

The Struggles of Faith: A Defense of Kierkegaard

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The feeling of absurdity can strike at any moment. Caught up in his monotonous routine, man hardly has time to pause and reflect on his existence. However, one day the “why” question unexpectedly arises and man’s mechanical life takes on new meaning by becoming devoid of meaning. The world abruptly loses its familiarity and assumes a strange denseness. Suddenly, the once comprehensible world becomes foreign and irreducible. In the midst of this unintelligible universe, man acknowledges his insatiable desire for unity and clarity. This conflict between the perpetual nostalgia in the human heart and the unreasonable silence of the universe is what Camus calls the absurd. Yet for Camus, absurdity in itself is uninteresting. He simply labels it a truism. Just as man is mortal, existence is absurd. These are in themselves, obvious facts. What Camus is interested in, are the *consequences* that can be deduced from this realization.

The instant man recognizes absurdity “it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all.”¹ In order to remain true to the concept of the absurd, which in itself, is a decision one *chooses* to make, one must adapt his behavior to ensure the absurd condition is always maintained. This means that the tension within man—his appetite for clarity and the inability of the world to satiate that appetite—can never be reconciled. Any attempt to suppress human nostalgia or make sense of the world, ultimately ends up negating the absurd. Camus describes a whole family of existential philosophers who acknowledge a universe full of contradiction and who simultaneously highlight man’s yearning for clarity. Their specific realization in itself is not important to Camus; he is solely interested in knowing the *conclusions* of their discovery. Camus ultimately deduces that, although they start out at the same point, noting that absurdity lies in the divorce between man and his world, all the existential philosophers suggest escape and instead, “find reason to hope in what impoverishes them.”² It is this hope, which is religious in all these thinkers, that Camus begins to analyze.

This paper will specifically answer to Camus’ main critique of Kierkegaard; namely, Kierkegaard’s ability to “save himself from that desperate nostalgia” and to “escape the antimony of the human condition” by adopting “the great cry of hope.”³ I will argue that a deeper analysis of Kierkegaard’s philosophy will show Kierkegaard remaining faithful to the tension between human nostalgia and the incomprehensible

world. Although Camus asserts Kierkegaard “takes the leap,”⁴ instead, Kierkegaard seems to remain “on that dizzying crest”⁵ through his struggle with objective uncertainty. There is no reconciliation of the divorce between man and his world; anguish is not calmed “in the familiar setting of the eternal.”⁶ The absurd condition in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is not suppressed, but lived with; not escaped, but constantly confronted. To efficiently outline this defense of Kierkegaard, this paper will be divided into two parts. The first part will emphasize the battle of the subjective individual and the second part will compare this battle, as primarily seen in the story of Abraham, to the struggles of Camus’ absurd hero, Sisyphus. Although Camus sees Kierkegaard as escaping the absurdity of existence, the struggle is never eluded, the paradox never solved.

In his essay on truth and subjectivity, Kierkegaard sharply differentiates between objective and subjective reflection. His main criticism of objective truth, which focuses on truth as an object, is that it falsely assumes that the existing individual, who is located in time, can comprehend an eternal truth. At its very best, objective truth is an approximation or a hypothesis. By focusing on truth as an object the knower relates himself to, the individual is made into something accidental; existence turns into something indifferent. On the other hand, viewed subjectively, truth becomes “appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity.”⁷ Subjective truth never forgets that the existing individual is constantly in the process of becoming. Thus, it is solely concerned with whether the individual’s *relation* is in truth. This, for Kierkegaard, is the only form of essential knowing since it accentuates what it means to be an existing human. Unlike objective truth, which claims to cancel the paradox, subjective truth will always be a paradox precisely because of its relation to the existing individual who is not ever complete, but always becoming.

Yet for Camus, Kierkegaard finds comfort and hope in the paradox by allotting the attributes of the absurd to God.⁸ Thus, the paradox only *appears* to be a paradox to humans, but for God the paradox vanishes. According to Camus, therein lies the comfort for Kierkegaard. Two retaliating points can be made concerning this notion. First, Kierkegaard sharply separates himself from those who state that from the point of the view of God, who is eternal and divine, there is no paradox. He retorts that he would never be able to make such a statement since he is only “a poor existing human being

who neither eternally nor divinely, nor theocentrically is able to observe the eternal but must be content with existing.”⁹ Thus, even the basic comfort in knowing that God experiences eternal truth is absent. Secondly, Camus does not take into account Kierkegaard’s stress on the struggle with existence. Due to the fact that objectively there can only be uncertainty, truth consists of a “daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty”¹⁰ with the passion of inwardness.

Although passion motivates the inward relationship of subjectivity, Kierkegaard states “it is nevertheless a striving.”¹¹ Kierkegaard gives the example of an individual who observes nature to find God. Objectively speaking, he finds omnipotence and wisdom, yet he also finds things that trouble and disturb him. Thus, the end result is objective uncertainty. Holding fast to objective uncertainty, which will always be a paradox, requires the “strenuousness of faith.”¹² As understanding pulls the individual in one direction, toward trying to explain the paradox, the inwardness of faith struggles to grasp the paradox and to exist in this contradiction. Since all man’s efforts are put into preserving the paradox, truly no effort remains to *explain* the paradox. Kierkegaard’s metaphor for faith consists not in a ship sitting calmly in fair weather, but rather, a ship that has sprung a leak and requires man to put all his efforts into keeping the ship afloat, all the while never seeking the harbor as a refuge.¹³ Living in faith is agreeing to exist in contradiction; it is agreeing to constantly reaffirm the battle of faith, not merely to acquire additional faith, but to maintain the faith that one has. Abiding in faith is agreeing to endure uncertainty despite the desire for objectivity. Only eternity can provide certainty; existence “has to be satisfied with a struggling certainty.”¹⁴

Kierkegaard further stresses this struggle through his discussion on speculative thought. The more difficult the struggle with the paradox becomes, “the more one is tempted to ruse along the easy road of speculative thought, away from the terrors and decisions, to fame, honor, a life of ease, etc.”¹⁵ Speculative thought seeks to explain the paradox and in doing so, cancels the paradox. One can immediately see the temptation of which Kierkegaard speaks of. Imagine if an absolute paradox was suddenly transformed into a relative paradox that could be comprehended if one was simply intelligent enough. Thus, speculative thought, while asserting the paradox, simultaneously asserts that it can explain the paradox. Yet an explanation, which should seek to remove the obscurity surrounding the paradox, cannot at the same time remove

the paradox! This type of explanation is “no explanation of the paradox but rather an explanation that there is no paradox.”¹⁶ In explaining the paradox by removing the paradox, the speculative thinker additionally removes the existing individual from existence. Furthermore, by reducing the irrational world to human terms and making it comprehensible, speculative thought has additionally negated the absurd. As if the battle with faith in itself was not hard enough, now the lure of speculative thought, seemingly attractive in its promise to explain the paradox, further afflicts the individual.

Thus, speculative thought can be seen as directly opposing Kierkegaard's philosophy, which embraces the paradox and the struggle. Kierkegaard notes the speculative thinker's comfort in being “exempted from martyrdom....the martyrdom of believing against the understanding, the mortal danger of lying out on 70,000 fathoms of water.”¹⁷ By reducing the paradox to a rhetorical expression that only the intelligent are capable of deciphering, speculative thinkers annul the struggle that fights to keep the paradox. Instead of staking all his understanding on grasping the paradox, the speculative thinker has reserved part of his understanding for explaining the paradox. Yet for the subjective individual, the battle of faith is a constant reaffirming of the paradox. Every moment of his life the subjective individual must rediscover the paradox and grasp it firmly with passion of inwardness. If by faith one hopes to eventually achieve assurance, then one must also be content with sacrificing inwardness and passion, for as probability increases, faith decreases. It is impossible to *believe* what one claims to almost *know*. Additionally, it is impossible to gain this assurance and comfort in the context of a temporal existence. Thus, it seems unthinkable that the speculative thinker can assert that “the paradox is the paradox only to a certain degree.”¹⁸ How can he affirm the paradox and then simultaneously annul it? Is he “an existing person only to a certain degree”?¹⁹ Kierkegaard concludes that the battle of faith is a unending struggle for the existing individual. As faith grips tighter around the paradox, the only certainty that increases is the certainty of uncertainty. Thus, the greater the faith, the greater the struggle; the greater the struggle, the greater the inwardness; the greater the inwardness, the greater the accent on existence.

This struggle is also seen in Camus' absurd hero, Sisyphus. Assigned as task that epitomizes futility and hopelessness, Sisyphus nonetheless exerts his entire being into ceaselessly rolling a rock up a hill. He exemplifies the absurd hero by denying hope and

simultaneously maintaining his passion for life. According to Camus, it is only the position of revolt that can give value to life. The revolt consists of “a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity.”²⁰ It is the acknowledgement of a crushing fate that lacks both hope and resignation. Sisyphus, filled with scorn and defiance, resists the gods and continues to exert his freedom. It is this tension between the hopeless futility of mundane tasks and the griping passion of day to day revolt that inflames the absurd hero. Additionally, the absurd hero is also tempted by religion and prophets who seek to reconcile his world. Through the constant reassertion of freedom, the absurd hero finds strength to reject unjustifiable claims and asserts that “he doesn’t fully understand, that [the claims are] not obvious.”²¹ The only certainty for Camus is the presence of the irrational world and the insatiable longing of the human heart. Likewise, the only certainty for Kierkegaard, who is also tempted by speculative thought, is the presence of uncertainty. Despite the fact that both these thinkers reaffirm the paradox, Camus insists that hope fuels Kierkegaard’s subjective individual. The expression of faith is seen as satisfying, and thus canceling, human longing. While faith is highly esteemed by Kierkegaard, it is nonetheless shown as an unending battle that lacks respite and comfort. This is best exemplified in Kierkegaard’s example of Abraham.

Although told countless times by multiple generations, Abraham’s story has been misunderstood by all who omit from it the struggles of faith. In retelling the story, Kierkegaard seeks to “describe the pain of the ordeal...to suck all the anxiety and distress and torment out of a father’s suffering in order to describe what Abraham suffered, although under it all he had faith.”²² As stated above, Kierkegaard sees faith as an inward passion that grapples with the paradox. In the case of Abraham, the paradox is that the single individual is ranked higher than the universal. Just as speculative thought was a temptation for the subjective individual, the ethical, or the universal moral code, is a temptation for the religious individual. The comfort and security of resting within the ethical is exemplified through the example of the tragic hero, Agamemnon. Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia in order to appease the gods and save his nation. His ordeal is now over and he finds consolation in the fact that his action is understood by all. Yet Abraham has transgressed the ethical in such a way that an outside observer is incapable of understanding him. Thus, he lacks the reassurance that

legitimizes his actions. He constantly thinks to himself, "What if I am mistaken?" There is always the possibility that the individual has misunderstood the deity, but no, "we do not want to know anything about the anxiety, the distress, the paradox."²³ One assumes, such as Camus supposes, that faith vanquishes the anxiety and relieves the torment. Yet the most terrifying aspect of possessing faith is the incredible isolation; the inability to be understood by anyone.

Unlike the tragic hero, Abraham is unable to take joy in the security of the universal. He is unable to find rest in knowing that everyone would approve his deed. Instead, he walks "a lonesome trail, steep and narrow; he knows it is dreadful to be born solitary outside of the universal, to walk without meeting a single traveler."²⁴ How refreshing it would be to share one's sorrows with another individual! Yet faith precisely entails this paradox of being unable to make oneself understood to anyone. There can be no aid or solace from the outside. An observer looking in on the situation would simply assume Abraham mad. This is what Kierkegaard speaks about when he speaks of "the martyrdom of misunderstanding,"²⁵ the dreadfulness of walking alone and never hearing the reassurance of another human voice. Had Abraham instead sacrificed Isaac to the universal, for example, in order to save a nation, he would not know the pain of solitude. Yet since he lacks this comfort, Abraham is left in utter isolation. Whereas the tragic hero has the consolation that he can share his sorrows with those around him, "groanings that cannot be uttered are torturous."²⁶ Abraham must carry his dreadful responsibility alone.

In comparing Abraham to Sisyphus, who would ever declare Abraham's struggle to be inferior? Has "the dazzling god of Kierkegaard"²⁷ effectively removed the tension from Abraham's situation? All evidence points to the contrary and one can clearly see how far removed the eternal appears to the struggling individual. Abraham is too consumed with the paradox to find reassurance in the eternal; *he is too busy existing*. While Camus claims that Kierkegaard's faith in God is enough to "negate that anguish,"²⁸ Kierkegaard argues that the existing individual can never find consolation in the unknowable eternal; all "eternal truths" appear as uncertainties. Thus, this notion of Kierkegaard being "swallowed up in his God"²⁹ belies a solace that is nonexistent. Unlike the tragic hero, Abraham can never rest in the certitude of the universal; he is constantly battling objective uncertainty. Where is the comfort in knowing that one's

most significant deed could have very well been a mistake? The existing individual can never take refuge in the eternal. Even if he assumes it to exist, it has no power to eliminate the paradoxes associated with existence.

For Camus, to remain loyal to the absurd, one must above all “preserve the very thing that crushes [oneself].”³⁰ This means continually reaffirming the confrontation between man and his universe. Anything that seeks to escape this condition betrays the absurd. Thus, the conflict must be continually revived through constant awareness, otherwise one can easily fall back into the mechanical life or, in despair, choose to find reassurance in the eternal or deliverance in suicide. Man is demanded “to live solely with what he knows” and “to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is.”³¹ In essence, Camus appears to be speaking in terms of objective uncertainty so central to Kierkegaard’s philosophy. An existing individual, always in the process of becoming, “can understand only in human terms.”³² Any claim that seeks to remove the existing individual from existence, is an invalid claim that neither Camus nor Kierkegaard would accept. The sum result of existence will always be objective uncertainty. Camus states, “I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it.”³³ Kierkegaard can do nothing more than agree with Camus. He claims to be nothing more than “a poor existing spirit”³⁴ struggling with a paradox he knows can never be solved.

Although Kierkegaard and Camus share similar thoughts on human existence, Camus seeks to undermine this partnership by instead opposing himself to Kierkegaard. In “The Myth of Sisyphus” Camus charges Kierkegaard with escaping the absurd and finding refuge in God. Yet throughout this paper it has been shown that Kierkegaard’s philosophy is filled with an unceasing struggle that lacks the reassurance of the eternal. The uncertainties in life will always remain as such so long as the individual is existing. Similarly, Camus’ absurd hero struggles with the same type of tension- the divorce between man and his universe, - which he knows can never be reconciled. Therefore, both Sisyphus and Abraham are left alone at the foot of their respective mountains. Rejecting all claims that seek to lure them with empty promises of objective truth and reassurance, they slowly tread their lonesome path. Placed in the extremity of existence, they know nothing other than passion and the paradox.

Endnotes

¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 22.

² Ibid., 32.

³ Ibid., 38-39.

⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁶ Ibid., 48-49.

⁷ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript To Philosophical Fragments*, 192.

⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 39.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript To Philosophical Fragments*, 212.

¹⁰ Ibid., 203.

¹¹ Ibid., 203.

¹² Ibid., 210.

¹³ Ibid., 225.

¹⁴ Ibid., 226.

¹⁵ Ibid., 208.

¹⁶ Ibid., 219.

¹⁷ Ibid., 232.

¹⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹⁹ Ibid., 219.

²⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 54.

²¹ Ibid., 53.

²² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 53.

²³ Ibid., 63.

²⁴ Ibid., 76.

²⁵ Ibid., 80.

²⁶ Ibid., 114.

²⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 47.

²⁸ Ibid., 49.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Ibid., 31.

³¹ Ibid., 53.

³² Ibid., 51.

³³ Ibid., 51.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript To Philosophical Fragments*, 189.

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