, are there ways in which a person brought up in a culture's traditional understanding of courage might draw upon his own inner resources to broaden his understanding of what courage might be? In such a case, one would begin with a culture's thick understanding of courage; but one would somehow find ways to *thin it out*: find ways to face circumstances courageously that the older thick conception never envisaged.⁶⁵

So it is, I suggest, with the hope Abraham manifests as part of his faith. That is, he finds ways to hope that go beyond his original understanding of God's promise. Abraham starts with a relatively clear idea of what God has promised him through Isaac. But his "trial" challenges this expectation. One way of thinking about Abraham's situation is that he is faced with the following dilemma. Does he give up this hope (perhaps in the manner of some of the sub-Abrahams)? Or does he maintain his faith in God in a manner to which radical hope – as summarised above: a hope that transcends his understanding - is central? The fact that Abraham responds in the latter way is a key part of why Johannes presents him as exemplary of existential faith.

⁶⁵ Lear (2006), p. 65.

The connection with courage can best be approached by considering why we consider courage as a virtue. Lear's answer is because it is an excellent way of responding to the fact that we are finite erotic creatures: "we reach out to the world in yearning, longing, admiration, and desire for that which (however mistakenly) we take to be valuable, beautiful and good".⁶⁶ As such, "we take risks just by being in the world".⁶⁷ And here we should note what it means to inhabit a world:

a world is not merely the environment in which we move about; it is that over which we lack omnipotent control, that about which we may be mistaken in significant ways, *that which may intrude upon us, that which may outstrip the concepts with which we seek to understand it.* Thus living within a world has inherent and unavoidable risk.⁶⁸

Surely this is something that Abraham learns, and as Johannes Climacus famously reminds us, without risk, no faith. Yet Kierkegaard's more positive spin on this is to say that "in reliance on God, one dares to venture everything" (EUD 369/SKS 5 354). The relevance of all this to courage is that in its thinnest sense, Lear suggests, courage is "the capacity for living *well* with the risks that inevitably attend human existence".⁶⁹

It is vital to stress that these risks are inextricably bound up with our finitude, and that this in turn impacts on a conception of the good life for creatures like us. In other words, goodness "transcends our finite powers to grasp it".⁷⁰ Indeed, "it seems oddly inappropriate – lacking in understanding of oneself as a finite creature – to think that what is good about the world is exhausted by our current understanding of it."⁷¹ Recognition of this finitude and

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 119-20.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 120.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 121.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 122.

God-dependence – and embodying radical hope in the face of this recognition – is again a significant part of why Johannes presents Abraham as exemplary.⁷²

2. HOPE'S LINK WITH HUMILITY

So why is Abraham's courage "humble"? A full answer is beyond the scope of this article, but let me offer a provisional sketch. One preliminary answer might be that the link between courage and humility is what you would expect, given that in the discourse "Against cowardliness", Kierkegaard equates cowardliness with pride: "cowardliness and pride are one and the same" (EUD 354/SKS 5 341). In this discourse, the proud person is presented as one who is struggling with God and wanting to do this under his own power (EUD 354/SKS 5 341). But there is a falsity about this, since such a person needs the support of others. God, says Kierkegaard, will expose his solitariness as a mirage, and this he can't stand (EUD 355/SKS 5 342). But Abraham, by contrast, is for Johannes both *genuinely* solitary⁷³ in his trial (unlike the "tragic hero") *and* recognises his absolute dependence upon God. However, here too a further parallel between Abraham and Plenty Coups might help. In Plenty Coups' courage, "There is no implication that one can glimpse what lies beyond the horizons of one's historically situated understanding. There is no claim to grasp ineffable truths. Indeed, this form of commitment is impressive in part because it acknowledges that no such grasp is

⁷² The "courage of faith", specifically, is presented in the discourse "Against cowardliness" as being a recognition of one's total reliance upon God, in language that recalls *Fear and Trembling's* references to "knights" of faith: "no one should fear to entrust himself to God with the idea that this relationship would deprive him of his power and make him cowardly. It is just the reverse. Anyone upon whom God does not confer knighthood with his powerful hand is and remains cowardly in his deepest soul" (EUD 352-3/SKS 5 340). (I am grateful to Adam Pelsler for this point.) As Daphne Hampson notes, however, this dependence is not just a Schleiermacherean resting in another, since for Kierkegaard the self must also relate to itself self-reflexively; choose to be itself (Hampson [2013], p. 230, p. 245).

⁷³ Hence the emphasis on his "silence".

possible.”⁷⁴ Yet both Plenty Coups and Abraham commit “to a goodness that transcends his understanding”.⁷⁵ This is “a peculiar form of hopefulness. ... the hope for *revival*: for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible”.⁷⁶ This is a form of commitment far more akin to humility than arrogance – especially when combined with the dependence on God stressed above. And this is a point worth noting in a world which, as Lear notes, often thinks that “religious commitment breeds arrogant intolerance – as though the believers had a ‘direct line to God’”.⁷⁷ (In my experience of teaching it, this is one of the most common undergraduate reactions to *Fear and Trembling*.) In other words, what might appear as Abraham’s arrogance – standing as a single individual above the universal; heading for Moriah without discussing the matter with Sarah – can be viewed differently if one sees this through the lens of his humility before God, and his openness and willingness to turn the whole situation over to God in faith, trust and hope.⁷⁸

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that, read against the background of the discourse “The expectancy of faith”, one can find much support for a version of the “faith as eschatological trust” reading of *Fear and Trembling* that Davenport has developed out of earlier interpretations. Two likely objections to that position – those about “the outcome” and about “something particular” - can be resisted. I have also stressed the advantages of understanding how Abraham’s hope is “radical” in something like Lear’s sense, a focus that also throws some light on why Johannes claims that Abraham manifests a “humble courage”. The

⁷⁴ Lear (2006), p. 95. (Compare here Kierkegaard’s 1850 journal remark that “the concept of the absurd is precisely to grasp the fact that it cannot and must not be grasped” (JP 1: 7/Pap. X 2 A 354).)

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ On this point, compare Carlisle’s suggestions about the “open-hearted” and “feminine” aspects of the courage of faith (Carlisle [2010], pp. 198-99).

significance of Abraham's hope deserves more attention than it has typically been given, not least because Abraham serves as a striking illustration of Kierkegaard's claim that so long as there is a task, there is hope (UDVS 276-7/SKS 8 371-2).

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