Chapter Six
Constancy of Faith?
Symmetry and Asymmetry in Kierkegaard's Leap of Faith

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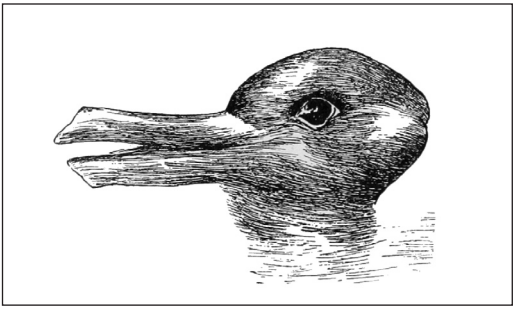
Suppose when I look at this picture I see a duck:



After looking at it for a while I suddenly see a rabbit. Then, after looking at it for yet another while, again I see a duck.[1] The process that takes me from the duck to the rabbit and back to the duck is a symmetrical process. The process can be reversed under the same conditions of my gaze.

Next, consider an explosion. Between the situation prior to an explosion to that after, there is asymmetry. After the explosion there is no way for the explosive process to reverse itself. If the explosion were on film and you reversed the film, then you would have symmetry, but not in real life. An explosion is an asymmetrical process.

Consider now a change of water to ice. Water has turned to ice. If the temperature rises, the ice will turn back to water. So in that sense freezing and thawing of the same water is a symmetrical process. However, if the temperature never rises, or as long as it does not rise, there will be no return of the ice to water. Unlike in the duck-rabbit picture, for symmetry to exist conditions must change. I am going to call this: *conditional symmetry*. We now have three categories: plain symmetry, asymmetry, and conditional symmetry.

What I want to ask is what is the nature of the Kierkegaardian *leap of faith*? Is it an asymmetrical process, perhaps like Buddhist enlightenment is

supposed to be, once achieved never to be reversed? Or is the leap of faith symmetrical, given to going back and forth in relevantly similar conditions? Or is it conditionally symmetrical? And if so, what are the chances of change in the relevant conditions?

I am going to be focusing on the *leap of faith* regarding the Absolute Paradox, faith in the God-Man, who is both infinite and finite. This is what Kierkegaard calls "the absurd." And I am going to be relating primarily to Kierkegaard's first authorship, specifically to the three pseudonymous authors, Johannes de silentio, Johannes Climacus, and Vigilius Haufniensis, and to some entries in the journals for the relevant period of time.

My short, and perhaps surprising, answer to my question is that the leap of faith is asymmetrical. It cannot be reversed. And this tells us much about what Kierkegaard means by a leap of faith. My long answer will involve determining the place of human volition in the leap. I will examine and reject three views that have been advanced by Kierkegaard scholars on the role of human volition in the leap. Following that, I will be advancing my own view on this. With that in hand, I hope to provide an argument for why the leap of faith is asymmetrical.

I. The Leap of Faith

In a journal entry of 1836, Kierkegaard wrote this about "conversion" to faith:

> Conversion goes slowly….one has to walk back by the same road he came out on earlier….This is why we are told to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, for it is not finished or completed; backsliding is a possibility. No doubt it was in part this unrest which drove people to seek so zealously to become martyrs.[2]

According to this passage, one advances slowly towards faith and might regress at any time. Even if you reach the end of the road, you might have a relapse. Indeed, Kierkegaard says with some wit, some chose to die martyrs rather than live with the risk of a relapse. Here, Kierkegaard is thinking of conversion to faith as symmetrical, perhaps not all that different from the symmetry of the duck-rabbit picture. At any moment a shift can occur taking you out of faith and back to where you had been previously.

Several years later, however, we find Kierkegaard occupied by a leap of faith, radically different from an incremental journey on a long road. A person makes "the leap of faith," says Climacus, "the qualitative transition…from unbeliever to believer."[3] Here, the achievement of faith is not quantitative, or incremental, as when on a journey, but qualitative. The change to faith is a sudden flop-over, not advancing bit by bit until complete. Coming from Climacus this has much irony to it, since "Climacus" is a "climber," implying just the kind of process he is rejecting. Climacus shares the name of the seventh-century monk who wrote a work entitled, *The Ladder of Divine Descent*. Here is no ladder. Only a leap.

Climacus returns often to the idea that there cannot be an "approximation" in faith, a process of coming closer and closer until you are there. Here is an example:

> With the aid of approximation, the absurd becomes something else; it becomes probable, it becomes more probable, it may become to a high degree and exceedingly probably. Now he is all set to believe it….The almost probable, the probable, the to-a-high-degree and exceedingly probable—that he can almost know, or as good as know, to a higher degree and exceedingly almost *know*—but *believe* it, that cannot be done, for the absurd is precisely the object of faith and only that can be believed.[4]

Together with the change from a quantitative to a qualitative conception of faith, I ask whether there was a shift from a symmetrical conception of faith to an asymmetrical or conditionally symmetrical one. To answer my question I need to turn to the difficult issue of the relationship between a person's volition in the leap of faith and God's contribution to the leap of faith. To what extent, if at all, does the leap transpire because of God's causality in divine grace? On the one hand, for Climacus and Kierkegaard, the leap of faith involves a "passionate decision" of will, a decision made in individual freedom. On the other hand, Climacus asserts categorically, "Faith is not an act of will."[5] Faith is a gift of God. The problem is how to reconcile these two statements. How can faith be a matter of free decision, yet not involve the will? I want to look at three different attempts to explain the relationship between human volition and divine grace in the leap, those, respectively, by Louis Pojman, Jamie Ferreira and David Wisdo. I will propose an alternative view of this relationship, from which will follow an answer to my question about the symmetry of faith.

Louis Pojman has interpreted Kierkegaard to be a direct volitionist. Direct volitionism has two parts:

> The volitional theory contains both a descriptive and a prescriptive feature. The former asserts that believing is an act of will, that in every belief situation the will is operative….The prescriptive feature asserts that one ought to will to believe certain propositions; for example one ought to make oneself believe that God exists.[6]

Descriptive *volitionism*, then, says that (P1) I can come to acquire beliefs by directly willing them into existence. And prescriptive volitionism says that (P2) There are some beliefs that I ought to directly will into existence. Direct volitionism differs from indirect volitionism. Indirect volitionism says that I can undertake courses of action for the purpose of hoping they will bring about a belief, and that sometimes, at least, I can succeed in bringing the belief to be. In addition, it says there are beliefs that I ought to try to obtain in that matter. Blaise Pascal was an example of an indirect volitionist, maintaining that one could help induce a belief in oneself by undertaking ta*SKS* apt for bringing about that result.[7] Pascal held that in some cases an individual ought to do such ta*SKS*, such as religious rituals,

to induce belief in God. Kierkegaard, according to Pojman, was a direct volitionist, claiming that one can and ought to will into existence directly and immediately faith in the *Absolute Paradox*.

What then happens with *divine grace* in this story? For Pojman, there are two stages in the acquisition of faith. He says this about faith in the proposition that God has *come into existence*, as when God became a man:

> This faith is not a natural faculty or capacity of man. It is unnatural. It is a gift of God….This faith is not an act of the will. We can do nothing to acquire it. It is a miracle. It is the necessary condition for being able to entertain the proposition that God has come into existence. Yet…it does not in itself guarantee that a person will make use of the gift, once bestowed. The will must re-enter, become activated….There is a cooperative effort between God and man in the process of salvation. God gives the capacity to believe and reveals the proposition; man must decide whether he will believe. The will is free to assent or reject the proposition once faith makes a decision possible. Human freedom is still operative in the midst of grace.[8]

"Faith" for Kierkegaard, according to Pojman, has two stages. The first stage is wrought by God. Here, God provides the conditions for a person to have the ability to choose faith. That we are able to choose to believe is a miracle, given by divine grace. No human will is operative at this point. In stage two, the person takes advantage of the divine grace and wills faith. A person *decides* to believe. We might fail to do so even though God has enabled our doing so. When we freely choose faith, it is our will that causes directly our belief to come into existence, per direct volitionism. This is how free decision and divine grace are reconciled, according to Pojman, for Kierkegaard. Grace operates before the human will is activated.

Pojman goes on to argue that direct descriptive volitionism is "essentially confused" and that prescriptive volitionism is "morally suspect." Pojman rejects direct descriptive volitionism on the grounds that belief never has the phenomenal feel of our deciding to believe. Belief, rather, is something that happens to us. In addition, Pojman argues that one cannot directly will a belief into existence.[9] (P1) is false. But then, by the principle that "ought implies can," so is (P2) false. Concludes Pojman, Kierkegaard's characterization of the leap as dependent on direct volitionism is indefensible.

Jamie Ferreira and David Wisdo, respectively, give far different readings of the category of decision in the leap. Ferreira rejects entirely that the leap is a result of a decision to believe on the part of the subject.[10] She notes that Climacus emphatically rejects that in the leap one "closes one's eyes, grabs oneself by the neck, à la Münchhausen, and then—then one stands on the other side."[11] Baron Münchhausen (1720-57) was famous for his being the hero of a fanciful book of his wild adventures that first appeared in 1786. In the book there appears a picture of a "Münchhausen leap" in which the Baron pulls himself up from behind the neck and leaps with his horse to the other side of a stream.[12] That will power caricature is also later rejected when Climacus notes, "The inwardness and the unutterable sighs of prayer are incommensurate with the muscular."[13]

Ferreira takes these comments by Climacus as a key to understanding the leap, denying what is surely its most common popular understanding as a heroic act of self-propulsion into faith. Climacus, says Ferreira, is opposing himself to such a caricature of the leap as a deliberate act of will power.[14]

Ferreira argues that the leap is not directly volitional at all. Yet, the leap must occur in freedom. How is this possible? Ferreira's view is that the leap is volitional in that it requires a decision to allow oneself to be grasped, by what Climacus calls an "infinite interestedness." Ferreira is here influenced by what Kierkegaard writes about the "leap" that is involved when one passes from the premises of a demonstration to its conclusion. In that "leap," Kierkegaard writes that there must be a "letting go," of the premises in order to pass—in a leap—at once to the conclusion. Just so, says Ferreira, the only willful decision involved in the leap of faith is a letting go and thus being open to the leap.

As Ferreira puts it, "The surrender of interestedness, of being grasped by something or decisively engaged by it, can account for both the letting-go which constitutes the leap and the passion which also constitutes it."[15] The leap itself is a divine gift. However, says Ferreira: "Neither Kierkegaard nor Climacus falls prey to the common mistake of seeing a 'divine gift' and human activity as mutually exclusive categories. Although the transition to faith is clearly a gift, it is also something *we* do—we let go, we embrace the Absolute Paradox, we leap."[16] To summarize, for Ferreira, in the leap one does not will faith into existence. Faith comes from God. Yet, one's will is active, since one must decide to open one's arms to be ready to receive the gift of faith.

David Wisdo concentrates on *Philosophical Fragments* and its pseudonymous author, Climacus. Like Ferreira, Wisdo too rejects thinking of the leap as a willful decision, calling it a "caricature" if one "imagines perhaps the spindle-legged Dane gazing over the precipice of existential decision. Having mustered up the courage, he grits his teeth, clenches his fists and springs over the abyss to find himself on the other side."[17] The leap is not volitional, and neither Climacus nor Kierkegaard intended to advance anything like the direct volitionist thesis. Pojman is mistaken to think otherwise.[18] For Wisdo, the key to understanding the leap of faith is to see it as a wonder, a miracle of divine grace: "The point is that faith is a miracle which cannot be explained by speculative philosophy. Ultimately, no one can become a disciple unless he or she receives from God the Condition, the gift of grace which transforms the individual into a new creature."[19] Wisdo interprets this and other passages from the *Fragments* as implying that faith is entirely a matter of God's wondrous grace, and that therefore no human will is involved in its formation. Wisdo leans heavily on this passage in the *Fragments,*

> But the one who not only gives the learner the truth but provides the condition is not a teacher. Ultimately, all instruction depends upon the presence of the condition; if it is lacking, then a teacher is capable of nothing, because in the second case, the teacher, before beginning to teach, must transform, not

> reform, the learner. But no human being is capable of doing this; if it is to take place, it must be done by the god himself.[20]

Here is how Wisdo puts it: "Faith enters the world as a miracle and as such resists our attempts to explain it by an appeal to will."[21] And, "In the end, it is not the will which accounts for the way one acquires faith, but rather faith which helps us grasp the miraculous transformation of the will."[22]

What then is left of human freedom and decision in the leap of faith according to Wisdo? Wisdo's answer is that while the will is not operative in the formation of faith, it is operative subsequently. For inevitably the person who has received faith will suffer doubt and uncertainty. Any contingent belief, says Wisdo, has, for Climacus, a dimension of uncertainty and possible doubt attached to it. This distinguishes it phenomenologically from eternal, necessary truths that are believed with certainty. One can attain certainty of one's contingent beliefs only by an act of will that suppresses or eliminates doubts and uncertainty. There, says Wisdo, is where the will is involved in the leap of faith. It is the source of one's acquisition of utter conviction and certainty *after* receiving the gift of faith. However, the will plays no part in the acquisition of faith.

Wisdo is more minimalist about the will than Ferreira. For Wisdo, there is no activity of the will before receiving faith, whereas for Ferreira a prior condition of receiving faith is the prior willingness to be open to receiving it.

So we have three views on the connection between the will and grace in the acquisition of Kierkegaardian faith. All three locate difficulty in faith being at once both an act of the person's will and an act of divine grace. Each, respectively, solves the difficulty by separating out the time of the activity of the human will from that of the activity of divine grace. For Pojman, by grace a person is given the possibility to have faith and is only "presented with the proposition," while the acquisition of faith happens subsequently when the will then acts to appropriate the proposition in belief. The will is what creates faith. For both Ferreira and Wisdo, on the contrary, faith is acquired by the activity of divine grace alone. For Ferreira the will is active prior to that, in opening the person to the reception of the grace of faith, while for Wisdo the will is active after that, erasing doubts and uncertainty once faith has been granted as a gift.

II. Willing Faith

I propose that each of these views misses a proper understanding of the connection in the Kierkegaardian leap between human volition and divine grace. That is because none of these views is alive to an ambiguity in speaking about a subject, S, and a result, R, when one says, "S wills R." Hence these views miss an ambiguity in the specific instance where "S wills faith."

My view of the place of the subject's will in the leap of faith depends on the distinction between *achievement* and *task* verbs.[23] In using an *achievement* verb one asserts that an appropriate, desired outcome is caused to occur, over and above the undertaken task denoted by the verb. Achievement verbs are for this reason also called "success verbs." Examples of achievement verbs are "cure," "win," "cheat," "prove," and "conceal." When I cure somebody I am engaging in a task that succeeds in causing an appropriate desired end—an end in addition to the task I do when engaged in curing. I administer a medicine and achieve good health for the sick person. If I administered a medicine and failed to bring good health to the sick person, then I might have tried to cure, but did not cure. Similarly, when I win a game I succeed not only in playing the game but in coming out ahead of my competitors. Contrasted with success verbs are task verbs. With a *task* verb there is no implication of success in any aim of the task, only reference to performance of the task denoted by the verb. Examples of task verbs are "try" and "hunt." From the fact that I tried to cross the street it does not follow that I succeeded in crossing the street. Nothing follows about what came out of my trying other than what was involved in the trying itself. When I hunt, my purpose is to succeed in capturing or killing an animal. Whether or not I succeed in doing that, I will have "hunted" in any case. Similarly for "look for." I can look for something yet fail to find it. These are task verbs.

Now, some verbs can be used both as achievement verbs and task verbs. Take the sentence, "At 8:00 I went to work." "Went to" here can have an achievement sense, in which it will imply not only that I left my home at 8:00, but that I succeeded in arriving to work after leaving home. Such would be the case in a sentence like, "At 8:00 I went to work, and at 6:00 I came home." "Went to," however, also can carry a task sense, as when were I to say, "At 8:00 I went to work, but I never made it to the office because I fell sick on the way and instead went to the doctor." "I went to work," here, refers to nothing more than the going in the direction of where I work, not to having gotten to work. In both cases, it is true that I "went to" work at the mentioned time, but the meaning of the verb in each case is different. Here is another example of multiple uses of the same verb. There is a difference between the achievement-sense of, "I ran the marathon," implying that I managed to finish the marathon successfully, and the task sense, in which my saying "I ran the marathon" is consistent with my adding that I tired in the middle and was not able to finish.

My proposal, disagreeing with Ferreira and Wisdo and, in a way, agreeing with Pojman, is that in the treatment of grace and human will in the leap of faith, Kierkegaard and Climacus are asserting that the will is indeed active in the very act of the leap of faith. This is the most natural way of understanding the many references to the will in the leap. Without human willing of faith into existence, faith would not come into existence. Yet, the existence of faith is entirely due to an act of grace. There is no contradiction between these, because of the two senses, achievement and task senses, possible in the statement, "S wills faith into existence." In the success-sense, "I will faith into existence," implies that I execute an act of

will, which act succeeds to bring my faith into existence. In the task-sense, on the other hand, "I will faith into existence," implies only that I perform the task in question. For my part I do the willing, but this time, without implying success in actually bringing faith into existence. In this sense, my willing faith into existence (not merely my *wanting* to have faith, which is a different matter entirely) is a task term. "I will faith into existence," is like "At 8:00 I went to work," in "At 8:00 I went to work, but never made it to the office."

Given that clarification, here is my view of grace and volition in the leap of faith. Kierkegaard and Climacus don't weary of telling us that the leap of faith is an absurdity. The absurdity we are most familiar with is the absurd *content* of the leap, the illogical belief that God became a finite human being while remaining infinite in nature. In the leap this absurdity is overcome by God. That is, God resolves the absurdity of the absolute paradox for the person of faith. In a journal entry Kierkegaard writes that what was absurd prior to faith is no longer absurd when in faith.[24] God turns the absurd to non-absurd for the person of faith. And in *The Concept of Anxiety,* pseudonymous Vigilius quotes Corinthians to say that in the leap of faith, "Behold all things have become anew."[25] The absurdity of faith is undone in faith.

In my view, there is a second absurdity in the leap of faith, which is the absurdity in the very *act of willing* faith into existence. Just so, this absurdity, too, is undone by God in faith. To Kierkegaard, for faith to come into existence, *I must will it into existence.* However, Kierkegaard *knows*—contra Pojman—that this is absurd since I cannot succeed in bringing faith into existence by my willing, and I, the willer, realize that my willing will not succeed. In what sense, then, do I "will faith into existence?" In the *task* sense only. I perform the task of willing faith into existence, knowing that I cannot possibly succeed in thereby bringing faith to be. My task is absurd. Nevertheless, I do it, in the task-sense, and in the only way such an absurd act can be done: with great passion. I do this knowing that my willing will achieve success only if God's grace will bring its success. In willing faith, my hope is that God will acknowledge my absurd willing and for it will grant me faith. When the leap transpires, it is the person who has *willed* it ("taskly") into existence but it is God who has made it to be. God makes my task into an achievement. In the leap, God resolves two absurdities, the one of content and the other the absurdity of my willing faith into existence.

Why must I will faith into existence (in the task sense) in order for God to grant me faith in grace? That is because a person cannot get faith until having what Kierkegaard calls an "absolute relation to the absolute."[26] In this, the individual comes to realize that he "is capable of doing nothing himself but is nothing before God."[27] It is in the act of willing faith—*knowing* that it cannot possibly succeed without God's bringing it to success—that one come's to the ultimate sense of being nothing before God. Faith is the greatest state a person can be in. And this state is beyond one's grasp. In absurdly willing faith into existence and failing, one comes to rely on God for everything. This is what Climacus called "self-annihilation," and the essence of the religious life.[28]

This is how it is possible for the leap of faith to include human willing it to be while it is God who brings faith to be by a miracle of divine grace. Both Climacus and Vigilius, respectively, quote pseudonymous Johannes de silentio as an expert on the leap. In *Fear and Trembling,* de silentio writes:

> It is supposed to be the most difficult task for a ballet dancer to leap into a specific posture in such a way that he never once strains for the posture but in the very leap assumes the posture. Perhaps there is no ballet dancer who can do it—but this knight does….The knights of infinity are ballet dancers and have elevation. They make the upward movement and come down again….But every time they come down, they are unable to assume the posture immediately….One does not need to see them in the air; one needs only to see them the instant they touch ad have touched the earth—and then one recognizes them. But to be able to come down in such a way that instantaneously one seems to stand and to walk, to change the leap into life into walking, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—only that only the knight of faith it—and this is the one and only marvel.[29]

In this passage, de silentio tells us that we will not know whether the person who leaps in the air is a Knight of Resignation or a Knight of Faith until he lands on the ground. Only by the manner in which he falls, without vacillation and falling naturally into the posture of the dance, will we recognize the Knight of Faith. I interpret this to mean not only that an onlooker watching the leap cannot know whether the person leaping is a Knight of Faith. The leaper himself cannot know whether he is a Knight of Faith until he lands in the way that only God can ensure. For the person can leap only with the *intention* of coming back to the ground totally in the posture. That is what he wills. Whether he will succeed in doing so, however, is fully up to God. God must bless the leap with success. When God does so, and only then, does the leaper know he is indeed a Knight of Faith.

I take Kierkegaard to be summarizing this position in the following journal entry of 1849: "Thus the absurd, or acting by virtue of the absurd, is acting in faith, trusting in God….I…turn to God in prayer saying: 'This is what I am doing; bless it, then; I cannot do otherwise."[30] Taken in my way, the leap of faith is full of paradoxes. However, how the leap can require human volition when faith is a divine gift, is not one of the paradoxes in the list.

Each of Ferreira, Wisdo, and Pojman takes human willing in the leap in the achievement sense. Pojman is correct in thinking that Kierkegaard teaches that (P1) One can directly will faith into existence, and that (P2) One ought to directly will faith into existence. But, both only in the *task-sense*, not in the achievement-sense of the verb to will, as Pojman thinks. In the achievement-sense, Kierkegaard would agree with Pojman that one cannot directly will to have faith. Thus, Pojman errs in thinking that faith, for Kierkegaard, is not a direct consequence of divine grace. It is so, but must be prompted by a task of willing by the subject of the grace.

Ferreira is correct to attribute to Kierkegaard that (F1) In the leap of faith one does not get faith because one has willed faith into existence.

Kierkegaard would agree that one cannot end up with faith by willing it to be. However, contrary to Ferreira, this does not imply in the task-sense of deciding to have faith that (F2) In the leap of faith one does *not* will faith into existence. This is because one does directly will faith, but that willing does not achieve faith. Hence, Ferreira need not have concluded that human will is operative only prior to the leap of faith and not in the leap itself. One cannot propel oneself to the other side of faith simply by willing it to be. Yet, one must will it to be so.

Finally, Wisdo is right that (W1) The leap of faith is a miracle of divine grace.

But wrong in thinking that for that reason (W2) The will does not participate in the leap of faith. The will is operative *within* the leap, in the task-sense, not only *after* the leap, as part of the leap itself. So while Wisdo is right that God must make the person into a "new creature," it does not follow that the leap is not initiated by human will.

III. Why the Leap is Asymmetrical

Given this background, I offer my defense of the asymmetry of the leap of faith. Were the result of the leap something I brought into existence myself, then perhaps also I could will myself out of the leap, go back and find myself without Faith. Then the leap would be symmetrical. But, that is not so. Although in the leap I must perform the task of willing faith into existence, the success of the leap, its achievement, is with God. Hence, were the leap to be symmetrical it would have to be so because God withdraws God's grace and returns one to the other side. But this will not happen. For God will not undo the leap. From God's perspective the leap is permanent, never to be undone.

Neither is the leap conditionally symmetrical (Kierkegaard does write of the leap as akin to "the leap by which water turns to ice,"[31] which I have labeled conditional symmetry. But we should understand him to be referring only to the *form* of a leap of faith, and to nothing more. The transition from a water-state to an ice-state is a sudden, qualitative one). To be conditionally symmetrical, the leap would require God to revoke it under conditions of sin. But as I understand Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors, God does not do so under any circumstances. In the case of faith, the ice never turns back to water. Instead, the ice is replaced, with new waters leaping in upon where the ice had been.

The leap is asymmetrical. However, do not infer from this that faith is permanent. Not at all. While faith cannot be reversed, one can leap out from under faith, abandoning it to oblivion. One cannot undo God's grace, but one can begin anew in opposition to God's grace, and that—by sin. A leap of sin, Climacus tell us, is no less qualitative than the leap of faith. It is a sudden jump away from grace. Kierkegaard says that every person is his own Adam. And sinfulness comes into existence anew, Vigilius tells us, by an act of sin. At every moment sin and sinfulness loom as a possibility, and

one must make the leap of faith again. To make the leap again is to will once again, with the help of divine grace.

To go from faith to sin, consequently, is not like going from seeing a duck to seeing a rabbit in the same picture. It is more like turning away from an unambiguous picture of a duck, in order to gaze at an entirely different picture, one of a rabbit, instead. The duck picture remains a duck picture always as it was. Neither are there any conditions that allow the thawing of faith back into sin. Faith is an explosion. And here is the tragedy of the human condition. God confers grace everlasting upon us when we will faith. And then we just vanish, abandoning faith, for sin.