

Fear and Trembling

Chapter Summaries

Preface

Kierkegaard, or should we say Johannes de silentio (John of silence), claims not to be a philosopher but a poet so that he has no intention of attempting what the German philosopher Hegel had supposedly done, to formulate a complete and accurate explanation of reality simply by reflecting on life, the "System." Instead, Kierkegaard takes the Greek and Cartesian approach of a kind of skepticism that humbly admits to both a lack of complete understanding and the possibility of being wrong in one's assessment of reality. Therefore, rather than presuming like the Hegelians that he already has sufficient faith in God and that the human task is to formulate a full, objective explanation of life, Kierkegaard is willing to spend the whole rest of his human existence on earth acquiring faith and simply stopping there in the midst of his own subjectivity. But he recognizes that all he can expect is criticism because of the present philosophical and theological climate in Denmark in the mid 18th century—"in an age where passion has been done away with for the sake of science." Our task is to figure out what Kierkegaard means by "passion."

Attunement

Not willing simply to be an armchair theologian and only intellectually reflect on the story of Abraham's being "tested" and commanded by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, Kierkegaard wants to climb inside Abraham's skin and experience the event at every level humanly possible—physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual (what Kierkegaard calls in other books the "situation of contemporaneity"). Thus he "attunes" himself to the story, i.e., he tries different scenarios and perspectives to accustom himself to Abraham's situation. These different perspectives may have suggested themselves to Kierkegaard from his own experience—from his relationship with his father, or from his simply being keenly aware of his own human weaknesses and failings. But none of these possible scenarios illustrates genuine faith. Thus, by considering the opposite of faith, Kierkegaard is helping himself and the reader to understand better what true faith is.

Speech In Praise Of Abraham

The prospect of eternity keeps us human beings from despairing. And Abraham was neither a poet nor a hero. The hero and poet need each other by the hero's striving with the world and conquering it and by the poet's striving with himself and writing about the hero's accomplishments and thus immortalizing both of them. But Abraham experienced "powerlessness," "folly," "insanity," and "hatred of self." Even when he left Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11,12), he left behind his "worldly understanding" (that belongs to the hero and poet) and took with him only "his faith" so that in the promised land that was unfamiliar "the novelty of everything tempted his soul to sad longing." And by faith Abraham accepted God's promise that the rest of humanity would be blessed by means of Isaac, so that he "held firm to the promise." God first tested Abraham's faith by making him wait until he was 100 years old before Isaac was born. Then God tested him again by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac. But "Abraham...had faith for *this* life" and did not doubt but "believed the absurd." Then at the end of this "speech" Kierkegaard begins to explain what he means by passion—"the sacred, pure, and humble expression of the divine madness which the pagans admired." Kierkegaard will continue to unpack this statement throughout the rest of the book. Our task will also be to figure out what Kierkegaard means by "absurd."

Preamble From The Heart

Sometimes people look at the story of Abraham's sacrificing his son, Isaac, as though the main lesson is "that he so loved God that he was willing to offer him the best that he had." But this is to leave out Abraham's "anguish." What was his anguish? Both that as a father, who is supposed to protect and care for his son, he was commanded by God to do the opposite, and that "[t]he ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac" while "the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac." In other words, it "can indeed make one sleepless" trying to reconcile the morality of murder (the ethical) with the spirituality of sacrifice (the religious). What does Kierkegaard do with this "monstrous paradox?" He divides Abraham's inward choice to obey God into a "double movement," i.e., one movement of "infinite resignation" and a second movement of "faith."

The first of these, according to Kierkegaard, anyone can do. It requires only "human courage" to give up everything in this life in the light of the greatness of eternal life, thus gaining one's "eternal consciousness." And it seems so right. If we give up this temporal life, then we can "win eternity" and gain the next life, eternal life. Nevertheless, this movement of infinite resignation, of renouncing everything infinitely, while it brings about a sense of peace and contentment, it also involves deep pain and sorrow that comes from loss. As human beings, we are wired to weep when we lose that which hold dear, like the young man who had fallen in love with a beautiful young woman, but gave her up because he had discovered that it was impossible to marry her. Thus, it must have been so difficult for Abraham to give up Isaac to be sacrificed.

The second movement of faith "is the greatest and most difficult of all" and requires a "humble courage," implying that God must bring it about within the human being. While the movement of infinite resignation is painfully giving everything up for the sake of eternity, the movement of faith is joyfully receiving everything back in this life--even if one never *actually* receives them back. In other words, faith receives things back "on the strength of the absurd," as with Abraham where "human calculation" was out of the question in understanding God's demand to sacrifice Isaac for "it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of [Abraham] should in the next instant withdraw the demand." Therefore, faith is based upon the fact that "for God all things are possible," whether raising Isaac from the dead, if this were the way He chose Abraham to receive him back with joy, or whether the young man never actually marries the woman he loves but only lives with the possibility until the end of his life. It is not the **actuality** of this life that gives the person of faith joy. It is the **possibility** of life that does, even if the possibility never becomes actuality. This means too that Abraham's "faith was not that he should be happy sometime in the hereafter," even though this would be true also, "but that he should find blessed happiness here in this world."

To summarize, infinite resignation involves becoming "convinced of the impossibility, humanly speaking," and faith involves becoming convinced of the possibility, divinely speaking. The former includes the greatest of pain and sorrow while the latter involves the greatest of joy and enthusiasm. The former makes sense. The latter is absurd and irrational. But is it really? Or does it only appear to be so?

Problema I – Is There A Teleological Suspension Of The Ethical?

The ethical is the moral is the universal. But is a "teleological suspension of the ethical" possible?

Think of morality as a circle and doing good is inside the circle while doing evil is outside the circle. Kierkegaard, like Kant and Hegel, claims that every human being is obligated to operate within the circle. Indeed, morality is the telos, the goal, of morality. In other words, it is its own goal. But could there be a higher goal than morality when faith is involved? Could we suspend the telos of morality and reach for a higher goal with faith?

Where do the prescriptions for good and the proscriptions of evil come from? Kierkegaard does not say explicitly, but reading between the lines I think we can conclude that he would say, "God." So God draws the circle of morality, and all human beings are morally bound to stay within it. This would include Abraham even though the explicit and foundational description of morality in the Ten Commandments had not yet been given to humanity in his day. In fact, we can go all the way back to Cain's murder of his brother Abel in Genesis 4 to see that every person in history has been obligated to live morally before God (not to mention Genesis 2 and 3 where God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and they disobeyed this moral command).

But according to Kierkegaard, faith, and particularly Abraham's faith, is a "paradox" because when someone is a person of faith, it makes him/her "higher than the universal." This person is therefore above morality—even outside the circle. But if we have said that evil is outside the circle, then is faith evil? Not at all. Because there are two outsides the circle. There is evil, and there is faith. Evil outside the circle makes sense. It is the opposite of good. But faith outside the circle does not make sense. It is absurd, a paradox, where the individual "stands in absolute relation to the absolute." The person of faith stands before God without universal morality linking him/her to God. He/she stands before God with the possibility that through faith God may call the person to act outside the circle of morality. But to do so would not be evil. It would be good and right as an act of faith.

How does Kierkegaard prove this of Abraham? First, by claiming that Abraham had a moral obligation to protect Isaac from harm just as any father has a moral obligation to love his son and guard him from suffering—even from himself, the father, from his murdering his son! Second, by showing that the only way to remain inside the circle of morality and kill one's child is to be a "tragic hero." Kierkegaard cites three examples of this.

1. Agamemnon, who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia when the goddess Artemis was angry with him and the Greek navy was becalmed on its way to Troy to rescue Helen after she had been kidnapped by Paris. Iphigenia's death was because of "heaven's disfavour" and "for the well-being of the whole" of Greece. But God was not angry with Abraham, and Isaac's death would have been for the bad-being (my word) of the whole of the Jews because God had stated explicitly in Genesis 21 that only through Isaac could Abraham have descendants who would eventually comprise the nation of Israel.

2. Jephthah, who killed his daughter after he bound himself to the promise that he would take the life of whatever came through his doorway first to greet him if God would cause the Israelites to succeed in battle against the Ammonites (Judges 11). But Abraham had made no such promise and was not involved in any kind of military campaign for the good of his people.

3. Brutus, or Lucius Junius Brutus, who was the founder of the Roman Republic in 509 B.C. and who executed his own son for failing in his military duty--a crime against the State. But Abraham's son had committed no crime. He had not failed in his duty to the State and thus did not deserve to be executed.

All the above three were "tragic heroes" who "stay[ed] within the ethical," within the circle of God-given, universal morality. "With Abraham it [wa]s different." His was a "purely private undertaking" that was not for the good of the whole. Thus his was a test, a test of whether he was willing to trust and obey God even if God ordered him to do the "unethical." But how would Abraham explain this? How do we explain this? Neither he nor we can do so because "he cannot speak"—and neither can we. The State, human government, would condemn Abraham for attempted murder, and well it should—because Abraham could never explain himself adequately in a court of law to justify his behavior! Remember, "he cannot speak." However, God declares Abraham good, right, and justified, and well He should—because Abraham is a man of faith! Thus, the paradox. It's absurd but true.

Kierkegaard goes on to so that Abraham's situation was like the Virgin Mary who became impregnated by God in a culture that would stone those who were caught in sexual immorality. How could Mary prove that God had miraculously made her pregnant and that she had not slept with Joseph, or some other man? She couldn't. Thus, her "fear, distress, and paradox" that are usually left out of the story. Or what about "Christ" who "in the promised land...walked among the others" and "was God" as Kierkegaard claims the Christian scriptures indicate. Would it not be "terrifying to sit down and eat with him?" But thus the "paradox" here that God came into existence in time (to borrow from Kierkegaard's book, Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'—"The thesis that God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox."). How absurd! But what if it is true? Then it requires faith.

But back to Abraham. He "was a murderer every minute or we stay with the paradox." Thus, "Abraham's story contains a teleological suspension of the ethical." In addition, "a tragic hero can become a human being by his own strength, but not the knight of faith" like Abraham. We all can empathize and admire the tragic heroes—Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus. We can even give them advice as they struggle to fulfill their moral responsibilities. But with Abraham we are speechless. We cannot even understand him—because faith ventures into the absurd and paradoxical; it is "passion"—passion to obey God in the midst of the absurd and paradoxical.

Problema II – Is There An Absolute Duty To God?

Is there an absolute duty to God?. The answer is a definite yes, and the way that Kierkegaard gets at this answer is by comparing ethics (morality) with faith. Ethics, he says on page 96, are universal and God-given. Everyone has a moral obligation to act ethically according to God's moral commandments. Therefore "all duty is ultimately duty to God." Nevertheless, while this ethical duty should point us to God, it is not by ethics per se or pursuing morality that we come into proper relationship with God. This is true because a relationship with God is defined more by what is going on *inside* of us than by what we do on the *outside*. "Faith" occurs on the inside while "ethics" occur on the outside. This means that we can do "ethics" even if we have no genuine "faith." Thus we might look like the most moral people in the world but lack an authentic relationship with God.

"Faith's paradox is this, that the single individual is higher than [ethics]." Also, "faith...is this paradox, that interiority is higher than exteriority" and "that the single individual...determines his relation to [morality] through his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute through his relation to [ethics]" (pages 97,98). The absolute is God. Therefore, we should define our relationship to morality by our relationship with God, not the other way around. This means that interior faith is a higher calling than exterior morality so that in the case of Abraham, if God commands him to sacrifice his son which is contrary to the moral commandment, "You shall not murder," then Abraham has an "absolute duty" to do so. His duty to faith is greater than his duty to ethics. Therefore, "the knight of faith renounces [ethics] in order to be the particular," i.e., an individual who is willing to abandon universal morality if God were so to command (pg. 103). Thus also, the knight of faith "stands in absolute relation to the absolute," God, and in relative relation to the relative, ethics—"or else faith has never existed" and "Abraham is done for" (pg. 108).

But here is the catch. While "the knight of faith renounces [ethics]," he does not *completely* abandon the moral commandments of God. In other words, Abraham is still required to love Isaac while he is fulfilling his absolute duty through faith of sacrificing him. As Kierkegaard puts it on page 98, when we come to realize the supremacy of our absolute duty to God through faith, "[i]t doesn't follow...that [the ethical] is to be done away. Only that it gets a quite different expression, the paradoxical expression, so that, e.g., love of God can cause the knight of faith to give his love of his neighbor *the opposite expression to that which is his duty ethically speaking*" (emphasis mine). Kierkegaard further states this point on page 101, "The absolute duty can...lead to what ethics forbid, but it can no means make the knight of faith have done with loving... The moment [Abraham] is ready to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical expression for what he does is this: he hates Isaac [because he is ready to murder Isaac which is typically considered a hateful act]. But if he actually hates Isaac, he can be certain that God does not require this [i.e., hate] of him; for Cain and Abraham are not the same. Isaac he must love with all his soul. When God asks for Isaac, Abraham must if possible love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him; for it is indeed this love of Isaac that in its paradoxical opposition to his love of God makes his act a sacrifice." It is not that Abraham loves Isaac less. He just loves him differently. Therefore, our absolute duty to God in the midst of faith does not make us completely reject morality. Instead, it might make us change the way we express morality towards another human being at a particular moment. In fact, it might make us express morality *in the exact opposite manner* in which we would normally think morality ought to be expressed. Thus, the *paradox*, i.e., apparent contradiction, of faith.

I think that the bottom line that we need to wrap our minds around is this. As important as morality is because God is the very source of morality and moral commandments that we are obligated to obey, it is not our moral *actions* that define an authentic relationship with God. It is the *inward passion of faith* that no one else can see and that we must hold in solitude before God if necessary. We all want the approval of other people. The way to get people's approval is to do what everyone else understands is the right thing to do—ethics. However, faith is higher than ethics and may make us look "insane" (pg. 103) to others (as Abraham does to anyone who would want to challenge him on God's speaking to him the way He did in Genesis 22, "Abraham, you must crazy to think that I would believe that God commanded you to sacrifice your son because that is totally contrary to God's own moral commandments!"). But what Kierkegaard is arguing is that

the moral commandment to love his son is still there for Abraham. It's just that God is requiring that he demonstrate his love for Isaac in an opposite way than what is universally held. This raises Abraham, the individual, above the rest of the world, the universal, and shows that Abraham has true faith.

Problema III – Was It Ethically Defensible of Abraham to Conceal His Purpose From Sarah, From Eleazar, From Isaac?

This is the longest and most intricate of chapters in this book. Kierkegaard asks an important question in the title of the chapter. He begins to answer the question by stating once again that “the ethical is...the universal” and as such “is in turn disclosed” (pg. 109), meaning that, if Abraham is justified in remaining silent, it is not because he was being ethical. A few pages later Kierkegaard continues his explanation by citing five examples that illustrate two important categories of life—the aesthetic and the ethical. The aesthetic category is concerned with individual experience and feelings. The ethical is concerned with universal rules and obeying those rules.

The first of the examples Kierkegaard uses to illustrate these categories is an invention of his. The last four are from literature (Aristotle in his *Politics*, the legend of *Agnete and the Mermaid*, the story of Tobias and Sarah in the *Book of Tobit*, and the legend of *Faust*). Each example considers the question of whether a character in the story ought to divulge certain important information to others or not. Kierkegaard's conclusion is twofold. If the story illustrates the aesthetic realm, then a person can find justification for either remaining silent or speaking, depending upon the situation, while, if the story contains strictly the ethical category, then there is no choice but to speak because “ethics...demands disclosure” (pg. 114).

After many pages of explanation of the above examples, Kierkegaard finally turns his attention once again to Abraham. Abraham is a “paradox” (pg. 137). He is “neither a tragic hero” who exists in the category of ethics, “nor an aesthetic hero” who falls in that category (pg. 137). In fact, Abraham “cannot speak,” and “therein lies the distress and anguish” because he could not make himself “understood” (pg. 137).

We might like to think that when “Isaac asks Abraham where the lamb is of the burnt offering,” and “Abraham said: My son, God will provide himself a lamb...”, that this was because Abraham knew already that God would stop him from killing Isaac and substitute a real lamb instead. But this is to deprive Abraham of the “test” of his faith (Gen. 22:1) and of the “distress and anguish” of the test. What kind of test of my faith is one where I already know the exact outcome of the story and where the outcome is painless? Thus, “Abraham makes two movements. He makes the infinite movement of resignation and gives up his claim to Isaac, something no one can understand because it is a private undertaking. But then he further makes, and at every moment is making, the movement of faith. *This is his comfort*. For he says, ‘Nevertheless it won't happen, or if it does the Lord will give me a new Isaac on the strength of the absurd’ (pg. 139, emphasis mine). Abraham's faith is in God's ability either to keep him from killing Isaac or to raise Isaac from the dead so that Isaac is a “new Isaac” who goes on to fulfill God's promise of bringing about the nation of the Jews through himself and his progeny (cf. Genesis 21:12 and Hebrews 11:17-19).

All this places Abraham and true, biblical faith in a completely separate category from either aesthetics or ethics. In Concluding Unscientific Postscript to ‘Philosophical Fragments’ Kierkegaard calls this third category the “religious” where someone has an

absolute duty to God. While “religious” people can gather in a community and worship God together, this category is nevertheless that of the individual and not the universal. Kierkegaard states this somewhat enigmatically and yet profoundly, “He who loves God has no need of tears, needs no admiration, and forgets his suffering in love, indeed forgets so completely that afterwards not the least hint of his pain would remain were God himself not to remember it; for God sees in secret and knows the distress and counts the tears and forgets nothing” (pgs. 143-144). In other words, in my pain as a human being of faith, if God is the only one who knows and understands my pain, then this must be ok with me. This is true faith. “So either there is a paradox, that the single individual as the particular stands in absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham is done for” (pg. 144), and we can convict him of murder.

Epilogue

In this last chapter Kierkegaard makes an incredibly important point. This is the fact that no generation of people who are attempting to acquire true, biblical faith should rely on any previous generation for working out their faith. This flies in the face of all the religions that I am aware of who claim the Hebrew (Jewish) scriptures and/or Greek (Christian) scriptures as their source(s) of truth. While it is valuable to listen to and learn from previous Bible students and the traditional beliefs that have been derived from their work, it does not lead to true faith to rely on them. In other words, each generation themselves need to pound out through their life experiences their beliefs and their faith from the scriptures alone. Kierkegaard puts it this way, “Whatever one generation learns from another, it can never learn from a predecessor the genuinely human factor. In this respect every generation begins afresh, has no task other than that of any previous generation, and comes no further, provided it didn’t shirk its task and deceive itself” (pg. 145).

Then the question is, what is “the genuinely human factor”? Kierkegaard says it is “passion,” and “the highest passion in a human being is faith” (pg. 145). Plus, “this task” of acquiring truth faith without relying on previous generations “is always enough for a lifetime” (pg. 146). It is all-consuming. Even if we never encounter the teachings and experiences of previous generations of people of faith, we would still have plenty to do to become people of faith ourselves through our own study of the scriptures and our own life experiences. This is a radical concept and one that has turned many people off to Kierkegaard. For their tastes it is too individualistic and places the individual above his or her tradition instead of submitting to the tradition. But, for Kierkegaard, it is what makes faith dynamic and not static. “[A]nyone who comes to faith...won’t remain at a standstill there” (pg. 146) if he takes on the task of working out his faith and not relying on his tradition. This according to Kierkegaard is to emulate Abraham, the paragon of faith.