

## Supplement on Kierkegaard:

The following chart summarizes the spheres of existence, and some of their important aspects.

Sphere	Criterion	Realm	Category
Religious	Absolute	Infinite	Faith
Ethical	Universal	Eternal	Duty/'The good
Aesthetic	Individual	Temporal/Finite	Pleasure/Love

## Fear and Trembling

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard uses the point of view of a fictional character, Johannes de Silentio, to explore the meaning of the Abraham/Isaac story. As Silentio views it, God's command to Abraham that he sacrifice Isaac had to have challenged Abraham on multiple levels:

- On a personal level (as a father) → God is commanding him to give up, indeed to kill, a son whom he loves, and loves dearly
- On an ethical level (as a moral agent) → God is commanding to commit murder – there is no obvious greater good that will come out of the situation
- On a religious level → God's command seems to be a revocation of the covenant he had earlier made with Abraham, that Abraham would be the father of many nations

Despite these multiple difficulties – and despite the anxiety that the story evokes in Silentio (and, presumably, in Abraham) – Abraham does not hesitate to do what God has asked him to do. And Silentio understands that what enables Abraham to do what he did is that he had faith in God. As Silentio puts it, in order to explain or account for Abraham's actions – and to account for Abraham's status as a religious exemplar, someone we should strive to emulate, we have to recourse to the category of faith. At the same time, Silentio repeatedly tells us that he doesn't fully understand what faith is or how it operates – the main reason is that he says when one thinks about faith (as illustrated in the story of Abraham), we immediately encounter a cluster of paradoxes. There's essentially two that he talks about:

- One is that faith makes the individual "higher" than the universal – faith seems to make it okay to behave immorally; and this, he thinks, doesn't make sense.
- The other is that, as Silentio presents him, the content of Abraham's belief doesn't make sense, or is absurd.

Silentio says that, even as Abraham prepares to kill Isaac, even as he believes with all his heart and soul that Isaac is gone to him forever, he simultaneously believes that Isaac will not be taken from him, that he will not be lost to him. For Silentio, this means that Abraham believes two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time – that Isaac is

gone, and that Isaac will not be taken from him. To clarify what he means by this and why he says it, he makes a distinction between two types of “knights” or two types of exemplars.

First is **the knight of infinite resignation** (also called the “tragic hero”) – this is an ethical exemplar, someone who gives up a finite good for the sake of a greater good. For example, a mother turns her son into the police because he’s dealing crack at the junior high – she has an obligation to her son, to love and care for her son, but she also has an obligation to the wider community to which she belongs. What she does is effectively scale down her obligation to her son in light of this higher obligation she has. Silentio calls the act of making this sacrifice the “movement of infinity” – you give up something finite (e.g., your son) for the sake of something higher.

Second is **the knight of faith** – a religious exemplar. He also makes a sacrifice; he also gives up something finite (so he makes the movement of infinitude).

But there are two key differences between the two knights:

(1) the knight of infinite resignation is intelligible to others and what he/she does is morally praiseworthy – the sacrifice is made to help the larger society, it serves a moral purpose. The knight of faith, in contrast, is unintelligible, Silentio says, and as a result, what he is doing is not something we can praise (because we can’t understand why he’s doing it) – we regard him either as insane or worse. (Think of talking to Abraham just before he is to leave for the mountain. What do you say to him? “You’re nuts!! You must have misunderstood what God said; or it must have been the devil tempting you in the guise of God; God gave you Isaac, why on earth would he now want you to kill him?”)

(2) The knight of infinite resignation stops with the movement of infinity – stops with the sacrifice [the mother relinquishes her son, and then that’s it]. The knight of faith makes another movement, the “movement of finitude” – that is, even as, with one hand, Abraham relinquishes Isaac, with the other hand, he holds fast to him. It’s not that he thinks, well, probably I’ll have to sacrifice Isaac, but there’s an infinitesimal chance I won’t have to; it’s not that he thinks, I probably won’t have to, but I’m prepared to do it if I must. He has to believe both that Isaac is gone and that he is not – for Silentio, this is central to faith. Faith requires both that he make the sacrifice – that he relinquish Isaac because God demanded that of him (if he doesn’t do this, he is not demonstrating the proper devotion/obedience to God – he has not really made the sacrifice). AND that he believe that Isaac not be lost (if he doesn’t do this, he shows no trust in God’s promise). Silentio presents him as having to be conscious of (or to will) both of these things.