

The Substance of Faith

It seems that the word “faith” is used in many ways today. Some use it to refer to religious tradition in general. Others use it to refer to some kind of mystic spirituality. Neither truly reveal the nature of faith. By looking at Kierkegaard, a picture of faith and its nature will emerge as one being “infinitely and personally and passionately interested on behalf of his own eternal happiness for his relationship to” subjective truth (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 23). We shall see that faith is something deeply embedded within one's passions and desires; something that cannot easily be quantified and something that is incorrectly labeled as one's religiosity. It is much more than these phenomenal aspects can grasp.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard names three character roles: the aesthetic hero, the tragic hero, and the Knight of Faith. Someone attempting an “objective” view of these three is quite likely to miss the distinction between them or even label some as “wrong” because of what these three entail. These roles should be seen in the sense of how a role is to be played, as if Kierkegaard is a stage director and everyone is an actor, akin to Nietzsche's concepts in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Each role is played when a character is placed between the universal/ethical and the absolute/particular. For Kierkegaard, the role of the Knight of Faith is the most elusive to capture; very few people can perform in that role. The best example of this Knight of Faith is the story of Abraham having to sacrifice his son at Mount Moriah.

One of Kierkegaard's most profound findings is that one must suspend the universal law of conduct in order to achieve the role of the Knight of Faith. This opposition faith has to the ethical is a theme that runs throughout Kierkegaard's critique of what he called "Christendom." Faith is more than following rules because the object of faith is well beyond these; faith is the paradox "that the particular is higher than the universal" (*F&T*, 46).

The Last Pick

The aesthetic hero is more like a comical mishap than a hero in any dramatic sense. The aesthetic hero is put into his situation by chance or accident. It is the old fool mistaken as the secret agent (e.g., Bill Murray in *The Man Who Knew Too Little*). The first distinction between the character roles is that the aesthetic hero is able to question others about his position. He is in no position that requires secrecy. One example of this is Agamemnon, who swears to the gods that if his ship can safely make it back to Greece from Troy, he will sacrifice the first person he sees. When his ship arrives back in Greece safely, the first person to meet him is his daughter. He is caught between the universal ethical (sacrifice his daughter to fulfill his oath) and the particular (transgress his oath and let his daughter live). He is able to speak to others (his wife, his captains, the priests) before he finds that he must sacrifice his daughter in order to maintain the universal. The ethical must be upheld and there is nobody above it.

The tragic hero is the primary character for contrast with the Knight of

Faith and can be seen in the figure of Brutus. The major distinction between this character and the Knight of Faith is that he never violates the ethical; he is fixed within it. The ethical always wins over the tragic hero. Brutus must rebel against Julius Caesar because it is his duty towards the universal ethical and not because it is a duty toward the absolute. Even though he is close friends to Julius, maintaining the universal is more important than that friendship. Everything is subsumed under the concept of the universal. The status quo overpowers the different. This is the same concept Kant has in mind when he formulates the Categorical Imperative (in a nutshell, act as if each action were a universal law for all). What makes this role tragic is that he must make a sacrifice in order to maintain the universal ethic; Brutus must betray and kill his close friend to the point where it is even against his own desire. Because of this, one cannot see Abraham as a tragic hero because Abraham consciously embraces violating the ethical by going to the mountain in order to sacrifice his son. We are left with two choices before the end of Abraham's story: "either Abraham was every minute a murderer, or we are confronted by a paradox which is higher than all mediation" (*F&T*, 56).

Ethics and Passion

The primary thrust of this teleological suspension of the ethical was the notion of an absolute duty toward God in that this absolute duty has the authority to suspend ordinary ethics. This suspension, if it is possible, would

have the superficial look of a tragedy but would more closely resemble a passion. A tragedy remains planted in the ethical; this duty supersedes it. Kierkegaard contends that the ethical comes from one's relation to the absolute (i.e. God) and not vice versa. If this is the case, then there should be such a thing as an absolute duty towards God that overrides the ethical. Kierkegaard also suggests that "[i]f such is not the case, then faith has no proper place in existence, then faith is a temptation, and Abraham is lost, since he gave into it" (*F&T*, 60). For Kierkegaard, faith must be something wholly other from the ethical. Faith is the unintelligible paradox, infinitely personal and subjective. Confusing it with the immediate (as early phenomenology was doing at the time) is a travesty. We can see in this formulation of the Knight of Faith a radical rejection of the virtue-happiness link, something that began in Kant with his categorical imperative (i.e., one should do something because it one's duty not because it may lead to happiness). Kierkegaard goes one step beyond Kant in that one should even pass the ethical duty if one encounters the absolute. Unlike the tragic hero who renounces himself for the universal, the Knight of Faith "renounces the universal in order to become the individual" (*F&T*, 65). The Knight of Faith stands alone and absolutely different from mankind; he cannot be repeated in ceremony, ritual, or practice.

For the Knight of Faith, submitting to the universal ethic is glorious because it is understandable; it also brings security. Yet the Knight of Faith

foregoes that for duty towards God, something not understandable and against the ethical. Duty towards God makes the ethical a mere temptation for the Knight of Faith:

Thus Abraham could surely have wished now and then that the task were to love Isaac as becomes a father, in a way intelligible to all, memorable throughout all ages; he could wish that the task were to sacrifice Isaac for the universal, that he might incite the fathers to illustrious deeds — and he is almost terrified by the thought that for him such wishes are only temptations and must be dealt with as such, for he knows that it is a solitary path he treads and that he accomplishes nothing for the universal but only himself is tried and examined. (F&T, 66)

None of Abraham's actions were done for the state, his family, or the ethical. Would he not be considered mad? After 130 years, Abraham finally gets a son and then goes to sacrifice the boy! Abraham doesn't explain why he must do these things, only that it is a trial. His actions never become available for public scrutiny. He is unable to intelligibly describe his situation because he is placed within the paradox of faith. How can that be explained? How can he explain to his wife Sarah that he is going to sacrifice her firstborn son and that God commanded him to do it? Having accepted the paradox, Abraham does not speak to Sarah, Eleazar, or to Isaac—three ethical authorities; this is because “the ethical had for Abraham no higher

expression than the family life” (*F&T*, 100). The Knight of Faith already understands the ethical and knows that his actions will transgress it.

The Knight of Faith is alone and without support of the ethical. To one situated in the ethical, the Knight of Faith is transgressing the very thing God laid down. There is no rationale that can explain God, the creator of the ethical, is commanding someone to violate that. The Knight of Faith cannot make his position any more understandable if he were to speak for days on end uninterrupted; he is unable to find relief in the ethical. This is where the Knight of Faith can experience the movements into faith: the first being that of giving up the ethical; the second being that of the absurd. Abraham finds comfort in the absurd by saying “[b]ut yet this will not come to pass, or, if it does come to pass, then the Lord will give me a new Isaac” (*F&T*, 102). The Knight of Faith, when seen from the perspective of the ethical, is a fool. He transgresses the ethical for some duty to something higher than the universal, is unintelligible, and finds comfort in the very thing leading him to transgress the ethical. No one can understand this Knight of Faith.

Paradoxical Faith

It is at the end of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (do I need to give a spoiler alert to a 20-year-old film?) where we can start to see the character of the Knight of Faith in a more modern setting. Our two main characters are Kirk, the human led by emotion and instinct, and Spock, the half-Vulcan who feels (if that is the right word) that everything must be done logically. In the

last dialog between Kirk and Spock, Spock questions Kirk why he came back to rescue him. For Spock, the logical (and ethical) thing to do was to let him die as a sacrifice because Spock willingly sacrificed himself in order to save everyone else. Kirk's response to Spock's question is where we discover the abandoning of the ethical for something more important: "Because the needs of the one...outweigh the needs of the many." There was something that Kirk found to be more important than the universal, more than the status quo. Sarek (Spock's father) tells Kirk, at one point in the movie, the illogical nature of his actions: "This cost you your ship, your son...". Kirk's immediate response, though, is that of a higher calling: "If I hadn't tried, it would've cost me my soul." This is the very point of the Knight of Faith: submitting to the ethical is the equivalent of losing the thing that makes one human.

For the Knight of Faith, his actions against the universal may be harmful to his livelihood, even his life, but to not do it would cost something even greater than those. The Knight of Faith is apprehended by this call from the unknown; the directive comes from an Absolute that is greater than the universal. This Absolute is infinitely particular and specific. The person possessed by this "higher calling" is absolutely different from all others. He is unable to speak about his calling because it is unintelligible to the universal. It is illogical, incoherent, and crazy.