

Mothers and Melancholia: Sacrifice in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*

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Abstract

The article examines sacrifice in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. I argue that in order to understand the meaning of sacrifice in this work, we have to account for the four poetic images of a weaning mother – often overlooked by commentators – that we find in the section entitled “Attunement”. I show that we can make sense of the images once we situate them within the context of Kierkegaard's (or his pseudonyms') broader critique of modernity, autonomous subjectivity, and the loss of premodern forms of authority. On my interpretation, for Kierkegaard, sacrifice entails a rupture of a communal bond; yet his pseudonyms explore both secular and religious ways of responding to such a rupture. Finally I argue that while *Fear and Trembling* ultimately offers no clear solutions, the story Kierkegaard conveys to us – a story about sacrifice, mourning, and mothering – can inspire us to reflect on the modern condition.

Keywords

sacrifice – Kierkegaard – weaning – mother – mourning – modernity

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Mourning can be shown, pragmatically, to be Kierkegaard's central affect in the foundational nexus of his philosophy.

THEODOR W. ADORNO



1 Introduction

What can we learn about sacrifice from Søren Kierkegaard? An obvious place to look for an answer to this question is in the notorious rendering of the *Binding of Isaac* in *Fear and Trembling* (1843), which has shocked and bewildered commentators for many decades.¹ It is not easy to rid oneself of the violence of the image of Abraham drawing the knife, fist clenched, looking down at his beloved son Isaac. Perhaps because of the violent spectacle at the heart of a text that is ostensibly about religious faith, commentators have often overlooked the four images of a mother weaning a child that we find in the book. While there is an enormous literature on *Fear and Trembling* – especially in Anglophone Kierkegaard scholarship – commentary on the mother and child is scant.² In this article, I argue that we can better understand the meaning of sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* if we account for the images of the weaning mother. I believe that we can make sense of the images once we situate them within the context of Kierkegaard's (or his pseudonyms') broader critique of modernity, the idea of autonomous subjectivity, and the loss of premodern forms of authority.³

1 Although accounts of Abraham's near-sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* are legion, to my knowledge few commentators explicitly deal with sacrifice as a more general theme in Kierkegaard's thought. Paolo Diego Bubbio examines destructive and kenotic notions of sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* and in *Works of Love* in his book *Sacrifice in the Post-Kantian Tradition*. Claudia Welz has offered a reading of sacrifice within the romantic relation between two people based on *Works of Love* in the article *Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice*. John Lippitt discusses self-love and sacrifice in *True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice*. Finally, Vanessa Rumble compares the role of sacrifice in Kierkegaard, Adorno, and Kant in her paper *Sacrifice and Domination*.

2 Some exceptions are Linda L. Williams, *Kierkegaard's Weanings*; Vanessa Rumble, *Why Moriah?*; Edward F. Mooney, *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, and Mooney, *Living Philosophy*. It is also notable that while Kierkegaard's relationship to his own father is often commented on in the literature, there is almost no mention of his relationship to his mother. See McDonald, *Søren Kierkegaard*.

3 All the works I cite in this article, except *Works of Love*, are from Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship. Yet how to approach his pseudonymity is one of the most contested issues in scholarship on Kierkegaard. Here, it must suffice to say that I do not think we can identify Kierkegaard's own position straightforwardly with those of the various pseudonymous voices, and thus I state the names of the authors of the positions I discuss. How close to Kierkegaard's own view these positions are situated would be a matter for another article.

My argument proceeds in three steps. 1. I suggest that to understand the figure of the weaning mother, we should turn to another place in Kierkegaard's oeuvre where a 'mother' appears, namely in *Either/Or I* (1843), which was published less than a year before *Fear and Trembling*. Here, we will see that the image of motherhood is connected to the pseudonym A's diagnosis of modernity as a time of social fragmentation and isolation. 2. I perform a reading of the section of *Fear and Trembling* entitled "Attunement," in which we find the four images of weaning. I show that, in this context, sacrifice marks a site of traumatic rupture in which a communal bond is severed, but that Kierkegaard also lets his pseudonyms explore both secular and religious ways of responding to such a rupture. 3. Finally, I argue that *Fear and Trembling* is a deeply aporetic work that offers no clear solutions. I nevertheless suggest that the story Kierkegaard conveys to us – a story about sacrifice, mourning, and mothering – can inspire us to reflect on the modern condition.

However, before I embark on the three steps of my argument, I will offer a brief outline of a reading of sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* that draws on a traditional Christian trope. I believe that, while this reading is compelling, it is not the only story about sacrifice in this book, and, consequently, does not account for the full depth of Kierkegaard's thoughts on the matter. According to such a reading, *Fear and Trembling* seems to present quite an orthodox Christian account of the abolishment of cultic and literal sacrifice in favor of the internalized self-sacrifice of faith. To understand why this is the case, we must keep in mind that, within Christianity – and perhaps within monotheism as such – we find a critique of sacrifice as a cultic practice that offers something to the gods in the hope of receiving something in return, for instance, offering an ox with the aim of receiving a good harvest. Ritual sacrifice follows an economic and violent *do ut des* logic: I destroy an object (e.g. an artifact, vegetable, animal, or even a human being), thereby offering it to the gods, in order to receive something in return. Yet the atoning *self*-sacrifice of Christ is meant to make all other sacrificial practices redundant. With the Atonement the sacrifice of objects is replaced by a sacrifice of the self that is non-economic and non-violent, since the Christian believer is supposed to perform internalized acts of self-sacrifice such as love, trust, obedience, and piety (in short: faith).⁴

In the biblical *Binding of Isaac*, God sends an angel to prevent Abraham from sacrificing his son. This is usually interpreted as an allegory for God's rejection of literal sacrifice.⁵ Hence arguably the *Binding of Isaac* is itself a version of

4 See Welz, *Love as Gift and Self-Sacrifice*, p. 238 et seq.

5 Since the *Binding of Isaac* is in the Hebrew Bible, Judaism and Christianity share this story about the abolition of sacrifice.

the story about the internalization of cultic sacrifice. On a common reading of *Fear and Trembling*, then, in choosing the *Binding of Isaac* as the focal motif of the text, Kierkegaard is not celebrating violent sacrifice, but rather showing that true faith involves an internalized and non-economic sacrifice. That is to say, the goal of *Fear and Trembling* is to present a model of religious faith as a self-sacrifice devoid of instrumentalism. There is some evidence to support such a reading. For instance, the text is filled with economic metaphors of faith being on “clearance sale,” being sold at a “bargain price” in “the world of business” (e.g. *FR* 5, 40, 48, 60, 79, 80, 121). These metaphors suggest a critique of sacrifice understood as a *do ut des* investment. The book’s pseudonymous author Johannes de silentio disparages the devaluation of faith amongst his contemporary bourgeois Christians, who are dominated by an ethos of prudence (*Klogskab*). “Prudence” is a term that is used throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship, which refers to a worldly logic, according to which, it is only prudent to sacrifice something if one will get a return for one’s investment. Yet the point of the book seems to be that faith is radically *imprudent* expenditure: Abraham sacrifices Isaac without the hope or expectation of getting him back.⁶ Hence, the story of Abraham is apparently employed as a means for ‘driving up the price of faith.’⁷

Still, since, to the modern reader, Abraham presents an uncomfortable exemplar of faith, commentators usually point to the book’s epigraph to suggest that Johannes de silentio is oblivious of the true message of book.⁸ We are thus urged not to read the book in an overly literal manner. In this

6 Since hope is a prominent theme in Kierkegaard scholarship, let me note that when I emphasize that Abraham has no hope or expectation of receiving Isaac back, I use the word hope in the sense of ‘counting on’ or ‘reckoning’. I.e., I refer to a kind of calculating hope, which does not transcend the *do ut des* logic of sacrifice. This kind of hope is contrasted with the higher attitude of faith (*FT* 18 and 131 et seq.). For a discussion of calculating hope, see Fremstedal, *Kierkegaard’s Metaphysics of Hope*, p. 52 et seq. However, several authors have explored a different notion of hope in Kierkegaard, especially based on *Works of Love*; one that is not contrasted with faith, but rather appears to be part of faith. For an account of this second notion of hope, see John Lippitt, *Learning to Hope*. Whether Abraham possesses the latter kind of hope is a question that exceeds the scope of this article.

7 See Kosch, *What Abraham Couldn’t Say*, p. 60 et seq.; Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling*, p. 133.

8 The epigraph, a quotation from the mystic Hamann, reads, “What Tarquinius Superbus said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not.” Through the metaphor of the poppies, Tarquinius conveys to his son – via an unknowing messenger – that he should kill the leading citizens of Gabii, where he is a military leader. The usual interpretation of the epigraph is that de silentio is likewise a messenger who doesn’t understand the true message of the book, and that consequently the book ought not be read too literally. See Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling*, p. 137 et seq.

way, the near-sacrifice of Isaac can be translated into a more digestible picture. For instance, Stephen Mulhall has suggested that we read the story analogically such that Abraham's trial anticipates God's sacrifice of his son in the Atonement:

God's substitution of a ram for Isaac [...] prefigures his substitution of his Son for human offspring, so that the sins of the fathers are no longer visited upon the sons; and Isaac's unquestioning submission to his father's will [i.e. in carrying the wood for the fire on which Abraham is willing to sacrifice him] prefigures Christ's submission to his own Father. In this sense, Isaac's receptive passivity represents [...] a transition from an understanding of God as demanding the sacrifice of what is ours to an understanding of God as demanding sacrifice of the self.⁹

Consequently, on this interpretation, in *Fear and Trembling*, the economic logic of sacrifice is replaced by internal self-sacrifice. Arguably this understanding of self-sacrifice culminates in Kierkegaard's later *Works of Love* (1847). In the penultimate section of this book, "The Work of Love in Praising Love," we find two forms of sacrifice. One is an "inward" form of "self-denial," whereas the "outward" form is "self-sacrificing unselfishness" (WL 360, 365, italics in original). In its self-sacrifice and servitude of the other (i.e. the neighbor), Christian love is purged of any instrumentalism.¹⁰

However, we may ask whether this kind of self-sacrifice is not also a kind of economy; namely an economy of endless debt to God and to the abstract neighbor?¹¹ While the austere take on sacrifice is a trope we find in the writings of Kierkegaard, it is not the only one. In what follows, I want to explore an alternative conception of sacrifice – and the possibility of its overcoming – in *Fear and Trembling*, which is suggested by the four images of weaning.

2 Modernity and Motherly Love in *Either/Or I*

Fear and Trembling consists of four introductions – the "Preface," the "Attunement," the "Ode to Abraham," and the "Preliminary Expectoration" – and

9 Mulhall, Stephen. *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 379 et seq. In my view, Mulhall's interpretation is the finest example of a Christian reading of *Fear and Trembling*.

10 Part of the literature dealing with the problem of self-love in *Works of Love* seeks to defend Kierkegaard against the charge that his account of love is overly harsh and austere. E.g. Lippitt, *True Self-Love and True Self-Sacrifice*.

11 Theodor W. Adorno has argued that Kierkegaard's notion of love as self-sacrifice is ultimately one of instrumental domination. See Adorno, *On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love*.

three philosophical “Problemata.” Throughout these sections de silentio employs both aesthetic means (the “Ode to Abraham”) and philosophical-conceptual tools (the three Problemata) to attempt to *understand* how Abraham could be the father of faith despite (or perhaps because) of his willingness to sacrifice his own son.

In the section entitled “Attunement” (*Stemning*), we find four alternative versions of the story of Abraham and Isaac – each of them different than the biblical story – and each of them coupled with a short stanza on a mother weaning her baby.¹² The four images of mother and child appear initially, as Linda Williams has remarked, “wildly *non sequitur*” in the middle of a book that is supposedly about the nature of faith.¹³ In order to make sense of them, I suggest that we begin by turning to *Either/Or I*, where we also find the figure of the mother.

More specifically, in the text fragment entitled “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama,” we find a reference to “motherly love” (*E/O I* 144). Let me first provide some context. The work *Either/Or* is edited by the pseudonym Victor Eremita and is subtitled “A Fragment of Life” (“Et Livs-fragment”); indeed, everything about the book is fragmented. To begin, it is fractured into Parts I and II: the first consists of disorganized text fragments, which Eremita attributes to an author whom he dubs A, while Part II is ostensibly written by the author B, who is also named Judge Wilhelm. Moreover, *Either/Or I* is subtitled “A Venture in a Fragmentary Endeavor” (“Et Forsøg i den fragmentariske Stræben”).¹⁴ In the text fragment on ancient and modern tragedy, A provides a brief genealogy of modern society as a process of fragmentation. He contrasts modernity with ancient Greek society, where the

12 Alasdair Hannay has suggested “attunement” as a translation of “Stemning,” which is the term I am using in this article. Reidar Thomte translates “Stemning” as “mood” in *The Concept of Anxiety*. By contrast, the Hongs have chosen “exordium.” This latter translation is problematic since it does not capture the meaning of “Stemning,” which is either atmosphere, mood, or tuning (like the tuning of an instrument).

13 Williams, *Kierkegaard's Weanings*, p. 310.

14 To be sure, *Either/Or II* is supposed to portray a *unified* ethical view of existence, but judging from this subtitle, which refers to both Part I and II, fragmentation runs deeper than unity. Vanessa Rumble has argued that Kierkegaard’s early pseudonymous writings suggest omnipresent fragmentation. The early writings stage “a disintegration [of the fictive personae within the texts]: Victor Eremita suggests that the aesthete ‘A’ and Judge William are in fact a single divided personality; Constantin confides that the young man in *Repetition* may be his own alienated reflection; and Johannes Climacus hints that the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling* is a mere figment of Johannes de Silentio’s poetic powers.” The pseudonyms, she argues, are “mere fragments of a personality already in disintegration.” Rumble, *Eternity Lies Beneath*, p. 94.

individual was determined by “the state, the family, in fate” (*E/O I* 143). These “substantial determinacies” provide orientation for the individual (*E/O I* 143). By contrast, A argues that in modern society, “the bond that in the political sense held the states together, invisibly and spiritually [has] dissolved,” and “the power in religion that insisted upon the invisible [has] been weakened and destroyed” (*E/O I* 141). In modernity, both religious and political authorities have lost their grip on individuals. Social cohesion is absent, and community has been fragmented, leaving individuals isolated from one another (*E/O I* 141). What is the cause of social fragmentation? A’s answer is *subjectivity* (to which Kierkegaard agrees, I think): “existence is undermined by the subject’s doubt; isolation continually gains the upper hand” (*E/O I* 141). The coming to be of autonomous and reflective subjectivity leads to the questioning and dissolution of absolute political and religious authority in modern community.¹⁵

A’s general ambition in the text is to compare ancient and modern tragedy in order to identify the truly tragic. Accordingly, he wants to find out if the tragic could be a way of responding to the crisis of fragmentation in modernity caused by the idea of autonomous subjectivity (*E/O I* 140). As part of his inquiry, A introduces a novel taxonomy, which is relevant for interpreting the weaning passages in *Fear and Trembling*. In considering the effects of tragedy on culture as a whole, A claims that ancient Greek tragedy conveys a healing sadness (*Veemod*) (*E/O I* 145). By contrast the effect of modern tragedy is depression (*Tungsind*) (*E/O I* 142). The reason for this distinction is that modern tragedy is committed to the idea of autonomous subjectivity. Since the tragic hero is fully free, she is also absolutely responsible for her own actions and transgressions. Yet unconditional autonomy implies crushing responsibility and unbearable guilt. In contrast to the modern hero, the actions performed by the ancient hero are determined by fate. Because of fate, the ancient hero acts only in partial freedom, and she is thus relieved of the full responsibility of her transgressions. To describe the ancient understanding of fate, A introduces the metaphor of the mother. He claims that the ancient tragic is a “*motherly love* that lulls the troubled one” (*E/O I* 145, my italics). A bit later in the text, he claims that the ancient notion of fate “gives a dominant tone [*Grundtone*] to the soul, and this is mourning [*Sorg*], not pain [*smerte*].” (*E/O I* 156)¹⁶ The

15 Like Hegel, Kierkegaard views Socrates as a proto-modern subject, who questions religious authority in Athens. This is the topic of Kierkegaard’s master’s thesis *The Concept of Irony*. In that light, Kierkegaard may have thought that the immediacy of absolute authority was always an illusion.

16 The Hongs translate “Sorg” as “sorrow.”

dominant tone of mourning (rather than pain) in ancient tragedy is thus the source of a kind of soothing or catharsis. Hence *the image of motherly love is associated with mourning*. In this way, A considers whether tragic mourning that helped the Greek community relate to suffering caused by the transgression of social norms (aesthetically represented through the wrong actions performed by the tragic hero) could offer a possible response to the problem of fragmentation in modernity.

A contrasts motherly love with both a) (modern) ethics, and with b) what he calls “fatherly love.” A writes that while the motherly love is “infinitely gentle,” ethics is “rigorous and hard” (*E/O I* 145). Ethics holds the individual responsible regardless of her history and the circumstances of her transgression. Hence ethics here represents the modern paradigm of one-sided autonomous subjectivity, according to which the individual is viewed as fully independent of community and religion. For the modern, there is no fate, and guilt cannot be erased (*E/O I* 145–46). Finally, “the religious” offers “fatherly love.” Fatherly love involves forgiveness of guilt (which it interprets as “sin”) (*E/O I* 145). In this way, I suggest that we read fatherly love as a *religious reconciliation* in which guilt or sinfulness is forgiven, and the individual is reconciled with itself and its past. By contrast, motherly love denotes an *aesthetic, and thus secular, reconciliation*. Here, the loss of the substantial fullness, which is caused by the individual’s transgression of the social, is mourned. This is possible because the individual’s guilt is partly excused due to the workings of fate. In both cases the subject’s autonomy is constrained – either by God or by fate.

Consequently, having rejected ethics, on A’s account, only motherly love (that we find in art/tragedy) or fatherly love (that we find in religion) would offer a possible remedy to the problem of fragmentation in modernity. Yet A is ultimately pessimistic about both prospects. In his opinion, both the tragic and the religious are forfeited by the present age since it is too blindly in love with the idea of autonomy. Hence A complains that “the vigor, the courage [of the age] that wants to be [...] its own creator, is an illusion, and when the age loses the tragic, it gains despair” (*E/O I* 145).

3 Sacrifices and Reconciliations in *Fear and Trembling*

How does the connection between motherhood and mourning help us interpret the weaning passages and understand the role of sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling*? Let us start with assuming that in this work, Kierkegaard is concerned with the same problem as in *Either/Or I*: the crisis of fragmentation caused by the idea of autonomy in modernity.

Hence the “Attunement” section begins with a story, narrated by *de silentio*, of a man who hears the story of Abraham as a child and finds it “beautiful” (FR 9). Later in his life, he re-reads the story, but now “life had fractured what had been united in the pious simplicity of a child” (FR 9). Adult reflection on the near-sacrifice fractures the immediate and undivided awe felt by the child. As an adult, the man admires the story even more, *de silentio* remarks, but he understands it less and less (FR 9). He “forgot everything else because of [the story]; his soul had but one wish, to see Abraham, but one longing, to have witnessed that event” (FR 9). I think we should read this passage in the light of *A*’s diagnosis in *Either/Or I*. The unity and immediacy of childhood correspond to the un-fractured whole of Greek premodernity. Here, authority was unbroken: individuals found meaning and direction from the polis, the family, and their religion (*E/O I* 143). Following this analogy, in the man’s childhood experience, Abraham is a beautiful exemplar of faith, i.e. Abraham is an undivided and unquestioned authority. The man longs to experience “that event [den Stund],” when Abraham looks at the mountain Moriah (FR 9). On my interpretation, the man wishes to witness the *institution of authority*. As the man grows up to become a reflecting subject, he starts to look for rational grounds for justifying the violent sacrifice. Yet he finds none since once traditional authority is reflected upon, it can no longer function as authority. Childhood (like Greek premodern innocence) is a state to which we cannot return.¹⁷ In my view, then, *de silentio* is allegorically describing the modern condition: the critical reflection of the modern subject has destroyed trust in authority. What is left is a world filled with loss, disorientation, and nostalgia.

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Subsequently, we are presented with four brief poetic interpretations of the *Binding of Isaac*. In all four stories, Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac, yet they each involve an irreparable loss.¹⁸ They are all, I want to suggest, examples of a loss caused by a violent sacrifice that represents the breach of a social

17 *De silentio* further claims that the man desires to follow Abraham on the three-day journey to Moriah in order to feel, “not the beautiful tapestry of the imagination, but the shutter of thought” (FR 9, translation modified). “The shutter of thought” seems to describe the *sublime*. However, the sublime is an aesthetic phenomenon and thus (merely) a secular substitute for the loss of premodern religious authority.

18 These stories are often read as indicating that Kierkegaard’s concept of faith is not tantamount to blind obedience, and thus that he is not a fideist (since in all cases Abraham obeys the command but is not *de silentio*’s exemplar of faith). Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling*, p. 28 et seq.

bond. 1) In the first story Abraham makes Isaac believe that not God, but he, his own father, wants to sacrifice him, in order to allow Isaac to preserve his faith in a benevolent God. Here, *Isaac loses Abraham* (as Isaac exclaims: “I have no father on earth[!]”) (FR 10). 2) In the second story, Abraham performs everything as prescribed but loses his love of the world (his “eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more”) (FR 12). The result of *this* sacrifice is that *Abraham loses Isaac*. Abraham has lost the ability to love his son and by extension the ability to love the finite. Thus, he is no longer a father in any relevant sense. 3) In the third story, Abraham draws the knife but is overcome by doubt in God and in himself. In attempting rationally to comprehend the command, *Abraham loses faith* (FR 13). 4) Finally, in the last story, *Isaac loses faith* because he senses Abraham’s despair in the moment when he draws the knife. Consequently, although the sacrifice is not literally carried out, the violence of the sacrificial gesture has just as much force as if Isaac had literally died. In each case a violent rupture of the social bond between the two takes place. On my reading of the stories, the violent sacrifice is a metaphor for an unspeakable loss of trust in the other. The violence precludes any possibility of a shared future. In the four images, the social bond of love between Abraham and Isaac, and, consequently, between Abraham and the future of his people, i.e. the bond of that transmits intergenerational community, is definitively severed.

Why does de silentio (or Kierkegaard) include four different versions of the *Binding of Isaac*? It is tempting to read the fourfold repetition as indicating a fixation on the trauma caused by the loss of trust in the other. According to Freud’s well-known distinction between mourning and melancholia, mourning involves a productive acknowledgement of loss, while melancholia consists in a pathological inability to let go of what is lost. While this conceptual pair is not identical to Kierkegaard’s distinction between healing sadness (*Veemod*) and depression (*Tungsind*) in *Either/Or I*, we can identify a loose analogy insofar as *Veemod* – which, we recall, was associated with mourning (*Sorg*) – allows for a reconciliation with loss, whereas *Tungsind*, like melancholia, has no such potential.¹⁹ In the four tableaux of violent sacrifices involving fathers and sons, there is neither comfort nor reconciliation with loss; there are only slightly altered repetitions of traumatic rupture.

As mentioned, each version of the father-son story is paired with a stanza about a mother weaning an infant. In contrast to the melancholic repetitions

19 Freud writes that “[m]elancholia is mentally characterized by a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love,” as in the four tableaux, in which Abraham and Isaac lose their ability to love each other and God, and by extension their hope for a common future. Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 204. Melancholia involves a “strong fixation” on the lost object, as well as an ambivalent reluctance to let go of what is lost. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

of the violent sacrifice in the former set of stories, I suggest that these latter stories are about the process of mourning. In the case of the mother and infant, there is sacrifice, since the mother must sever the bond that she shares with her child and thus lose their symbiotic unity. Yet there is also reconciliation in the form of forging of a renewed social bond. Accordingly, I think we ought to read the stories in the following way. 1) To wean her baby, the mother manipulates the child by blackening her breast, but the child does not ultimately lose her. (By contrast, Isaac loses Abraham.) 2) The mother hides the breast, but does not disappear absolutely. (By contrast, Abraham disappears into the darkness of his own mind, thus losing Isaac.) 3) The mother mourns the rupture of the symbiosis with her infant, but the work of mourning is “brief” and productive, giving way to a new relationship between the two in which the child has earned a degree of relative independence (*FR* 13).²⁰ (By contrast, Abraham’s doubt is destructive and obsessive, leaving his relationship to Isaac definitively broken.)²¹ 4) Finally, the child loses the breast but is offered solid food as compensation “so that [she] not perish.” (By contrast, Isaac loses faith without compensation or comfort, and so he perishes – if not physically, then spiritually.)²²

The image of weaning represents a process of mourning, a loss that allows for a temporarily broken relation to have a future. By contrast, in the case of Abraham and Isaac, the relationship is permanently broken, and theirs is a pain that cannot be healed. If we follow the Freudian analogy suggested above, the mood of the images of Abraham and Isaac is *Tungsind* or melancholia – a painful fixation on what is lost, which precludes futurity. In the weaning passages, however, since the loss of the old relationship is acknowledged and mourned, a new relationship can be born.²³

Vanessa Rumble comments on the Abraham-Isaac quadruple that “the prospect of meaningless suffering is the worst vacuum of all. In the scenarios so vividly invoked, ‘the stronger sustenance’ of communication between divine and human is dislodged by the trauma of brutal, recurrent naked loss.”²⁴ Although

20 As in “The Tragic,” the term used here is “Sorg” (mourning) (“Moderen er ikke uden Sorg” (*SKS* 4 110)).

21 Abraham “could not understand that it [i.e. the sin of sacrificing his beloved son] could be forgiven, for what more terrible sin was there?” (*FR* 13).

22 “Isaac had lost his faith. Not a word was ever said of this in the world, and Isaac never talked to anyone about what he had seen” (*FR* 14).

23 While Mulhall’s interpretation differs from mine, he also believes that the hidden dynamic potential in the text is the trope of motherhood. He argues that the point of *Fear and Trembling* (which he believes de silentio misunderstands) is not the ideal of being the father of faith. Rather, he claims, Kierkegaard indirectly argues that what is significant is that which one fathers. I.e. the book is about the *birthing* of a future. Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, pp. 377–380.

24 Rumble, *Why Moriah?*, p. 259.

this passage refers to the breach of trust between Abraham and God, I agree with Rumble's reading of sacrifice as a locus of rupture and loss that cannot be healed. However, in reading the fourfold repetition of the mother and infant story, Rumble appeals to biographical details about Kierkegaard's sisters dying during, or immediately after, childbirth. She argues that the "naked loss" refers *also* to the mother and infant relationship.²⁵ While I find her interpretation imaginative, it seems quite clear to me, as I have explained, that the images of mother and child are *opposites* to those of Abraham and Isaac. I believe that the images of weaning form an allegory for a process of *becoming* (*Tilblivelse*), which involves both sacrifice and reconciliation. In each case, the social bond between mother and child is in a state of transition rather than rupture. Instead of a breach of trust, we find the birth of a new kind of relationship as the child matures.

Weaning involves a sacrifice of symbiotic unity, but one in which neither the social bond, nor the individual self is destroyed. Rather, the structure of weaning is one in which the individual is separated from the other, only to be reconciled with the other, but now as a more independent person. Hence in contrast to the ideal of self-sacrificing love in *Works of Love* mentioned above, successful birthing, mothering and weaning is letting someone else become herself within a social relation. Here there is no absolute sacrifice or self-sacrifice.²⁶

The "Attunement" section is, therefore, Kierkegaard's attempt at tuning us into the problem of modernity: the painful loss of the security of substantial determinations and our thick social bond to the other. The figure of the mother is a metaphor for an aesthetic and secular form of reconciliation with this loss. In virtue of this reconciliation, something new can be born. The imagery of motherhood and weaning offers a way of imagining a form of community in which the individual is neither sacrificed nor absolutized.

4 Stillbirths

I hope to have made a convincing case that *Fear and Trembling* stages the problem of modernity and autonomous subjectivity through the creative re-telling of the story of Abraham and Isaac, and that the images of motherhood and

25 Rumble, *Why Moriah?*, pp. 258–260. I find no textual evidence for the reference to Kierkegaard's sisters.

26 Indeed, both mother and child undergo a transformation; it is a "two-track story of individuation," as Mooney has suggested. Mooney, *Living Philosophy*, p. 124. The mother sacrifices her symbiotic relation to the child, but she loses neither herself *qua* mother nor the child in an absolute sense.

weaning illustrate one possible solution to this problem: a successful process of becoming oneself within a relationship to another. I will, however, end the article by suggesting that *Fear and Trembling* is an aporetic work that presents us with possible modes of reconciliation between self and other only to revoke them. As we recall, A argues in *Either/Or I* that motherly love is unavailable to moderns (*E/O I* 144). In a similar way, the story of the man in “Attunement” shows that we cannot return to the immediacy of traditional community and authority (represented by the image of childhood).

Could the ethical serve as path to reconciliation? In the three *Problemata*, de silentio asks different versions of the question, “Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?” (*FR* 54). That is, can the individual’s transgression of a universal or social ethical norm (such as Abraham violation of the duty to love his son) be redeemed?²⁷ Again, as in “The Tragic,” it is argued that ethics is punitive and does not allow the transgressor to reconcile with the universal.²⁸ In ethics there is no birthing and no futurity, because its ideals are too abstract and unyielding to make room for the particular individual in her becoming.²⁹ Thus, the question is answered with the conditional: yes, there is a teleological suspension of the ethical, if Abraham is the father of faith and not merely a murderer (*FR* 66). Yet this conditional is neither denied, nor confirmed.

What then about fatherly love – a religious reconciliation? In the section entitled “Preliminary Expectoration,” de silentio develops a vision of Abraham as the true father of faith. He explores the possibility of a ‘higher’ comfort of loss corresponding to the fatherly love suggested by A. De silentio portrays fatherly love as a “later immediacy” that could reconcile the self to its finitude and to its dependence on other beings (*FR* 82). Yet as presented in *Fear and Trembling*, all this takes place in de silentio’s imagination and is merely a phantasy of reconciliation. Hence de silentio continually repeats that he “cannot understand Abraham” (*FR* 82). *Fear and Trembling* strands in an aporia.

27 De silentio defines the ethical as the universal (e.g. *FR* 54). However, other definitions of ethics appear elsewhere in Kierkegaard’s writings.

28 As Rumble emphasizes, there is an often-overlooked passage in *Fear and Trembling* in which de silentio comments on the infeasibility of ethics. He states that in “sin the single individual is higher [...] than the universal, because it is a contradiction on the part of the universal to want to demand itself from a person who lacks the *condition sine qua non*” (*FR* 98). She argues that, according to Kierkegaard, it is never a question for us to “remain within the ethical,” since we *qua* sinners are perpetually transgressing it. Rumble, *Why Moriah?*, p. 249.

29 A different version of this argument is found in the *Concept of Anxiety*, where Vigilius Haufniensis writes, “[w]hat is said about the law is also true of ethics: it is a disciplinarian that demands, and by its demands only judges *but does not bring forth life*” (*CA* 16, my italics).



We have seen that within the symbolic universe of the pseudonymous writings, the image of weaning stands for the possibility of forming new communities in the absence of ultimate premodern authorities. Motherly love is an image of a sacrifice that is only relative, and of a loss that is acknowledged so that a new beginning can ensue. Thus, the weaning images lead us to a story about sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* that not only concerns pain, violence, and death, but also mourning, birth, transition, and mothering new possibilities. Yet, as I have argued, considering the book as a whole, it seems that Kierkegaard finds the birthing of new beginnings endlessly difficult. This feeling is strengthened when we turn to *Repetition*; a work which was published the same day as *Fear and Trembling*. Here, we find striking references to motherhood in the form of metaphors of *unsuccessful* births: a reversed birth (FR 131), a lament of the pain of childbirth (FR 141), a “sterile” mind producing stillborn thoughts (FR 169), and labor without delivery (FR 221). Judging from the images in *Repetition*, then, the new cannot be born. Perhaps this is because we have not effectively come to terms with the limits of our autonomy and mourned our past.

Biography

Dr. Cæcilie Varslev-Pedersen works on 19th century philosophy (especially GWF Hegel and Søren Kierkegaard), and feminist philosophy. She is interested in critiques of modernity, and whether art, philosophy, and religion are able to transform culture socially and politically. Dr. Varslev-Pedersen holds an MA and a PhD in Philosophy from the New School for Social Research in New York. She is working on a book with the provisional title *Thinking Through Fragmentation: Conceptions of Sacrifice and Reconciliation in Ethical and Political Modernity*.

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