

The Courage of Faith

Kierkegaardian Reflection on the Spiritual Danger of Enjoying Finite Goods

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When Christians today consider whether and in what way faith might be difficult or fearful and thus require courage, they are likely to think of the dangers of persecution and perhaps even martyrdom. Such dangers do attend faith, as Jesus promised his first-century disciples that they would, but they are merely accidental dangers (as the relative safety and security of twenty-first-century American Christians reveals). In his book *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard offers insightful reflections on the relationship between faith and courage, focusing his attention not on the dangers of persecution, but rather on certain moral and spiritual difficulties—indeed, dangers—that are inherent in the life of faith. Underscoring the inherent difficulty of faith, Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous character, Johannes de Silentio, writes, “what every person does not have a right to do is to make others believe that faith is something lowly or that it is an easy matter, whereas it is the greatest and the hardest.”¹ According to de Silentio, faith appropriately inspires fear and trembling because the difficulty of faith is dangerous (and fear is an appropriate response to danger). In the “Preliminary Outpouring” section of *Fear and Trembling*, de Silentio highlights one particular way in which faith is inherently difficult and dangerous; namely, mature faith essentially involves loving, hoping for, and enjoying the finite goods (especially other people) of this life without giving into the temptation to idolize or become too attached to or dependent for our happiness on them. This aspect of the life of

ABSTRACT: In *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous character, Johannes de Silentio, highlights the spiritual danger inherent in the Christian life of enjoying finite goods (especially our relationships with other people) without giving into the temptation to idolize or become too dependent for our happiness on them. In light of this danger, de Silentio suggests that the life of faith depends on a special kind of courage—“the courage of faith.” Here, I offer an analysis of the courage of faith, underscoring its importance for the Christian life, and I explore the interdependence of courage, faith, and a third virtue—humility.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, trans. Sylvia Walsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 44.

faith might at first seem neither difficult nor dangerous. Yet, as I will argue, de Silentio was right; this aspect of the life of faith is indeed dangerous and thus ought to inspire fear and trembling in those who undertake to live a life of faith. In light of this danger, de Silentio suggests that faith, which is itself a kind of virtue, depends on a special and especially admirable kind of courage—"the courage of faith."

Despite considerable recent scholarly work on Kierkegaard's view of the nature of faith, very little attention has been paid in the literature to the Kierkegaardian virtue of the courage of faith. In the following pages I thus offer a moral-psychological analysis of this Kierkegaardian virtue, contrasting it with the courage of infinite resignation, and explaining just what is so dangerous about faith's inherent difficulty—that is, the difficulty of attempting to live a life of both total devotion to God and enjoyment of finite goods.² I will also show how Kierkegaard's treatment of the relationship between courage and faith, both in his pseudonymously authored *Fear and Trembling* and in his nonpseudonymous essay "Against Cowardliness," reveals an important connection between these two virtues and a third virtue—humility. Indeed, as we shall see, the courage of faith is a distinctly humble kind of courage. I will conclude by responding to a couple of pressing objections to this Kierkegaardian analysis of the relationship between courage and faith and by articulating the value of these Kierkegaardian reflections for Christians today. While the analysis I offer here should help to illuminate an important theme in Kierkegaard's writings, the focus of this essay is not solely, nor primarily, interpretive. My primary aim is, rather, to show how these insights from Kierkegaard can help inform our understanding of a distinctly Christian kind of courage and its importance for the life of faith, with an eye toward guiding Christian moral-spiritual formation.

Two Kinds of Courage for Two Fearful Movements

Aristotle tells us that courage is the virtuous mean between the vicious extremes of cowardliness and rashness.³ Whereas cowardliness is an excess of fear and a lack of feelings of confidence or daring, rashness is an excess of confidence and lack of fear. The courageous person does not lack all fear, for to lack all fear would not be a virtue but a defect. There are, after all, real evils and dangers in this world, and fear is an appropriate and effective response to danger in that it enables us to appreciate the dangerousness of

2. For present purposes I will set aside consideration of de Silentio's later discussion of the psychological difficulty of following God's commands when they conflict with the abiding ethical principles of one's society of (i.e., "the teleological suspension of the ethical"), even though this difficult aspect of the life of faith is not entirely disconnected from the aspect under consideration here and it too requires courage.

3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.6–9, 1115a6–1117b20.

dangers and keeps us from carelessly (rashly) rushing into dangerous situations. While the courageous person experiences appropriate degrees of fear in response to threatening situations, however, she is not overcome by her fear, but rather displays mastery over her fear by facing those dangers that she, in her practical wisdom, judges must be faced. As Rebecca DeYoung has recently argued, courage is always employed in service of that which one loves.⁴ The courageous person does not overcome her fear and face dangers indiscriminately; rather, she overcomes her fear in order to face those dangers she must face in order to preserve and protect that which she loves. While this sketch of the virtue of courage is sorely incomplete it will suffice for our present exploration of the relationship between faith and courage.

The important connection between courage and faith is revealed through de Silentio's discussion of the courage exemplified by Abraham, the father of faith, in the biblical narrative concerning God's command to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22). De Silentio does not stick to the limited details of the biblical narrative, but instead imagines what Abraham must have been thinking and feeling as he prepared to sacrifice his son, the son of God's covenant promise, in obedience to God's command. According to de Silentio's moral-psychological self-diagnosis, it is his own lack of the courage of faith that would prevent him from being able to respond as he imagines that Abraham did to God's command to sacrifice Isaac and God's deliverance of Isaac back to Abraham. In fact, de Silentio claims that he cannot even *understand* the response he attributes to Abraham due to his own lack of the courage of faith. De Silentio writes,

I have looked the frightful in the eye; I do not timidly flee from it but know very well that even if I approach it bravely my courage still is not the courage of faith and is nothing to be compared with that. I cannot make the movement of faith, I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd; that is for me an impossibility, but I do not praise myself for it. I am convinced that God is love. . . . But I do not believe; this courage I lack.⁵

Later, de Silentio explicitly distinguishes two kinds of courage—the courage of infinite resignation and the courage of faith—and connects the two kinds of courage with two existential movements for which they are respectively necessary:

A purely human courage is required to renounce the whole of temporality in order to gain the eternal, but this I gain and never in all eternity can renounce without self-contradiction. But it takes a para-

4. Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, "Courage," in *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life*, ed. Michael W. Austin and R. Douglas Geivett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 145–66.

5. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 28.

doxical and humble courage next to grasp the whole of temporality by virtue of the absurd, and this is the courage of faith.⁶

De Silentio thus distinguishes two movements—the movement of infinite resignation and the movement of faith (or, rather, the infinite movements of resignation and faith)—and he argues that the former movement (infinite resignation) is a necessary condition for the latter (faith). He writes, “Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that whoever has not made this movement does not have faith.”⁷ According to de Silentio, to make the infinite movement of resignation is to sacrifice to God a finite good in which one has concentrated all of one’s desire and love. It is the willing release of one’s possession or enjoyment of that which one loves most in the world for the sake of devoting oneself totally to God. Imagine a young woman who sacrifices the possibility of marrying the love of her life by committing herself to celibacy and joining a convent in order to devote herself fully to God. It is this sort of infinite resignation to which Jesus called the rich young man when he commanded him to sell all of his possessions, give all his money to the poor, and follow Jesus.⁸ It is easy to see how Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God involved just such a movement of infinite resignation.

Based on the limited details in the biblical narrative of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac and the Gospel account of the rich young man’s awkward encounter with Jesus, it is tempting to think that the willingness to resign the finite goods one loves most in the world for the sake of devoting one’s life wholeheartedly to God is the essence of faith. According to de Silentio, however, the willing sacrifice of that which one loves most in the world is not yet the movement of faith. Rather, the movement of faith is a further movement in which one stands constantly ready to receive back the finite good one has resigned (and, paradoxically, which one still is resigning) and enjoy it fully. Robert Adams explains that the movement of faith thus involves three simultaneous movements—concentration of one’s love and desire in a particular finite good, resignation of that good, and joyful reception back of the good.⁹ To use the foregoing example of the young woman, imagine that she makes a sincere and firm commitment to celibacy, but then it becomes abundantly clear to her that God has released her from her commitment and that His will for her is to marry the love of her life after all. For her to make the movement of faith would be for her to follow God’s will joyfully by marrying her beloved bridegroom, all the while maintaining her willingness to

6. *Ibid.*, 41.

7. *Ibid.*, 39.

8. Matt. 19:16–30.

9. Robert M. Adams, “The Knight of Faith,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 391–2. Adams points out that the reason the movements must be simultaneous is that if the person of faith stops infinitely resigning the finite good and tries again to hold onto it, she has merely slipped back into an aesthetic form of life.

ungrudgingly give up her marital bliss should God ever call her to return to a life of celibacy (for a popular fictional example similar to this, consider Maria in Rogers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music*). In his "Preliminary Outpouring" de Silentio portrays Abraham as making just such a movement by receiving Isaac back joyfully, despite his willingness to sacrifice him—*literally*—in obedience to God.

While de Silentio contends that the movement of infinite resignation, though immensely difficult, is possible with human power, he argues that the movement of faith is impossible on human effort alone since it involves embracing "by virtue of the absurd" the finite goods one has resigned:

I can perceive, then, that it takes strength and energy and spiritual freedom to make the infinite movement of resignation. I can also perceive that it can be done. The next movement amazes me; my brain whirls in my head, for after having made the movement of resignation, now by virtue of the absurd to get everything, to get the wish, whole, unabridged—that is beyond human powers, that is a miracle.¹⁰

It is important to note here that de Silentio's phrase "by virtue of the absurd" should not be read as suggesting that faith is inherently irrational in the sense that it requires one to believe contradictory claims. As C. Stephen Evans has compellingly argued, the reason faith is difficult on de Silentio's (and Kierkegaard's) view is not that it involves self-contradictory beliefs or a rejection of morality, for faith involves no such thing.¹¹ Rather, de Silentio's remark that faith involves receiving back "by virtue of the absurd" the goods which one infinitely resigns reveals that from de Silentio's nonfaith perspective this seems a practical or psychological impossibility, since it is impossible on human power alone. Robert Adams likewise observes, "That taking back of what one is still giving up with all one's force of decision is a practical rather than a theoretical contradiction. It is, I take it, 'the absurd.'"¹² This interpretation is supported by de Silentio's own explanation that his bewilderment at the movement of faith is grounded in the fact that "by my own

10. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 40.

11. For Evans's discussion of the absurdity of faith in *Fear and Trembling*, see "Faith as the Telos of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 209–23. Evans argues that the ethical in *Fear and Trembling*, which the person of faith must be willing to violate or "suspend" for the sake of obedience to God, is not ethics understood generally, but a particular Hegelian conception of the ethical as *Sittlichkeit*, i.e., the authoritative norms and customs of society. Evans also argues for a perspectival account of human reason, according to which assessments of rationality or reasonableness depend on one's perspective, which itself depends on one's passions. Daniel M. Johnson further develops this perspectival account of reason in "Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard's Supposed Irrationalism: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling*," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2011): 51–70.

12. Adams, "The Knight of Faith," 385.

strength I cannot get the least bit of what belongs to finitude, for I continually use my strength to resign everything.”¹³

Concerning his portrayal of Abraham’s response to God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, de Silentio expresses utter amazement and admiration for Abraham on account of his ability to receive Isaac back with joy:

What came easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me—once again to be joyful with Isaac!—for whoever has made the infinite movement with all the infinity of his soul, of his own accord and on his own responsibility, and cannot do more only keeps Isaac with pain.¹⁴

For de Silentio, then, what is so humanly impossible and “absurd” about the movement of faith is not that it involves the complete and utter resignation of that finite good which one loves most in the world—that would be infinite resignation—but rather the simultaneous resigning of that which one loves with one’s whole heart and receiving it back with the fullest joy. This may at first seem puzzling. If de Silentio can understand something as radical as Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son, despite Abraham’s deep love for his son and hope in God’s promise that through Isaac Abraham would become a father of many nations, what keeps de Silentio from grasping Abraham’s ability to receive Isaac back with joy?

I suggest that the answer lies in the nature of emotions and their connection to the passions constitutive of one’s identity (that is, one’s *self*).¹⁵ Here, Robert Roberts’s analysis of emotions as concern-based construals is instructive.¹⁶ According to Roberts emotions are cognitive, conceptually-rich construals or perceptions of situational objects that are grounded in and informed by one’s concerns or desires. The emotion of fear, for example, is a construal or perception of some object or situation as involving a threat to one’s wellbeing or the wellbeing of something (someone) for which (whom) one cares. Likewise, to experience the emotion of joy is to “see” the situation about which one is joyful as involving the satisfaction of a deep concern or desire one has.¹⁷

As Roberts, Merold Westphal, and others have pointed out, Kierkegaard uses the language of “passions” (*Lydenskab*) in two ways: first, to refer to emotions and, second, to refer to identity-forming cares or loves.¹⁸ Westphal

13. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 42.

14. *Ibid.*, 29.

15. I am grateful to Daniel Johnson for helpful discussion on this point.

16. Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). I sketch a similar analysis of emotions in “Emotion, Evaluative Perception, and Epistemic Goods,” in *Emotion and Value*, ed. Sabine Roeser and Cain Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 106–22.

17. Cf., Roberts, *Emotions*, 277–9.

18. Robert C. Roberts, “Dialectical Emotions and the Virtue of Faith,” in *The International Kierkegaard Commentary: Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon,

explains that “to have a passion for [something]” in this second sense “is to care about it so deeply that it becomes part of one’s identity.”¹⁹ Passions, in this sense, are not emotions, but they are emotion-dispositions. Put in terms of Roberts’ concern-based construals analysis, such passions are deep concerns, attachments, or loves that dispose their bearers to have a range of emotions in response to various concern-relevant situations. My love for my wife, Katie, is a passion in this sense because it disposes me to have a variety of emotions in response to situations involving or having to do with her. For example, if she accomplishes a difficult and valuable task I feel proud of her and rejoice in her accomplishment. When she suffers significant losses, I mourn alongside her as though the loss were my own (in fact, most often they are my own because, as our wedding vows affirmed, what is mine is hers and what is hers is mine—and this is true of much more than our possessions). I get angry when she has been offended and I experience gratitude toward those who treat her kindly and generously. In this emotion-disposing way, my love for Katie is not altogether unlike my concern for the success of the Baylor University football and basketball teams since that concern of mine also disposes me toward a variety of emotions. My love for my wife is distinct from my concern for the success of Baylor athletics, however, in the sense that it is a central part of my identity—my love for and relational attachment to Katie is essential to *who I am* as a person in a way that my being a Baylor fan is not. Kierkegaard identifies faith as just such an emotion-disposing passion when he writes, under his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, that faith is a “happy passion”²⁰ and when he discusses “the passion of faith.”²¹ Moreover, faith, for Kierkegaard, is what we might call a “ruling passion.”²² For faith supersedes and informs whatever other passions and concerns one might have. As de Silentio puts it, “Faith is the highest passion in a human being.”²³

As for the content of faith, whatever else faith might involve, the person of Christian faith trusts Jesus (the God-man) to provide salvation from sin and death; the mature person of faith likewise trusts God (the Holy Spirit) to enable her to overcome sin and temptation in this life. Moreover, the ma-

GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 73–93; Merold Westphal, “Kierkegaard on Faith, Reason, and Passion,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2011): 82–92; Ryan West, “Faith as a Passion and Virtue,” *Res Philosophica* 90 (2013): 565–87.

19. Westphal, “Kierkegaard on Faith, Reason, and Passion,” 89.

20. Søren Kierkegaard (under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus), *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 54.

21. Søren Kierkegaard (under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 563, 565.

22. I have appropriated this phrase from the title of Simon Blackburn’s *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

23. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 108.

ture person of faith will have a strong concern (desire) to do the will of God above all else, and this concern will regularly motivate obedience to God's commands.²⁴ This relational trust in and desire to follow Jesus not only motivates certain behaviors, but, as Roberts observes, it also disposes the person of faith to have a range of emotions, such as hope in response to God's promises of sanctification, resurrection, and eternal life, gratitude for God's good gifts, and joy over the accomplishment of God's will in one's own life and in the world at large.²⁵ Understood in this way, the passion of faith, which is also a kind of virtue, is not identical with the movement of faith; rather, the passion of faith is, at least in part, an identity-constituting disposition toward the distinctive set of actions, thoughts, and emotions that constitute the movement of faith—that is, the willing sacrifice of those finite goods one loves most together with the grateful enjoyment of those goods as gifts from God.²⁶

In light of this analysis, the reason that de Silentio cannot understand Abraham's receiving of Isaac with joy, despite his ability to understand in some sense how Abraham might have reasons for being willing to sacrifice Isaac, is that de Silentio does not share Abraham's passion of faith; hence de Silentio's inability even to imagine emotionally construing the return of Isaac as a good thing. It is not as though de Silentio cannot imagine himself loving Isaac as Abraham did. In fact, in attempting to imagine himself into Abraham's position, de Silentio explicitly acknowledges, "that I loved him with my whole heart is a precondition without which the whole thing becomes a misdeed."²⁷ Rather, de Silentio cannot imagine receiving Isaac back with joy because de Silentio's fundamental life-guiding passion—his "ruling passion"—is what we might call *auto infinite resignation*; that is, his deepest identity-constituting concern is to rely solely on his own power to resign all attachment to finite goods for the sake of total devotion to God (or, as de Silentio puts it, "love of the eternal being"²⁸).

24. I do not here intend to take a position on the internalism/externalism debate over the motivational power of desires; rather, I simply mean to point out that the person of faith will regularly obey God's commands, being motivated (at least in part) by a desire to do so. As West (2013) points out, here faith in God and love for God seem to overlap.

25. Roberts, "Dialectical Emotions and the Virtue of Faith," 88–93.

26. It is because the passion of faith involves this collection of dispositions that it is properly considered a virtue. For, as Peter Goldie has defined them, virtues "are dispositions reliably to recognise what is of value or disvalue in the world, and reliably to respond appropriately in thought, feeling and action" (*On Personality* (London: Routledge, 2004), 42). For further discussion on the relationship between faith and trust and on the nature of faith as a virtue, see Paul Moser, "Faith," in *Being Good*, 13–29; Robert Audi, *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 53; C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Robert Adam, "The Virtue of Faith," *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (1984): 3–15; Roberts, "Dialectical Emotions and the Virtue of Faith"; and West, "Faith as a Passion and Virtue."

27. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 29.

28. *Ibid.*, 36.

For de Silentio, then, receiving Isaac back would not satisfy his primary concern or passion, but would rather impede its satisfaction. It would place a temporal and finite good (his relationship to Isaac) back in his life as a temptation to hold onto the finite. He cannot, at least not on his own power, infinitely resign finite goods and then continue to enjoy them without falling back into sinful attachment to those very goods (that is, without giving up his infinite resignation of them). Receiving Isaac back would, therefore, not be an occasion for joy, but pain and anxiety—a temptation too hard to bear. By contrast, Abraham was able to receive Isaac back with joy because Abraham's fundamental passion of faith, which involves trust in God for all good things and a concern that God's will be done above all else, enables him to resign finite goods for the sake of total devotion to God while enjoying those finite goods as blessings from God. Abraham is able to see God's sparing of Isaac (that is, God's returning of Isaac to Abraham) as a very good gift, bearing in a positive way on both his ultimate passion of faith and his subordinate, though far from insignificant, paternal desires for the preservation of Isaac's life and for the preservation of his this-worldly relationship with Isaac. Abraham's construal of the situation as bearing positively on his relevant concerns is thus, at least as de Silentio depicts it, a joyful one.

De Silentio further develops this theme by contrasting two noble characters—the knight of faith and the knight of infinite resignation. Because he trusts in God and believes “by virtue of the absurd” that all things are possible for God, the knight of faith is able to pursue with hopeful anticipation and, once attained, find great joy in all of the good things of this world (in particular, his beloved princess), all the while remaining unattached to the attainment of those goods because of his contentment in the ultimate good—the love of God. The knight of infinite resignation, by contrast, does not believe “by virtue of the absurd” in God's power to accomplish anything no matter how humanly impossible. He must, therefore, focus all of his energy on resigning those best of all finite goods (that is, his beloved princess) which might draw his devotion away from God; for he knows that he is incapable of securing those goods against the vicissitudes of life and that he is incapable of keeping himself from becoming idolatrously attached to those finite goods should he allow himself to enjoy them.

To be sure, infinite resignation is an extremely difficult task on its own and a fearful one insofar as it involves the danger (that is, threat to one's wellbeing) of losing that which one loves most in the world. In fear, the knight of infinite resignation perceives (construes) such a sacrifice as a significant threat to his happiness, even while judging that ultimate happiness is to be found in God alone. As Kevin Hoffman explains,

De Silentio's own view is that when understood honestly, faith will not be ventured lightly. Indeed, he assumes many of his readers, far from living a rich life without faith, have enough to do simply loving

as Abraham loved. Most people, so thoroughly immersed in triviality, do not recognize the value of intense, evaluative, but problematic emotional investments.²⁹

It would be a mistake, therefore, to conclude that the courage of infinite resignation is no great courage just because it is easier than the courage of faith. Yet, as difficult and dangerous as it might be to loosen one's hold on all of the goods one loves most in this world for the sake of one's love for God, it is even more difficult and dangerous still to resign those goods and then continue to enjoy them as good gifts from God.

This, then, is one important way in which faith is inherently fearful, according to de Silentio. To live by faith is to stand ready to enjoy the finite goods of this world that are outside of our control without idolizing or becoming too attached to or dependent for our happiness on them—that is, while remaining wholly devoted to God and God alone. Since faith involves the resignation of finite goods, including our closest relationships, for the sake of complete devotion to God along with the readiness to enjoy those finite goods when God grants us that pleasure there is a constant temptation inherent in making the movement of faith—the temptation to find our happiness in and to try to control and hold onto the finite goods of this world when God graciously gives them to us for our enjoyment. In other words, the enjoyment of finite goods is a constant temptation to treat them as substitutes for the infinite good of God and His love. This is a dangerous and fearful prospect for anyone who attempts to live a life of total devotion to God. For it is a temptation that, as de Silentio observes, no human is strong enough to resist on his own power. Faith thus requires a special kind of courage—the courage of faith—to face such a powerful and ongoing temptation.

A Humble Courage

We are now in a position to understand why de Silentio calls the courage of faith a humble courage. The courage of faith is a kind of *courage* insofar as it essentially involves a disposition to face and endure through an ever-present danger to one's spiritual wellbeing, an obstacle to one's ultimate goal; it is *humble* insofar as it essentially involves recognition that one is powerless to overcome such a temptation through one's own power.

This intimate connection between the virtues of courage, humility, and faith is evident in de Silentio's commentary on Luke 14:26. He notes that Jesus's teaching that one must "hate" one's family if one is to be a true disciple is immediately followed by Jesus's story about the importance of evaluating one's ability to finish building a tower before one begins the project, lest

29. Kevin Hoffman, "Facing Threats to Earthly Felicity: A Reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34 (2006): 452.

one's abortive attempt draw ridicule. He writes, "The close connection between this story [about building a tower] and the cited verses [Luke 14:26] seems precisely to indicate that the words should be taken as frightfully as possible in order that each person may examine himself as to whether he can erect the building."³⁰ He continues:

The words are frightful, yet I certainly believe that one can understand them without implying that the person who has understood them therefore has the courage to do that. Thus one ought to be honest enough to admit what they say and to acknowledge their greatness even though one lacks the courage to do that oneself.³¹

In these passages, de Silentio emphasizes the daunting, indeed frightening, prospect of infinitely resigning our relationships with those people we love most while simultaneously enjoying our lives with them.

Interestingly, Jesus's story about erecting a tower surfaces elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writings, in one of his *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, "Against Cowardliness."³² There, Kierkegaard (as himself) affirms the intimate connection between humility and courage, arguing that the vices which stand opposed to these two virtues are, in fact, identical: "Pride and cowardliness are one and the same."³³ While this seems implausible as a literal identity claim, I suspect that Kierkegaard was simply exaggerating the closeness of the relationship between pride and cowardliness for rhetorical effect. In another significant point of similarity between "Against Cowardliness" and *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard's description of the proud individual in the former bears a striking resemblance to the knight of infinite resignation in the latter, suggesting that pride entails the lack of a certain kind of courage (that is, the courage of faith) even if pride is not identical with cowardliness. He writes:

The proud person always wants to do the right thing, the great thing, and he is actually struggling not with people but with God, because he wants to do it with his own power; he does not want to sneak out of something—no, what he wants is to set the task as high as possible and then to finish it by himself, satisfied with his own consciousness and approval.³⁴

The proud person, like the knight of infinite resignation, might possess an impressive level of the courage of infinite resignation, but he lacks the cour-

30. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 63.

31. *Ibid.*, 64.

32. Søren Kierkegaard, "Against Cowardliness," in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 361.

33. Kierkegaard, "Against Cowardliness," 354.

34. *Ibid.*

age to admit the fearful and humbling truth that he is powerless to secure his own salvation and happiness.

Likewise, in "Against Cowardliness" Kierkegaard affirms the humility of the knight of faith, writing, "Anyone upon whom God does not confer knighthood with his powerful hand is and remains cowardly in his deepest soul, if for no other reason than that he was too proud to bear the accolade, inasmuch as it, like every accolade that confers knighthood, requires the confession of one's own unworthiness."³⁵ The allusion in this passage to the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling* is unmistakable. As de Silentio emphasizes in *Fear and Trembling*, so too Kierkegaard here teaches that faith cannot be achieved by human power alone, but must be conferred on the knight of faith by God. In God one comes up against something far greater and more powerful than oneself. Placing faith in God in utter dependence on him for eternal salvation and for all other good things is threatening to those whose sinful tendency is to operate under the delusion that it is possible to depend solely on their own power. In order to receive the knighthood of faith, therefore, we must have the courage to humble ourselves before God, admitting that we are nothing more than unworthy servants.³⁶ It is clear, then, that Kierkegaard himself agrees with de Silentio's claim that living a life of mature Christian faith essentially involves the humble courage of faith.

The distinction between the humble courage of faith and the prideful courage of infinite resignation parallels a distinction DeYoung draws between aggressive courage and enduring courage. She writes,

In acts of daring aggression, our attack of daring is based on the belief that it is possible to avoid or conquer the evil that threatens. Thus there is a sense in which the courageous person still has some control over the situation: he acts courageously because he believes he has sufficient power to gain or protect the good; to that extent, he still trusts his own power to overcome the threat.

In an act of endurance, on the other hand, the courageous person can only avoid danger or death if she renounces or betrays the good at stake. That means, given her love for and faithfulness to that good, she is powerless to evade the threat. She must stand firm against it and take what comes.³⁷

35. *Ibid.*, 353.

36. Kierkegaard again emphasizes that the person of faith sees herself (at best) as an unworthy servant, when he writes, "God does not give a spirit of cowardliness but a spirit of power and of love and of self-control, such as is necessary in order to know what is the good, what is truly great and noble, what significance it has for him and in relation to him; in order to love the good with the unselfish love that desires only to be an unworthy servant, which is always love's delight, and the opposite of it is a violation that pollutes love for him by making it profitable; and in order to maintain constancy, lest everything become unfruitful without the self-control that tempers the effort and the decision of resolution" ("Against Cowardliness," 360).

37. DeYoung, "Courage," 153.

In other words, aggressive courage is the kind of courage displayed when someone faces a threat that, while difficult and daunting, she is confident she can overcome without significant loss to herself or that which she loves. By contrast, enduring courage is the courage displayed in weakness when the only way one can protect the good at stake is by surrendering her own life to the evil threat. Following DeYoung, we might say that the courage of infinite resignation is a kind of aggressive courage because the knight of infinite resignation courageously endeavors to resign the finite goods of this world and fully devote himself to God on his own power. The courage of faith, on the other hand, is a kind of enduring courage because in order to possess the faith of Abraham, the knight of infinite resignation must humble himself before God in recognition that he is ultimately powerless to enjoy the good things of this world as gifts from God while resisting the temptation to depend on them for his happiness. The humble courage of faith thus is a greater courage than the courage of infinite resignation because, as DeYoung explains, “It is a common experience that in the face of dangers and threats of pain, a greater sense of powerlessness also increases one’s fear.”³⁸

Is Faith Really So Fearful?

It is important at this point to consider two pressing objections to the account of the courage of faith presented here. The first worry, suggested by Adams, concerns the appropriateness of the initial movement—which we might call infinite concentration—that de Silentio takes to be the first step in infinite resignation. Adams points out that it seems both ethically and religiously suspect to concentrate all of one’s desire in a particular finite good (typically a person): ethically, because investing the whole of the meaning of one’s life into another person is likely to harm that person as well as others; religiously, because investing the whole of the meaning of one’s life into another person seems to amount to a kind of idolatry, even if one resigns that other and “transfers” the strength of one’s devotion to God.³⁹ This objection amounts to the claim that the movement of faith as de Silentio describes it is not, in fact, an aspect of Christian faith at all.

In reply to Adams, we might grant that insofar as it involves infinite concentration infinite resignation is not a part of genuine Christian faith. Nevertheless, faith might still essentially involve resigning (that is, giving up our vain attempts to secure and control) even those finite goods (persons) we love with “our whole heart” in the less radical and more commonplace meaning of that phrase. After all, it is no sin to love dearly one’s children, one’s parents, one’s spouse, or one’s friends. As C. S. Lewis explains, “It is

38. *Ibid.*, 154.

39. *Ibid.*, 389–90.

probably impossible to love any human being simply ‘too much.’ We may love him too much *in proportion* to our love for God; but it is the smallness of our love for God, not our greatness of our love for the man, that constitutes the inordinacy.⁴⁰

Here, Lewis explicitly disagrees with St. Augustine who draws a distinction between the use and enjoyment of worldly goods (including other people) and argues that we ought to use the things and people of this world to help us draw nearer to God, but that we should not enjoy them for their own sakes, lest we end up depending on them for our happiness. Augustine writes that “When you enjoy a human being in God, you are enjoying God rather than the human being. . . . Yet the idea of enjoying someone or something is very close to that of using someone or something together with love.”⁴¹ In his *Confessions* he counsels that only by weakening our affection for those we love will we be spared the kind of agony and mourning that Augustine himself experienced in the wake of his friend Nebridius’s death.⁴² Lewis, however, argues that such emotional self-protectiveness is not proper to the Christian life, being instead a kind of lovelessness (and, I would add, faithlessness). Indeed, while Augustine’s love for Nebridius might well have been inordinate, properly ordering one’s love for others below one’s love for God does not protect one from the pain and sadness of loss. For, “Christ did not teach and suffer that we might become, even in the natural loves, more careful of our own happiness. . . . We shall draw nearer to God, not by trying to avoid all the sufferings inherent in all loves, but by accepting them and offering them to Him; throwing away all defensive armour.”⁴³ Lewis goes on to explain that “The question whether we are loving God or the earthly beloved ‘more’ is not, so far as concerns our Christian duty, a question of the comparative intensity of two feelings. The real question is which (when the alternative comes) do you serve, or choose, or put first? To which claim does your will, in the last resort, yield?”⁴⁴ Lewis thus seems to be in agreement with Kierkegaard that while it is difficult to enjoy things and people other than God for their own sakes without idolizing them, it is possible and even essential to a life of mature Christian faith.⁴⁵ We Christians must learn to

40. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 122.

41. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25.

42. Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.10f.

43. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 122.

44. *Ibid.*, 123.

45. John Calvin also discusses the difficulty of avoiding intemperate love of this world while enjoying and being grateful for the finite goods or “blessings” of “this present life” in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Book 3, especially chapters 9 and 10), but as I read him Calvin does not seem to appreciate the inherent value of the goods of the present life to the extent that Kierkegaard and Lewis do. Moreover, unlike Kierkegaard, Calvin does not mention the importance of the virtue of courage for overcoming the fear inherent in living with this temptation. Nevertheless, Calvin’s discussion is instructive concerning the presence of this dif-

love others deeply and vulnerably while at the same time refusing to put our love for others above our love for and obedience to God, trusting Him (not ourselves) for our happiness in this life and the life to come.

Yet, in our pride we all too often attempt to secure our own happiness and salvation from the vicissitudes of this life by holding tightly onto and attempting to exert total control over the lives of those we love the most. We are overprotective of our children, overly concerned about the health and youthful vitality—especially sexual vitality—of our spouses and of ourselves in relation to our spouses, overeager to use any medical technology necessary, regardless of the financial and social cost, to keep our parents with us in this life just a little while longer. If total devotion to God is compatible with dearly loving these precious others, then faith must essentially involve trust in God to enable us to overcome the temptation to make our loved ones into idols even while loving them dearly and enjoying their presence in our lives. Such trust in God involves believing “by virtue of the absurd” that God loves us and our loved ones even more than we do, and that He is able to bring about our wellbeing and the wellbeing of those we love even when it seems impossible to us. Of course, the mature Christian will also see the possibility of life in the kingdom of God as so surpassingly great that the goods of this world, even our most intimate and valuable relationships, pale in comparison, despite being of great value. Recall the teaching of Jesus that “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field.”⁴⁶

What de Silentio’s reflections on faith reveal, then, is that faith is not simply trust in God for resurrection to eternal life after death; rather, faith is trust in God “by virtue of the absurd” to enable us to enjoy finite goods in this life even as we continually relinquish our hold on them and give up our prideful attempts to secure them for ourselves. To relinquish our attempts to preserve and protect for ourselves all of the finite goods we hold most dear in this life is a frightening prospect because it involves admitting that we are powerless to secure our own happiness. As long as we continue under the delusion that it is within our power to keep those we love most and enjoy them forever, we can stave off fear, but only by blinding ourselves to our impotence in the face of the many and varied dangers of this life.

This leads to the second, and perhaps more pressing, worry for the account of the courage of faith presented here. That is, it might be objected that I, following Kierkegaard, have exaggerated the inherent fearfulness of the movement of faith. After all, DeYoung argues that enduring courage is paradigmatically exemplified by the martyr who, being otherwise helpless in the

ficulty in the Christian life. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this connection.

46. Matt. 13:57. All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

face of great danger, must lay down her own life, succumbing to the evil of death, in order to remain faithful and loyal to God. We might wonder, then, how the courage of faith, which is exemplified not in enduring martyrdom but rather in living a faithful life of devotion to God and enjoyment of finite goods this side of death, can really be considered enduring courage. Put another way, it might seem intuitively false and perhaps even callously insensitive to suggest that living a life of faith in enjoyment of the finite goods of this world is at all akin to the danger of martyrdom. This worry might be exacerbated by the observation that it does not seem that the knight of faith, at least as de Silentio describes him, is at all tempted by the finite goods of this world. So, perhaps the knight of faith only has courage in a weak, analogical sense of being able to face with confidence situations that inspire great fear in most others (but not in the knight himself).

Yet, as de Silentio astutely recognizes, the person of mature faith does not cease fearing those frightening elements of faith examined herein upon making the initial movement of faith. About the ongoing struggle of living the life of faith he writes,

In those olden days it was different; then faith was a lifelong task because it was assumed that proficiency in believing is not achieved in either days or weeks. When the tried and tested oldster drew near to his end, having fought the good fight and kept the faith, his heart was still young enough not to have forgotten that fear and trembling which disciplined the youth and was well-controlled by the man but is not entirely outgrown by any person.⁴⁷

Here, it is the person of mature faith who, even at the end of his life, has not entirely outgrown the fear and trembling that was his upon his initial movement of faith—the fear and trembling he must continually overcome through the courage of faith. Likewise, in “Against Cowardliness” Kierkegaard contrasts the proud person with “someone who, quiet and silent, humbles himself under God in fear and trembling.”⁴⁸

These reflections suggest that Kierkegaard was sensitive to the fact that most, if not all, Christians are not perfect knights of faith. Like de Silentio and the rich young man who could not bring himself to give all he had to the poor and follow Jesus, we find it incredibly difficult even to make the first movement of infinite resignation, let alone the humanly impossible movement of faith. Pridefully desiring to control our own happiness we continually give in to the temptation to make idols out of the finite goods (especially the people) with which (whom) God has blessed us. We do not know how to enjoy the good things of this world without trying to subject them to our control, deluding ourselves into believing that we will be able to dictate and secure our own happiness. To give up all attempts to control and secure those

47. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 5.

48. Kierkegaard, “Against Cowardliness,” 371.

goods and people we love most in this world thus requires daily dependence on God to help us do what we cannot do on our own. Like the martyr, we must have the courage to endure a danger that we are too weak and powerless to overcome, all the while trusting that, by God's grace, we can overcome it. As Jesus reassured his disciples following his encounter with the rich young man, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."⁴⁹

Kierkegaard's reflections on the courage of faith thus serve as a reminder of a truth so often forgotten by those who complacently take faith to be an easy task: to live a life of faith is akin to facing martyrdom every day of one's life. We must daily die to our sinful selves and, without faithlessly rejecting the good gifts God gives us for our enjoyment, we must rely fully on the power of God to help us resist the dangerous temptation to hold too tightly onto those goods. Only by relying on God to help us endure this ever-present danger are we able to live full and abundant (resurrected) lives in Christ. Indeed, it is not until we learn to cast all of our anxieties and our vain attempts to secure our own happiness on God that we will be able to experience the full joy of a life characterized both by total devotion to God and full enjoyment of all the wonderful goods this life has to offer. But this, as we have seen, takes great courage. So, while there may be no fear of temptation left in perfected faith, those of us whose faith is imperfect must continue to heed Paul's admonition to "work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us], both to will and to work for his good pleasure."⁵⁰

49. Matt. 19:26.

50. Phil. 2:12. For helpful comments on previous drafts, I am grateful to Stephen Evans, Daniel Johnson, and Ryan West, as well as an audience at the 2013 Midwest Regional Conference of the Society of Christian Philosophers and two anonymous reviewers for this journal. Support for this work was funded in part by the Wake Forest Philosophy Department Thomas Jack Lynch Memorial Fund and by the Character Project grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Character Project, the Templeton Foundation, or the official policy or position of the US Air Force, the US Department of Defense, or the US government.