

The Impossibility of Faith

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A Pseudo-Academic Introduction to Søren Kierkegaard

Imagine having to teach the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac to a fourth-grade Sunday-School class. How would you deal with this passage and its ramifications? The story is well known, but not often discussed in any great detail. In Genesis 22, God "tests" Abraham, saying to him:

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

Most of us have read the story, and know how it will turn out: an angel will interfere at the last moment, applaud Abraham for his faith, and then provide a ram for a sacrifice. God's message seems to be: "Just testing you Abe, sorry about all the anguish I caused you—just needed to make sure you were for real."

Søren Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, uses the story of Abraham as a springboard for a discussion of faith; he considers the ingredients of Abraham's faith, and what the story means to our understanding of Abraham as the ultimate example of what it means to "have faith". Kierkegaard considers Abraham in his work *Fear and Trembling*, where he adopts a pseudonym, "Johannes de Silentio". Kierkegaard uses pseudonyms to allow him two unique opportunities: to attack his reading public behind false names, and explore different perspectives on the same subject using two or more pseudonyms. This is the case with the topic of faith: Kierkegaard uses his pseudonyms to attack Copenhagen's intelligentsia and their comfortable attitude towards faith, and to provide two distinct approaches to the question of faith. *Fear and Trembling* features Johannes de Silentio as "unbeliever", confused by Abraham's faith. Five years later, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard will revisit the question of faith in another light, this time under the pseudonym "Anti-Climacus". By comparing the two different perspectives on faith that Kierkegaard provides, we see his larger project with more clarity.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de Silentio introduces a comparison between Socrates and Abraham in order to illustrate the complexity of Abraham's faith. Johannes' reaction to Abraham is an expression of both praise and bewilderment; he loves Abraham's boldness, but admits that thinking of Abraham's action is "annihilating." Johannes de Silentio praises Abraham's ability to believe the ridiculous: Abraham both obeys God's command and *at the same time* believes God's promise that through Isaac he will become the father of a nation. This tension is the absurdity of Abraham's faith—what causes Johannes to exclaim: "Abraham I cannot understand; in a way all I can learn from him is to be amazed."

Johannes also speaks of the anguish of the Abraham story—an anguish that accentuates his own incomprehension of Abraham's deed. He recognizes that the story's agony is typically minimized in an attempt to make the story easier to swallow—as words like "trial" and "test" are used to describe Abraham's actions. Johannes does no such thing; he wants to make the story more difficult, not less, claiming: "if faith cannot make it into a holy deed to murder one's own son, then let the judgment fall on Abraham as on anyone else." Johannes is struck by the greatness of Abraham's deed, but he is also appalled by it. He is paralyzed by the paradox of Abraham's faith, and admits that it is an act he cannot comprehend or achieve.

One person Johannes does understand is Socrates—and the distinction between the Greek philosopher and the Hebrew patriarch is discussed throughout *Fear and Trembling*. Johannes makes the comparison between Socrates' "infinite resignation" and Abraham's faith. Resignation is "the last step before faith", an individual's renunciation of life, through philosophy in the case of Socrates. Socrates' resignation comes without faith; he spends the hours before his death proving the immortality of the soul. Resignation is a purely philosophical move. Socrates dies believing that his death is not an end, but only a release. For Socrates, loss *is* gain; by giving up himself he hopes to reach a higher sta-

te of understanding. Socrates' last words before his death are: "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; please pay it—do not neglect it." Asclepius is the Greek god of healing, and a cock is the traditional gratitude for a cure; Socrates believes that his death is in fact a healing, for he is leaving the prison of his earthly body for something better beyond this life.

In comparing these words of Socrates with the words of Abraham, we see the crucial difference between Abraham and Socrates. When Isaac asks him "where is the lamb for the offering?" Abraham replies: "My son, God will provide a lamb for the burnt offering." This statement highlights the glaring absurdity of Abraham's belief: Abraham *knows* that God has told him to sacrifice Isaac, and he *intends* to obey, yet he *still believes* God's promise that Isaac will live. This is what Johannes calls "believing on the strength of the absurd": Abraham believes that he will both lose *and* gain. Abraham has already made the movement of infinite resignation by giving up his claim to Isaac, "but then comes the marvel, he makes one more movement, more wonderful than anything else, for he says: 'I nevertheless believe that I shall get [him], namely on the strength of the absurd.'" This is the step that is completely beyond Johannes' comprehension. Johannes finds his lack of understanding frightening, for he realizes the importance of this last "movement" that Abraham makes, and is worried by the fact that it is a movement he cannot make—that it is in fact *impossible* to make.

This movement of faith is tricky to portray, since it is by nature absurd—a paradox. One way Johannes describes Abraham's deed is by naming it a "teleological suspension of the ethical." By this he means that Abraham's deed is one that goes *beyond* ethics, in a way that Socrates' does not. Whereas Socrates made a sacrifice for the universal (the greater good), Abraham makes a sacrifice that "determines his relation to the universal through his relation to the absolute." The universal, in this case, is an ethical category, but the absolute is religious. At issue here is the way the *particular* (i.e. Abraham) relates to the absolute (the final word/God). Socrates determines his relation to the absolute *through* the universal, submitting his particularity to the universal, believing that the greater good and the final word are the same. Abraham, however, relates directly to the absolute as a particular, "suspending" the ethical. The ethical, in the case of Abraham, is simply his relation to Isaac: that a father should love his son. Abraham, by attempting to kill Isaac because God has commanded it, is doing the right thing absolutely (because God is the final word in this case) even though he is obviously breaking the ethical rule; his *absolute* duty to God is higher than his relational duty to Isaac. This is what Kierkegaard means by faith "making it a holy deed to murder one's own son."

Søren Kierkegaard's mission, the point behind all these philosophical puzzles and pseudonyms, is to make faith extraordinarily difficult, to put all the weight of the "movement" of faith on the individual. In Copenhagen at the time Kierkegaard was writing, most of the reading public considered themselves both Christians and Hegelian philosophers. The audience Kierkegaard is writing to is an intelligentsia who think they have faith "figured out" and want to "go beyond" faith—something they feel comes easily to them—and progress to proving God's existence using philosophical theorems. This disgusts Kierkegaard, for he wants to make matters of faith *really* hard—to make them virtually impossible. Throughout *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard, speaking from "Johannes *de Silentio*," time and again stresses the fact that faith is "absurd", something that we cannot understand or even really achieve—in short, that faith is not a philosophical maneuver. He knows that faith is a necessary step for being a Christian—but he himself has trouble doing it. The movement of infinite resignation is a relatively easy one for a theologian like Kierkegaard, for it involves philosophy and calculation, both of which are things he feels he is good at. But what Abraham did was not philosophy; "he believed on the strength of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since been suspended." Abraham's task is one that appears to us as superhuman, as impossible; we cannot comprehend him, we can only stand, with Kierkegaard, in amazement. But if faith is impossible, how are we to achieve it?

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard, this time writing under the pseudonym of "Anti-Climacus", approaches the question of faith from a different angle—through the lens of *despair*. *The Sickness unto Death* is mainly a discussion of the concept of despair, and

the different stages of despair. The two most crucial categories of despair are: "the despair that it is ignorant of being in despair" and "the despair which is conscious of being in despair." Anti-Climacus places the majority of Copenhagen in the first category, and would place Johannes *de Silentio* in the second. Johannes is in a place where he understands that this "movement of faith" is a movement he cannot make, but still longs to be able to.

In *Sickness*, despair is nearly synonymous with *sin*. Anti-Climacus defines "sin" not as acts we perform, "movements" we make, but as a persistent state of despair "before God." In this picture, sin marks the fact that we as humans are separated from God. Sin places a gap between God and us. In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes' discussion of faith as a leap across this gap shows us that he is aware of the gap, and also of the fact that he cannot bridge it—for it is impossible. It is impossible, Anti-Climacus explains, because of our sin, our state of lack "before God". Sin is our undoing, that which makes the leap impossible for Johannes. But what Johannes does not understand, according to Anti-Climacus, is that faith *is* possibility, believing that "for God everything is possible". It seems that Johannes has overlooked the key aspect of Abraham's faith; Abraham, as well as every other true believer, "possesses the ever-sure antidote to despair: possibility; since for God everything is possible at every moment. This is the health of faith which resolves all contradictions." Both Abraham and Anti-Climacus understand that the antidote to sin and despair is to *believe in the possibility of the absurd*: that for God all things are possible.

This does not by any means make things easy, which is certainly not Kierkegaard's intention. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard uses the unbelieving Johannes *de Silentio* to show how difficult it is to grasp the leap of faith intellectually. Then in *The Sickness unto Death*, he shows how Johannes' conscious despair—the awareness of his lack—is the first step of true faith. Johannes has made it this far: he has reached the "decisive moment...when man is brought to his utmost extremity, where in human terms there is no possibility." By showing us Johannes' awareness of his lack, Kierkegaard is hoping that Copenhagen (and us, his readers) will come to a similar awareness. Faith is not an intellectual maneuver: it is a belief in the absurd. Kierkegaard, by making the movement of faith "impossible", introduces us to the antidote: the belief that for God everything is possible. Faith believes that the impossible is in fact possible.

Works Cited:

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