Faith, Recognition, and Community: Abraham and “Faith-In” in Hegel and Kierkegaard

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# Abstract

This article looks at “faith-in” and what Jonathan Kvanvig calls the “belittler objection” by comparing Hegel’s and Kierkegaard’s interpretations of Abram (later known as Abraham). I first argue that Hegel’s treatment of Abram in *Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* is an objection to faith-in. Building on this with additional Hegelian texts, I argue that Hegel’s objection employs his social command account of morality. I then turn to Johannes de Silentio’s treatments of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love* to argue that Kierkegaard defends faith-in as part of a moderate divine command account of moral knowledge. Finally, this article suggests that the belittler objection is ultimately an objection to faith-in as a divine command source of moral knowledge or obligation rather than social command.

# Article

## Introduction

This article looks at “faith-in” and what Jonathan Kvanvig calls the “belittler objection” by comparing Hegel’s and Kierkegaard’s interpretations of Abram (later known as Abraham).[[1]](#footnote-1) I first argue that Hegel’s treatment of Abram in *Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*[[2]](#footnote-2)is an objection to faith-in. Building on this with additional Hegelian texts, I argue that Hegel’s objection employs his social command account of morality. I then turn to Johannes de Silentio’s treatments of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* and Søren Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*[[3]](#footnote-3) to argue that Kierkegaard defends faith-in as part of a moderate divine command account of moral knowledge. Finally, this paper suggests that the belittler objection is ultimately an objection to faith-in as a divine command source of moral knowledge or obligation rather than social command.

In this paper, I take “faith-in” to mean placing sufficient credit or trust in another to provide knowledge (or, possibly, expert knowledge), as opposed to “faith-that” with respect to propositional content.[[4]](#footnote-4) This sort of faith-in enables the individual to “act under the presumption” without necessarily reaching a conclusion about its propositional content.[[5]](#footnote-5) This enables it to supply what I will call “moral knowledge,” defined as the notion that “I should do …” or “I am obliged to do …” (or, the negation of these things) received in trust.[[6]](#footnote-6) I take this to be more conative than cognitive, and more related to action than to propositional acceptance.[[7]](#footnote-7) My use of the elocution “faith-in,” however, hinges more on what follows in the article than on staking a position in this contemporary debate itself.

Fortuitously, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and the contemporary debaters all consider Abraham’s faith-in God and the role of Abraham’s God-relation in informing him of his moral obligations. This enable us to compare their different responses to faith-in and relate these to the motivations of those whom Jonathan Kvanvig describes as “[t]he belittlers [who] object to faith on multiple grounds, but the fundamental concern expressed is that such faith cannot survive epistemic scrutiny.”[[8]](#footnote-8) As I will argue below, Hegel is one of the belittlers with respect to faith-in, and Kierkegaard is not. By looking at Hegel’s objection to faith-in, we can clarify both what many belittlers find odious in the notion, and why they will not be moved from this position by any species of faith-in.

## Hegel’s Social Command Theory, Faith-In, and the Problem with Abraham

In this section, I connect Hegel’s assessment of Abram and his social command theory to the contemporary discussion about faith-in. I first turn to the posthumously published *Spirit of Christianity*. I then show that Hegel continues this evaluation when he looks at conscience in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.[[9]](#footnote-9) Subsequently, I attend to Hegel’s use of the term “faith” in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*[[10]](#footnote-10) to argue that he is not describing faith-in. Finally, I relate his concerns back to the contemporary debate on faith-in.

### II.A. Abraham’s Faith-in God in the Spirit of Christianity

*Spirit of Christianity*, written in 1798, predates both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the encyclopedic system. The text considers Abram as a paradigm of “Jewish Religion,” where “Jewish Religion” refers to having, or seeking to have, a relationship to the transcendent in order to escape from the arbitrary nature of the temporal and accidental immanent. *Spirit of Christianity* contrasts this with “Christianity,” where immanence (now united with transcendence) returns triumphant. This is an early prototype of a common pattern in Hegel’s argumentation: (a) natural “immanence,” (b) “transcendence” that makes itself universal by becoming ideal, and (c) a return to immanence that is also universal, insofar as it captures the whole in all of its distinctions.

*Spirit of Christianity* contains Hegel’s critique of Abram, which I argue here is a critique of faith-in God. While many authors look at Abraham and faith in light of the *Akedah*, or Binding of Isaac (Kant, for instance, takes up this subject twice, viewing the idea that God could command Abraham to do something other than what the morality of pure reason dictates as both immoral and nonsensical),[[11]](#footnote-11) Hegel’s critique in *Spirit of Christianity* hones in on a seemingly more innocuous segment: “Abraham, born in Chaldaea, had in youth already left a fatherland in his father's company. Now, in the plains of Mesopotamia, he tore himself free altogether from his family as well, in order to be a wholly self-subsistent, independent man, to be an overlord himself” (*SC* 185). For Hegel, this is Abram breaking free from natural immanence by means on an abstract universal.

While the author of *Hebrews* praises Abraham’s action, interpreting that “by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive an inheritance …” (*Epistle to the* *Hebrews* NRSV 11:8), Hegel reaches a very negative judgment:

He did this without having been injured or disowned …. The first act which made Abraham the progenitor of a nation is a disseverance which snaps the bonds of communal life and love. The entirety of the relationships in which he had hitherto lived with men and nature, these beautiful relationships of his youth (Joshua xxiv. 2), he spurned (*SC* 185).

For Hegel, this is a problematic break with the natural. He contrasts this with a neutral or positive assessment of individuals who are forced by tragedy, punishment, war, or coercion to leave their communities or homelands. A major reason Hegel is not bothered by these others is that, whether they move as refugees or conquerors, they still “carried [their] gods forth with them” (*SC* 186).

Abram, however, is to be condemned, because “Abraham wanted to be free from these very relationships, while the others by their gentle arts and manners won over the less civilized aborigines and intermingled with them to form a happy and gregarious people” (*SC* 186). Moreover, as Abram travelled, he continued to refuse to join an existing epistemic community. Hegel describes this constant refusal as a “struggle against his fate” (*SC* 186). As Mark C. Taylor notes, for Hegel, “Abraham represents the extreme of alienation (later identified as the unhappy consciousness).”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The center of Hegel’s critique is that Abraham has a faith relationship with a transcendent God. Thus, Hegel identifies Abraham’s faith-in God – and the exclusivity it demands – as the primary problem at hand:

In this way, Abraham’s God is significantly different from household gods [*Laren*] and national gods. A family worships its household gods; a nation, its national gods; They isolate themselves namely by taking something as their own portion [*Teile*] and forsaking other portions. But they, at the same time as this, allow other portions, and do not reserve the immeasurable to themselves and banish all others from it. Instead, they grant others rights equal to their own, and recognize the household gods and gods of others as household gods and gods. Conversely, in Abraham and his descendants lie the dreadful insistence on a jealous god – that he alone, and this nation by itself, has the one God (*SC* 188, my translation).

In other words, belief in differing household gods and national gods is still a part of a larger social system wherein the particular distinctiveness falls under a shared communal agreement about what is going on. For such a community, there is still a common epistemic model, because what differences exist from god to god are swallowed up under the structural idea that each house and each country has its gods, whose interactions mirror the members of the community itself.

After considering Abram’s departure from his homeland, Hegel stops considering Abraham in *Spirit of Christianity*. The stop seems abrupt, in part because it skips the *Akedah* entirely. Turning next to Jacob’s children, Hegel explains the entire point of this faith-in relation as “segregation [*Absonderung*]” (*SC* 188). Hegel continues his handling of Abraham’s story by looking at the transformation of the Jews into a nation. Taking a remarkably different view than the Old and New Testament authors, he praises the Jews’ worship of idols as the loss of this problematic segregation and the gain of integration into the local community (*SC* 201). His assessment here is consistent with his critique of faith and transcendence: by returning to idol worship, the Jews return to immanence. All is not well, however.

For Hegel, their prior escape to transcendence leaves behind in their fundamentals the positing of “an impassable gulf, an alien court of judgment” between human actions and their evaluations (*SC* 240). The issue is specifically tied to acquiring moral knowledge from God: “they had alienated from themselves all the genii in which men are united; they had put nature in the hands of an alien being” (*SC* 240). To complete the circle and return to immanence, but this time with transcendence, Hegel posits Jesus as overcoming by the upheaval [*Aufhebung*] of the transcendence-immanence divide that defines “Jewish Religion” (*SC* 206-10; *SC* 258-9). For Hegel, the fulcrum is that “between man and God, between spirit and spirit, there is no such cleft of objectivity and subjectivity; one is to the other an other only in that one recognizes the other; both are one” (*SC* 265; See *SC* 278).

Hegel calls this recognition of divinity in oneself “faith”: “Hence faith in the divine grows out of the divinity of the believer's own nature; only a modification of the Godhead can know the Godhead” (*SC* 266). However, Hegel’s understanding of faith is clearly not faith-in, understood as trust in another as a source of moral obligation. Instead, Hegel’s is an overcoming of the split that brings morality back under the governance of the community. Hegel identifies this, textually, with Peter receiving “the keys of the kingdom” and, conceptually, as apprehending through Jesus the falsehood of this transcendence-immanence (and God-man) (*SC* 241-2; *SC* 266-7).

These keys invest in Peter the power to decide the content of morality. This realization grows from knowing friends as equals (*SC* 248-250; *SC* 267-8) to becoming a community of Spirit, which decides morality through rational autonomy (*SC* 271-3). Ultimately, it is the recognition that the self is part of a larger epistemic community built on “mutual recognition” that supplies the morality of its members.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Contra faith-in, where the object of faith-in can supply moral knowledge or obligation for the faithful, Hegel’s markedly contra-textual judgments in *Spirit in Christianity* all build on the idea that the community is to be the source of social values. Conversely, values from faith-in or other structures of private revelation are specifically condemned, as in the case of Abram. This is an early expression of Hegel’s opposition to anything that cannot be “mediated,” meaning comprehended systematically and universally. From this, we see that Hegel views this sort of faith-in as heinous, because it breaks the common epistemic environment and posits a transcendence that will not be subsumed.

### II.B The Continuing Objection to Faith-in in the System and Philosophy of Right

Since *Spirit of Christianity* is an early and unpublished work, one could argue that Hegel might have changed his view on this question as he matured as a philosopher. In this vein, Hegel tinkers with the position and function of “Jewish Religion” in his history of religions as he adds further religions and places them within a story of the progress towards Absolute Religion where each religion needs a role. I argue here, however, that Hegel’s negative assessment of faith-in as a source of moral knowledge for a self only grows stronger in his later works.

To confirm this assessment, we turn to Hegel’s consideration of evil in the *Philosophy of Right*. This occurs near the end of his discussion of “Abstract Right.” For Hegel, the crux of the possibility of evil is that the self has an inwardness and a will, which can choose either “the universal in-and-for itself” or “the arbitrariness of its own particularity” (*PR* §139, 167). Translated from Hegel’s perhaps idiosyncratic vocabulary, the moral self faces a choice of motivations between objective universal morality and something of its own devising. For Hegel, the choice of the particular over and against the common universal is the origin of evil (*PR* §139 Remark, 168).

In fact, it does not matter whether this inwardness presents itself as internal caprice or revelation from God. What matters is that this is a particular will that stubbornly refuses to take on objective content. Hegel calls this “subjectivity declaring itself absolute” (*PR* §140, 170) which he identifies as the “last and most abstruse form of evil” (*PR* §140 Remark, 171). In other words, he includes faith-in within this category, because faith-in is precisely the idea that the self has a source of moral obligation or knowledge that is not communal, and therefore is not brought under rational scrutiny.

### II.C Why We Can Ignore “Faith” as it Occurs in Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion

One final issue to address in Hegel’s texts is his own use of the term “faith” in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. I maintain that what “faith” means here is not faith-in, but rather a synonym for picture-thinking [*Vorstellung*] as a temporary and slightly inadequate form of universal knowledge. Hegel defines faith as “the witness of the spirit to absolute Spirit” (*Rel* I.211-2; See also I.218-9, III.119) or “regarding [objects of knowledge] with the spirit” rather than the “outward way of conceiving it” (*Rel* III.86). To those unfamiliar with Hegel’s terms, this phrasing can sound nearly orthodox, and Hegel believed what he was expressing is the truth of orthodoxy: “Faith is essentially the consciousness of the absolute truth, of what God is in His true essential nature” (*Rel* III.87).

But it is important to understand what Hegel means by “Spirit” and to recognize the consequences of this for assessing the sentences above. For Hegel, “Spirit” is shared conscious and self-conscious reasoning, which, in its absolute form, knows everything about everything.[[14]](#footnote-14) In other words, when Hegel writes that faith is “the witness of the spirit to absolute Spirit,” he is saying it is an individual’s rational knowledge of the systemic whole, in which the thinking part of reality as a whole thinks about all of reality in all of its particulars.

Under this definition, the point of religion is to reach absolute knowledge (though not in its absolute form). Accordingly, Hegel traces a progression of religions as they move from being mere “given” towards becoming fully differentiated knowledge of the Absolute (*Rel* I.224-7). This is shorthand for the entire project of the *Phenomenology*. The role of faith is as a seed for knowledge or a picture-thinking attempt at knowledge (*Rel* III.114; see also *Rel* I.211-9), which can die when it becomes unnecessary. Consequently, its only inadequacy is the form under which it knows things. Thus, when Hegel explains that faith has “no accidental content” and involves the dissolution of any dualities that yield to reason (*Rel* I.218-221), he is again expressing his opposition to the possibility of anything like faith-in.

From this, we can see that “faith” in the *Lectures on Religion* has a similar fate to Absolute Religion: once the community of Spirit has appeared, faith as a sensuous expression of the truth is no longer necessary (*Rel* III.115-6). Thus, in Christianity qua Absolute Religion, a community is established on the basis of the “worthlessness of all particularity” (*Rel* III.106) which transcends friendship, marital love, and all other relationships. Thus, there is “no particularity left” (*Rel* III.142). Moreover, this community qua church ceases to be a necessary entity and becomes subsumed into the state (*Rel* II.298).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Despite this apparent fancy footwork with respect to the commonly-understood meaning of the word “faith,” Hegel continues to have a negative conclusion with respect to faith-in. Thus, shortly before the end of *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel makes explicit his objection to a non-socially mediated source of moral knowledge in his condemnation of pietism:

[Pietism] is an inner self-enclosed life which may indeed coexist with calm, lofty, and pious aspirations, but may as readily appear as hypocrisy or as vanity in its most extreme form. … Pietism recognises no objective truth, sets itself in opposition to dogmas, to the content of religion, and though it does indeed preserve the element of mediation, and still maintains a certain relation to Christ, yet this relation is supposed to remain in the sphere of feeling, in the sphere of inner sentiment. Each person has thus his own God, Christ, &c. The element of particularity in which each has his own individual religion, his own theory of the Universe, &c, does undoubtedly exist in Man; but in religion it is absorbed by life in the Spiritual Community, and for the truly pious man it has no longer any real worth and is laid aside” (*Rel* III.141).

The important feature to notice here is that Hegel categorically rejects the devout individual’s claim to a private relation with transcendence as incompatible with his sort of project. Instead, he condemns it in the same sort of terms as he condemns faith in *Philosophy of Right* as “hypocrisy or vanity in its most extreme form,” precisely because it, like Abram, sees a source for values outside of the community. Hegel disparages all such forms, because the only source of moral knowledge should be the moral reasoning of Spirit in the community, which is self-certain and immanent.

II.D Hegel’s Social Obligation Theory Objection to Faith-In

We now have the resources to understand and articulate Hegel’s objection to faith-in and to link this with the belittlers. Our comparison is made easier because Kvanvig’s analysis of the belittlers also looks at Abram’s faith. Kvanvig understands the faith that leads Abram out of the land of his familial community as a commitment that begins affectively rather than cognitively.[[16]](#footnote-16) Such a reading is fully compatible with Hegel’s critique. We can make sense of this by understanding the relationship between Abram and Hegel’s desiderata for moral theory.

Hegel supplies a social command theory of moral obligation.[[17]](#footnote-17) On such an account, the individuals are the accidental parts of a greater social whole, which informs them of their obligations and the content of morality. For Hegel, this supplants divine command theories as a truer account of how we receive moral knowledge. Hegel, as we have seen above, is not opposed to all religion. In fact, he’s amenable to religions where society is the source of moral knowledge. Consequently, Hegel cryptically describes being born into the church as being born with no Other-Being (*Rel* III.129), which means to be born in such a way that there is no transcendent other but rather a locus where all difference is mediated. Thus, Hegel can accept both civic religion in Greece and faithless Christendom because, in these arrangements, members hold shared social conceptions of right and wrong (the former, pre-critically; the latter, critically).

Such context can even permit a multiplicity of stories about these concerns, as long as they are subsumed under a larger social whole. So, while it is true on this model that Person A believes in God P and Person B believes in God Q, there is unity in the differences and both are being told to do X. In other words, these Gods turn out to be fictive ways of transmitting necessary moral truths (much like how God in Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* repeats the conclusions that pure reason attains on its own), and acts a crutch for the weak.

A social command theory of morality does not mean that Hegel is a moral relativist or anti-realist (on my interpretation he is neither, but we need not resolve that question here). By focusing on social command theory as an account of the transmission of moral knowledge or moral obligation, we are operating in the same domain as many moderate species of divine command theory that are not voluntarist about the right and the good. In both instances we are not committing ourselves to an answer on the question of what makes something right and wrong metaphysically; we are only committing ourselves to an answer to the epistemic question of how we know something is right or wrong. The sections above in the *Philosophy of Right* and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* supply strong support for this, insofar as the entire objection Hegel has to faith-in is that it refuses to cooperate with the totalizing project of the system.

What cannot be borne by a social command theory is any notion of faith-in that supplies an individual, like Abram, with a private basis for moral knowledge separate from the integrated socio-communal account.[[18]](#footnote-18) In other words, it is not merely that Person C believes in God R who supposedly said Y, but rather Person C’s faith-in God R produces a Y not shared by Persons A and B through their beliefs in their Gods S and T. In other words, Hegel’s belittler objection is precisely that Abram has “fidelity to a call” that does not come from his community and cannot be heard by all.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Hegel’s approach thus contrasts with Kant, who also objects to Abraham. Kant states that he limits knowledge “in order to make room for faith” (*Critique of Pure Reason* Bxxx), including such things as belief in God’s existence, the proportionality of justice, and the existence of an afterlife. These ideas are important and practically necessary in Kant’s moral philosophy (even if he thinks they are postulates). Hegel believes this Kantian truce between reason and faith is a failure with little of either left.[[20]](#footnote-20) Consequently, Hegel seeks to get rid of the black box that Kant uses to make room for faith, and instead places everything under a unified science of knowledge. A necessary corollary of this is that faith, as that which makes sense but which the self cannot make sense of, disappears as a category altogether in the system that understands everything.

Thus, the only “faith” that is not repugnant to Hegel is one which is a synonym for rational social knowledge. For this reason, religion as a set of social practices is acceptable but, as a relationship to transcendence, is not. The contemporary belittler joins Hegel in this position, seeing faith-in as problematic not merely because of what it might say, but due to the mere fact that it could even be providing a private source of moral knowledge or obligation that stands outside the community.

## Kierkegaard, Divine Command Theory, and Faith-In

In this section, I argue that Kierkegaard[[21]](#footnote-21) similarly understands Abraham as having faith-in God. I begin by showing how *Fear and Trembling* is about faith-in that pulls Abraham’s faith-in out of the of the ethical community and mutual recognition. I then turn to *Works of Love* to show that the critique of the belittlers is about faith-in, rather than about the moral knowledge that is the fruit of faith-in. Finally, I argue that we should understand faith-in as divine commands that supply moral obligations to others rather than divine commands as excluding obligations to anyone but God to distinguish between a strawman and accurate version of the belittler objection to faith-in.

### III.A Faith-in God, Abraham, and Fear and Trembling

*Fear and Trembling* is infamous as the text in which Kierkegaard believes that Abraham is willing to obey God and murder. This paraphrased summary, however, hides two mistakes. The more minor of these mistakes is that Kierkegaard distances himself from authorship using a pseudonym. The more major of these mistakes is that the main thesis of the text is about faith (which I will argue is faith-in), rather than the specific divine command itself.

De Silentio’s Preface begins by contrasting Descartes’ method of doubt, which cancels itself out and does not attack faith, with an attitude of “everyone is unwilling to stop at faith but goes further” (*FT* 7, 4.102). That de Silentio means this as a critique of a Hegelian system[[22]](#footnote-22) is made clear by his lampooning of the system: “He has not understood the system whether there is one, whether it is completed …. Even if someone were able to transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that he has comprehended faith, comprehended how he himself has entered into it” (*FT* 7 / 4.103).

The same page also states de Silentio’s thesis for the book: “Faith was then a task for a whole lifetime” (*FT* 7 / 4.102). De Silentio essentially repeats this at the beginning of the Exordium by highlighting that living only makes the self understand more the struggle of faith (*FT* 9 / 4.105). Each case in the Exordium is a sample of Abraham lacking faith in God’s command: I. A duplicitousness, II. A loss of faith on his part, III. Disbelief in God’s command, and IV. A loss of the confidence of obedience. In each case, the *Akedah* is the case study but not the point.

De Silentio interprets Abram’s emigration in very different terms than Hegel’s *Spirit of Christianity* does:

By faith Abraham emigrated from the land of his fathers and became an alien in the promised land. He left one thing behind, took one thing along: he left behind his worldly understanding, and he took along his faith. Otherwise he certainly would not have emigrated but surely would have considered it unreasonable [*urimeligt*]. By faith he was an alien in the promised land, and there was nothing that reminded him of what he cherished, but everything by its newness tempted his soul to sorrowful longing. And yet he was God’s chosen one in whom the Lord was well-pleased! As a matter of fact, if he had been an exile, banished from God’s grace, he could have better understood it – but now it was as if he and his faith in were being mocked (*FT* 17 / 4:113-4).

For Hegel, Abram’s departure from Mesopotamia is a moment of consternation where Abram breaks with pre-critical social command theory; for de Silentio, it is a moment worthy of eulogy where Abram’s faith-in demonstrates his repeated trust in God and willingness to obey divine command. Central to *Fear and Trembling* is “the claim that to be seriously religious is to have a higher allegiance than to my people and their conception of the Good.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

A major motif in *Fear and Trembling* is to go beyond Hegel’s going beyond. In other words, to turn the concept of a social whole and social command theory on its head by introducing faith as an even higher particular. Thus, it calls “infinite resignation … the last stage” before faith (*FT* 46 / 4:140) and situates faith as something after “esthetic emotion” and “far higher” (*FT* 47 / 4:141). This one-upmanship culminates in the image of being able to “[perform] the marvel and [grasp] existence in its totality by virtue of the absurd” (*FT* 51 / 4:144-5).

*Problemata* I defends the possibility of a break with the ethical universal that involves a single individual asserting himself as higher. In this respect, it parallels one feature that Hegel’s *Spirit of Christianity* condemns about Abram (*FT* 54-5 / 4:148-9). While Hegel sees setting oneself apart from the universal as a source of condemnation, de Silentio presents faith-in as the only possible justification for Abram’s exception-taking with respect to the universal (which appears in social commands) that condemns Abram (*FT* 62 / 4:155).

*Problemata* II similarly attacks one of the ideas that *Spirit of Christianity* presents, namely, the idea that duty to God can be subsumed under a more general category of duty: “The ethical is the universal, and as such it is also divine. Thus, it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God, but if no more can be said than this, then it is also said that I actually have no duty to God” (*FT* 68 / 4:160). As I showed above, Hegel, like Kant, accepts God-talk in ethics especially when the outcome is a generic social command. Conversely, here de Silentio is arguing that, for faith-in, this outcome is precisely what will not do. His argument is that faith, and the obedience to divine commands which it requires, cannot be reduced back into the commensurate whole such that the individual relates directly to the absolute rather than universal (*FT* 70 / 4:162).

*Problemata* III echoes the same point but in terms of immediacy, such that “the first immediacy is the esthetic, and here the Hegelian philosophy certainly may very well be right” that it can be mediated and that it has no right to “justified hiddenness” (*FT* 82 / 4:172). Faith, by contrast, is “not the first immediacy but a later immediacy” and one that has a right to and requirement for hiddenness (*FT* 82 / 4:172; 112 / 4:200). Perhaps the most important addition here is that the ethical system is offended when a secret is kept from it (*FT* 86 / 4:176) and that, unlike esthetic silence, religious silence cannot communicate its content in the realm of social commands (*FT* 86-7 / 4:176-7).

Two final thematic considerations sustain the manner in which *Fear and Tremlbing* responds to the argument of *Spirit of Christianity*. First, De Silentio is emphatic at several points that Abraham has present tense faith-in God. This too mirrors Hegel’s emphasis on Abraham’s stubborn resistance to not integrate with the cultures he encounters. De Silentio notes the active nature of Abraham’s faith-in God as a fight against time (*FT* 17 / 4:114-5) and notes three times on the same page that “time passed” (*FT* 17 / 4:114). The point of all this temporality is to make clear that Abraham’s faith-in makes it impossible to subsume it under the pattern of the household gods or national deities. In other words, it will not be reconciled to a social command theory and is only available in opposition to one (Cf. *FT* 27 / 4:123).

The second point of contrast is their evaluations of the tragic hero. For Hegel, the tragic hero is still redeemable because they function from the values of their society and sacrifice their individuality (*SC* 185). For de Silentio, the tragic hero is a “knight of infinite resignation” (*FT* 37-8 / 4:132-3), such as an Abraham that sacrifices himself instead (*FT* 20-21 / 4:117), but this does not rise to faith-in precisely because what they do is obey a social command or make a socially-comprehensible and culturally praiseworthy choice (*FT* 58-9 / 4:151-2). In other words, what they do is not born out of faith-in. Instead, it is ethical courage (*FT* 87 / 4:176-7).

To avoid making Abraham into a tragic hero, de Silentio maintains that Abraham’s conduct is murder vis-à-vis the social command and can only be something else on account of his faith-in God (*FT* 30 / 4:126). Consequently, he rejects the attempt to relativize Abraham: “if perhaps because of the location conditions of the day, it was something entirely different, then let us forget him, for what is the value of going to the trouble of remembering that past which cannot become a present” (*FT* 30 / 4:126). Instead, he holds that Abraham “transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher telos outside it” in acting “for God’s sake” and “for his own sake” (*FT* 59 / 4:152-3). Conversely, for the tragic hero, the “ethical is the divine” and there can be no private relationship (*FT* 60 / 4:153).

Thus, we have seen that in *Fear and Trembling*, faith-in is something that gives Abraham a source of value separate from his culture and central to Abraham’s noetic structure.[[24]](#footnote-24) Despite chronological impossibility (since *Spirit of Christianity* was not published until the twentieth century), *Fear and Trembling* reads like a polemical defense of faith-in against Hegel’s social command theory that belittles Abraham and “Jewish Religion.” The thrust of de Silentio’s argument is designed to elicit something that may contemporary belittlers seem to acknowledge: either faith-in claims should be taken more seriously and seen as threats to social command theory, or they should be abandoned altogether.

### III.B Kierkegaard’s Moderate Divine Command Theory and Faith-In

Building on *Works of Love*, I argue here that faith-in for Kierkegaard contains obligations to others in society. As we saw in the preceding section, one of the defining features of faith-in is that it bears the mark of the present tense. Kierkegaard references the same idea in *Works of Love* when he describes the love God commands as that which “abides” and “is,” which Kierkegaard links directly to faith as “what … must be believed and lived” (*WL* 8 / 9:16).

For Kierkegaard, the relation to God is one of “love in unconditional obedience” for which “[y]ou have only lovingly to listen-obey [*at lyde*]” (*WL* 20 / 9:28, my translation; the word *lyde* means both to listen and to obey in Golden Age Danish). For Kierkegaard, this is a command that must be grasped and obeyed in faith (*WL* 27 / 9:34). In spite of not having read *Spirit of Christianity*, Kierkegaard sees this command as expressly linking the pedigree of Christianity and Judaism (*WL* 24-5 / 9:32-3). Later, Kierkegaard describes this as “going with God” (*WL* 77 / 9:83).

Kierkegaard explicitly rejects the possibility of a social origin for these commands under the motto, “Beware of people” (*WL* 27 / 9:35). Later, he contrasts “culture’s highest” with the “essentially Christian” (*WL* 59 / 9:65-6). Similarly, he exhorts his reader to stand fast against the failing of “holding together” with others (*WL* 78 / 9:84). A similar motif is that Kierkegaard believes the person of faith is called to ignore social claims on the self as sources of moral obligation and understand the monstrous claim of God (*WL* 90 / 9:94-5).

All of this seems to play into the hands of the belittler, by pointing out that the self’s obligations are from God (an issue I address in the next section), but there are two features which suggest that this is not the whole story for Kierkegaard’s view. First, Kierkegaard recognizes the belittler objection. He points out that, from a Hegelian perspective, the view he offers is “actually a delusion, a retardation” and “an abominable era of bond service” (*WL* 114-5 / 9:118). Kierkegaard responds in kind to his imagined interlocutor, calling the social command theory “inhumanly protracted labor on the common agreement among all people,” which plays out as a terribly long and boring game that some start but never finish, and others join midway but see the end (*WL* 116 / 9:119-20). For Kierkegaard, obligations that originate in society are ultimately “augmented forms of self-love” (*WL* 266-7 / 9:265-6).

Second, and more importantly, the obligations we have in this divine command theory are to people under the category of “the Neighbor.” For Kierkegaard, this is a category defined by dissimilarity in culture but equality before God (*WL* 60 / 9:66). Kierkegaard links this to faith by repeating that the obligation is to listen-obey and that the heard command is to love the neighbor (*WL* 84-5 / 9:90). Thus, Kierkegaard summarizes the obligation thusly: “Love … is a quality [*Egenskab*] by which or in which you are for others” (*WL* 223 / 9:225). Rather than seeing moral obligations coming from God as a weakness, Kierkegaard sees it as a source of eternal financing for our moral obligations:

God is not a part of existence in such a way that he demands his share for himself; he demands everything, but as you bring it you immediately receive, if I may put it this way, an endorsement designating where it should be forwarded, for God demands nothing for himself, although he demands everything from you (*WL* 161 / 9:161).[[25]](#footnote-25)

This passage provides the mature structure of Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith-in: God commands (obligates) the self to behave in certain ways towards others, but these obligations are not born as social commands. Kierkegaard supplies an analogy that the understanding counts and counts as it approximates what one should do, but Kierkegaard believes that faith leapfrogs this and finds deeper non-tentative meaning in divine commands (*WL* 105 / 9:109). All of this implies that Kierkegaard is consciously presenting a divine command account of moral obligation where the self, who has faith-in God, receives moral obligations from God, in contrast to a Hegelian social command.

### III.C The Critique of Social Command Theory in Works of Love

In this section, I maintain that at least some species of the belittler’s objection to faith-in hinges on a misunderstanding. As we have seen above, the self has obligations to others in society; what is missing is that these are not “social obligations” or to word it more clearly that the obligations to others are not the fruit of social commands and instead find their origin in divine commands. This distinction is important, because confusing the two issues sometimes causes belittlers to object to a strawman rather than faith-in.

It is my contention that Mark C. Taylor fails to make this distinction. Taylor has also compared *Spirit of Christianity* and *Fear and Trembling* declaring that *Spirit of Christianity* contains “Hegel's anticipation of important dimensions of Kierkegaard's philosophical and theological perspective.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Central to this for Taylor is the critical line that “[i]ndividual selfhood is most completely actualized in the isolation from other persons and the opposition to the natural realm established by total devotion to the transcendent Lord over against whom the individual always stands. ”[[27]](#footnote-27) In a different article, Taylor states that “Kierkegaard’s vision of authentic selfhood or realized spirit is fundamentally non-social” and contrasts this with the claim “for Hegel selfhood or spirit is inherently social.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

I believe Taylor has misunderstood the point de Silentio is making. Taylor’s critique here hinges on a failure to distinguish between sources of moral obligation and recipients of moral obligation captured in the two senses of sentences like this: “Abraham's type of faith exacerbates the opposition between the individual and his social and natural world.”[[29]](#footnote-29) This could refer either to an Abraham who has moral beliefs that stands opposed to everything in nature or an Abraham whose source of moral obligation is neither found in natural law nor social convention.

My position is that faith-in, as presented Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms,[[30]](#footnote-30) only implies the latter but does not contain the former. First off, *Fear and Trembling* is about learning to follow Abraham in faith – not murder, and Abraham’s example of faith-in is used to “jack up the price [at skrue Prisen op]” of faith in the realm of spirit (*FT* 121 / 4:208). Here, the central demonstration of Abram’s faith-in is as Kvanvig describes for faith in: “when God says go, Abraham goes.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Thus, this is primarily obedience to these commands in Abraham’s action in the world. and this is primarily about “following the command of God” in this world. Worded another way, Abram singlehandedly rejects a social command theory approach and acts from a special relation with transcendence. Through this, Abraham functions as an exemplar of faith because he recognizes faith-in as a source of moral knowledge that teleologically suspends the ethical.

Second, *Works of Love* does not present a theory where the self has no social responsibility or obligations to others. As C. Stephen Evans, building on Robert Merrihew Adams,[[32]](#footnote-32) has convincingly argued, despite the gory case of the *Akedah*, Kierkegaard’s point need not be seen as advocating voluntaristic divine command theory (i.e., the sort of view that maintains God could command anyone at any time to commit atrocities).[[33]](#footnote-33) Instead, it can be seen as an intermediate divine command theory where something becomes obligatory when God commands.[[34]](#footnote-34) This can be done without figuring out why God picks to command something and thereby make it obligatory, because the issue in question for faith-in is that the one who has faith-in sees the object of faith as a source of moral knowledge or obligation.

This arrangement does, however, validate the second charge, that the self has a source of moral obligation in divine commands that are not social commands (here meaning commands or obligations that issue from the self’s community to the self). This defense of Kierkegaard is not the singular domain of partisan Kierkegaard scholars. Stern rightly captures that this is a debate about legitimate sources of obligation – not whether moral selves have obligations to others in society:

The root of Kierkegaard's concern here, I will argue, has to do with the relation between ethics and faith: on Hegel's social theory of obligation, there is a huge cost in religious terms, as such a theory cannot treat the good and the right as transcendent and thus beyond our· full comprehension, while for· Kierkegaard it is precisely this transcendence which it is necessary· to acknowledge if we are to stand in the proper relation to the divine.[[35]](#footnote-35)

In other words, the disagreement between Hegel and Kierkegaard is whether transcendence can trump immanence as a source of moral knowledge or whether all sources of moral knowledge must be subject to upheaval [*Aufgebung*] and brought into a unified picture of moral knowledge.

A further factor in support of this reading is that while some recent and contemporary belittlers seem to fail to grasp this distinction, it is not clear that Hegel also failed to grasp the distinction between sources of moral obligation and recipients of moral obligation. My sense is that part of what belittlers find troubling is the very idea of faith-in as a source of moral obligation regardless of whether it can and does supply obligations that equal those of social commands; it is the very idea that is odious. Thus, while I’m critical of the precision of Taylor’s objection above, I think he expresses clearly the belittlers conclusion about Abraham and faith-in when he describes Abraham’s relation with transcendence plops the self into “a more profound servitude.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

## Conclusion

The actors change, but the play remains the same. As Thulstrup remarked, Kierkegaard once used “modern science” as a synonym for the “speculative whole” that is Hegelian philosophy.[[37]](#footnote-37) This word choice is felicitous for our age – since by keeping the phrase and substituting in the contemporary meaning, the critique remains roughly the same. For both Hegel and Kierkegaard, faith-in is to have just the sort of relation where God serves as an independent source of obligations to act, to believe, and to think. Both understand faith as a faith-in-a-person (trust), something that provides the self with a subjective source of knowledge outside of the objective community. Both agree that faith-in threatens the holism of the epistemic community which provides social commands.

Their disagreement is thus concentrated in their assessments of Abraham and his faith-in and whether this could provide a higher immediacy or source of moral knowledge. For Hegel, it appears to be impossible and undesirable. It is impossible for Hegel, because the entire project of human thinking culminates in realizing it is a project where human thinking is both the subject doing the thinking and the primary content of the thinking. Simultaneously, it is undesirable, because it would prevent a holistic social command theory and leave differences unreconciled. Consequently, Hegel belittles Abraham and his faith-in without even focusing on the troubling *Akedah*.

For Kierkegaard, it is much the opposite. For de Silentio, a world without faith is a banal shell, and the goal of totalizing knowledge whether expressed as the project of “modern science” or the Hegelian system is an empty promise. For Kierkegaard, both in his eponymous works and his pseudonymous works, faith-in God supplies a source of moral knowledge outside of community and the universally accessible.

The above considerations now enable us to see why the belittlers of today (like the belittlers of yesterday) will not be calmed, but perhaps their argument has one less tooth than some think. When Kvanvig identifies faith in the following manner: “Religious faith thus aims at the full integration of a life in relation to an all-encompassing ideal, even if the actual situation for a given individual falls short of that ideal (i.e., even if their faith is weak with respect to the ideal in question),”[[38]](#footnote-38) he is already highlighting the faith-in relation with transcendence that the belittlers have always found so troubling. Moreover, the retreat into affectiveness provides no protection from the squall of the belittlers, because they only accept affective differences that can be reduced out rather than those which lead to independent sources of moral knowledge.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The reason is that what is at stake for the belittlers is the question of whether all sources of moral knowledge are universally accessible. The idea of faith as a source of moral knowledge threatens this social whole. And, echoing the Athenian response to Socrates, the belittlers answer faith an opprobrium that does not apply to civilly-integrated religion (or non-religion). Consequently, it is unsurprising when thinkers like Adorno are unmoved by sophisticated versions of faith, because their objection is not really to the moral knowledge that comes from faith-in but the very possibility of its modality wherein some individual has access to a source of moral knowledge that is not shared by the community as a whole.[[40]](#footnote-40)

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1. Jonathan L. Kvanvig, "Affective Theism and People of Faith" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (September 2013): 109-28, at 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox and Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 182–301. Siglum: *Spirit of Christianity* or *SC*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983). Siglum: *FT*; and Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). Siglum: *WL*. Pagination after the slash is from *Søren Kierkegaard Skrifter* available at http://sks.dk. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The literature on faith-in is substantial. See Robert Audi, “Faith, Belief, and Rationality,” in *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 213-39, at 215; William Alston, “Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith,” in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of Religion Today*, ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 3-29, at 12–13; Benjamin W. McCraw, “Faith and Trust,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 77, no. 2 (April 2015): 141-58, at 145–6; Trent Dougherty, “Zagzebski, Authority, and Faith,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 4 (December 22, 2014): 47-59, at 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Audi, “Faith, Belief, and Rationality,” 218. See also Daniel J. McKaughan, “Authentic Faith and Acknowledged Risk: Dissolving the Problem of Faith and Reason,” *Religious Studies* 49, no. 1 (March 2013): 101-24, at 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Audi, “Faith, Belief, and Rationality,” 232–33 and Daniel J. McKaughan, “Action-Centered Faith, Doubt, and Rationality,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 41, no. Supplement (2016): 71-90, at 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kvanvig, “Affective Theism and People of Faith,” 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Ibid., 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Nisbet, H.B. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Siglum: *PR*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Speirs, E.B. and Sanderson, J. Burdon, vol. 1, 2, and 3 (Kagan Paul Trench Trubner & Co, 1895). Sigla: *Rel* I, *Rel* II, *Rel* III. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* 6:87, 186-7 and *The Conflict of the Faculties* 7:62-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mark C. Taylor, “Journeys to Moriah: Hegel vs. Kierkegaard,” *Harvard Theological Review* 70, no. 3–4 (October 1977): 305-26, at 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is mostly worked out in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of Right*. See also Robert B. Pippin, “What Is the Question for Which Hegel’s Theory of Recognition Is the Answer?,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (August 2000): 155-72, at 158. Also note that this is not a relativistic system. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. To construct this definition, I am merely consulting the table of contents of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and incorporating the major headings which reflect the development of Spirit’s in its comprehension of itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See H.B. Acton, “Introduction,” in *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Science of Law* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kvanvig, “Affective Theism and People of Faith,” 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Robert Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Westphal, Merold, “Kierkegaard and Hegel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Daniel Marino (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101-24, at 106. For our purposes, we can view this narrowly as a claim about *how* the self comes to know, rather than any deeper communitarian claim about the metaphysics of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kvanvig, “Affective Theism and People of Faith,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This paper strives to honor Kierkegaard’s wishes in attributing the works to their respective pseudonyms, but takes no ultimate position on their significance. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For our purposes, it does not matter whether de Silentio has in mind Hegel himself or Danish Hegelians. For the greatly interested, read Niels Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979) and Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003) for two contrasting views on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Westphal, Merold, “Kierkegaard and Hegel,” 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*, Provost Series (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2006), 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. As translated at Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Taylor, “Journeys to Moriah,” 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Mark C. Taylor, “Love and Forms of Spirit: Kierkegaard vs. Hegel,” *Kierkegaardania* 10 (1977): 95-116, at 111–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Taylor, “Journeys to Moriah,” 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A similar analysis could be raised for Johannes Climacus which I have not included for space and clarity reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Jonathan L. Kvanvig, “The Idea of Faith as Trust: Lessons in Noncognitivist Approaches to Faith,” in *Reason and Faith: Themes from Richard Swinburne*, ed. Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey E. Brower (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4-26, at 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 230. and C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also *FT* 31 / 4:126: “it is only by faith that one achieves any resemblance to Abraham, not by murder.” [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation*, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation*, 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Taylor, “Journeys to Moriah,” 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel.*, 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Kvanvig, “Affective Theism and People of Faith,” 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 119–20. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Theory and History of Literature, v. 61 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 21–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)