

Morpheus and the Leap of Faith



Søren Kierkegaard

1813-1855



Morpheus

Dates Unknown

I cannot make the movement of faith, I cannot shut my eyes and plunge confidently into the absurd.... Be it a duty or whatever, I cannot make the final movement, the paradoxical movement of faith, although there is nothing I wish more. -- *Johannes de silentio* (Kierkegaard's pseudonym)

You're going to have to trust me. -- Morpheus (Matrix Reloaded)

Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling

Unlike W.K. Clifford, who defines faith as "belief based upon insufficient evidence," Kierkegaard regards faith as something closer to *a belief that one holds irrespective of the evidence*. The person who truly has faith will maintain their belief even if all evidence speaks against it. For this reason, Kierkegaard regards faith as a very difficult thing to attain. "Faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off." (p.82)

Kierkegaard uses the story of Abraham from Genesis 22 as the focus of his reflections about faith in *Fear and Trembling*.

Genesis 22: And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him...Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of . . .

Kierkegaard begins *Fear and Trembling* as follows:

There was once a man; he had learned as a child that beautiful tale of how God tried Abraham, how he withstood the test, kept his faith and for the second time received a son against every expectation. When he became older he read the same story with even greater admiration, for life had divided what had been united in the child's pious simplicity. The older he became the more often his thoughts turned to that tale, his enthusiasm became stronger, and yet less and less could he understand it. Finally, it put everything else out of his mind; his soul had but one wish, actually to see Abraham, and one longing, to have been witness to those events.



"Akeida" by John Bradford

Why is it called *Fear and Trembling*?

The title seems to refer to the kinds of feelings of fear that the story of Abraham brings to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard seems to be puzzled that most people seem to understand the story and are not disturbed by it. He does not understand it, and is very disturbed/fearful of it. Here are a couple of scary thoughts:

1. If the story of Abraham is to be valued (and Kierkegaard thinks it is), then there is a sense in which we are supposed to be like Abraham. But what a frightening thing to contemplate! Could I kill a loved one if God demanded it? Could I actually be like Abraham, and have the kind of unquestioning faith that he did?

Kierkegaard writes:

"Who gave strength to Abraham's arm, who kept his right arm raised so that it did not fall helplessly down! Anyone who saw this would be paralyzed. Who gave strength to Abraham's soul, so that his eye did not become too clouded to see either Isaac or the ram! Anyone who saw this would become blind.(p.55)

2. A second very frightening thought is that perhaps our salvation lies in having the kind of faith that Abraham had. If so, the realization that I may not have that unquestioning faith is itself terrifying. And how can I be certain that I have that kind of faith until I am truly tested.

Who among you has this kind of faith?



Morpheus: The Knight of Faith

Excerpt from ***Like a Splinter in Your Mind Chapter. 11:***

On Kierkegaard's account, true faith involves a "double movement," **a movement of infinite resignation** and **a movement of faith**. In order to become what Kierkegaard calls a "knight of infinite resignation," one must be prepared to give up the very thing that one hopes to keep. We see this in Abraham as he is fully prepared to give up Isaac, who for him was all the joy of this world. Similarly, we see this in Morpheus, the moment that the Nebuchadnezzar is destroyed. In despair he calls out: "I have dreamed a dream, but now that dream is gone from me." But to become a true "knight of faith" one cannot stop at there. Johannes de silentio tells us that such immense resignation, while a component of faith, is insufficient on its own. What makes men like Morpheus and Abraham truly amazing is that they simultaneously make a *movement of faith*. At the very moment that they give up their dreams and every hope for this world, they continue to expect the impossible:

All along he had faith, he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while still he was willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded...and it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of him should in the next instant withdraw the demand.

On this picture, Abraham believed "on the strength of the absurd." His faith transcended logic, for he believed two contradictory propositions:

(a) Isaac is lost to him.

Which he believes in his movement of infinite resignation.

(b) Isaac is not lost to him.

Which he simultaneously believes in his movement of faith.

We see the same double-movement in Morpheus. After Neo's story of how it was all just another system of control, and then the destruction of the Nebuchadnezzar, he resigns himself to the loss, saying: "***I have dreamed a dream. But now that dream has gone from me.***" But despite its utter absurdity, he continues to believe in the prophecy. In the opening scenes of *Revolutions* we see him continue to search the Matrix for Neo, despite the fact that he is not even jacked in. So Morpheus also simultaneously believed two contradictory propositions:

(a) The prophecy has failed.

Neo's trip to The Source did not end the war as it was supposed to.

(b) The prophecy will come to pass.

Despite all signs to the contrary, his dream will be fulfilled.

Of course it is irrational to believe both of these propositions simultaneously. And it is not that the knight of faith somehow *forgets* about his resignation through an act of self-deception. Rather, Kierkegaard tells us that the knight of faith believes ***on the strength of the absurd.***

The quoted passages from *Fear and Trembling* are from the Penguin Classics edition, translated by Alastair Hannay copyright 1985.