

Faith and An Alternative Telos Beyond Christianity -Research Analysis of Søren Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling

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Abstract: Being a godly man in a time of exploration and expansion of human intellect, Søren Kierkegaard put his knowledge in various fields to use by applying them to the critical reflection of the Christian community. He devoted himself to renew Christian faith, dedicated to the search for a modern application of Christianity. Such an approach is of great significance in his work *Fear and Trembling*, in which he elaborated on Binding of Isaac, a biblical story about Abraham and his son, and discussed his take on the structure of existence, on top of which is faith. Written in terms of the Bible, the justification of Kierkegaard's argument is heavily dependent on religion. There could be a way to interpret Christianity and the role of faith in a more contemporary fashion, same as how Kierkegaard attempted to make it relevant to the world he lived in.

Keywords: Ethics, function, religion, subjectivity

1. Introduction

Albert Einstein once said that “The only difference between genius and insanity is that genius has its limits.” A similar distinction is made in Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*—only in this case, we are concerned with the difference between thinking of Abraham as the father of faith and as an attempted murderer. In his works, Kierkegaard establishes a structure of existence consisting of three stages: the aesthetic that pursues only basic desires, the ethical that values moral righteousness, and the religious. For Kierkegaard, the religious is the highest stage, the very telos or purpose of existence, and this is identified with the Christian religion. Taking on a more contemporary approach which could potentially apply this structure to the current world, I would like to offer an alternative telos for existence that demands faith while remaining unattached to any sort of religion. People often find consolation and a strong purpose for life in their relation to the divine, but when one looks inside of oneself instead of reaching out to the external world, it is not impossible to produce a motivation that requires a faithful effort as well. I'd like to point out that the desire to reach inner peace can serve the same function that faith in God plays in Kierkegaard's account.

2. Common interpretations and Kierkegaard's version of faith

So what is faith in God for Kierkegaard? For countless believers, it is in the words of a preacher and the scripture that their faith in Christianity lies. Contrary to what is commonly believed, Kierkegaard equates a personal trust in a higher existence that transcends both the particular and the universal to

genuine faith instead of blind obedience to the church's biddings and dogma. A religion's common beliefs usually display themselves in the forms of sacred texts and idols. Figures worshipped by most tend to be interpreted in a fixed fashion—being less open to any kind of discussion or doubt. Many believe that faith is attainable with only blind surface commitments like recitations and adherence to the scripture. According to Kierkegaard, such a plain subject-to-object relationship which lacks distinctness does not contribute to faith at all. It exhibits nothing about the divinity that should be inciting the individual to perform actions besides fundamental needs and wants. If anything, the canonical way of belief only encourages certain individuals to disguise their desires with pretentious and even selfish acts.

On other interpretations, moral excellence is considered an essential part of faith in the Bible, and it is a form of faith which a lot of people believe in as well. “And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue...” (2 Peter 1:5). Such a quality of doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong is regarded as being morally excellent. While acknowledging that personal desires exist in every man, Kierkegaard certainly agrees that any religion—in particular, Christianity—usually guides its believers to work for the good of the community rather than individual benefits. The ethical task is to be carried out at all times by all people, since for every action performed ethically, a man's aesthetics is overcome, which (according to Kierkegaard) is putting the universal before the particular. But the story of Abraham's story suggests that sometimes God's will can contravene the ethical. What God demands is the key to obtain or show one's faith. But if morality's existence is also indispensable, a contradiction once again emerges between God's demand of Abraham to sacrifice his son and the absolute immorality of such a demand.

Kierkegaard's own view is that faith is more than a matter of dogmatic beliefs or social morality; a subject-to-subject relationship should be regarded as a vital component of faith. It is more about what an actual believer shares with the divine. Because faith requires a personal connection for the particular to communicate with a higher power, the divine is able to “speak” directly to the individual in order to ignite the faith and follow-up actions of a true believer. Unlike those tragic heroes presented in books who went to great lengths for their ethical purposes, those with true faith like Abraham set their telos entirely above ethics. The nuances of the ethical no longer applies to Abraham as it does to the heroes. Abraham's basic ethics are no different from that of the tragic heroes to which Kierkegaard compares him. Family bonds are what hold them to the ethical ground. However, instead of simply trying to achieve a higher expression of ethics, Abraham decided to suspend his familial ties and reach for an even higher telos in terms of faith. By putting such a private connection to God above his fatherly duty to Isaac, Abraham seems to be prioritizing something particular, unique to him, over the universal duties he shares with all other human beings. But it is important to differentiate someone who cares more for himself than the general well-being from someone whose faith pushes him beyond the ethics of men.

3. Distinctiveness of faith

But how do we differentiate an act of faith from an act of self-interest? Without the context of receiving a message from God, Abraham's intent to kill his son would not be justified. Tragic heroes like Agamemnon, on the other hand, allow the general public to make sense of what they do, because their actions rest on a higher gradation of the ethical. By prioritizing the interest of the state (the universal) over their own (the particular), the reason for the heroes' suspension of the lower gradation of the ethical becomes conceivable. Unfortunately, for the likes of Abraham, such a clarification cannot be easily made. Due to a missing piece of information, which, in Abraham's case, is God's message for him to sacrifice Isaac, there is insufficient evidence for any third party to believe that Abraham was indeed acting on a God-given mission rather than a personal endeavor.

Kierkegaard offers a phrase of great importance but great obscurity to help with understanding the paradox that seems to have trapped Abraham. He says that “If as an explanation they [the men of faith] added, ‘This we believe by virtue of the absurd,’ who would understand them better? For whom would not easily understand that it was absurd, but who would understand that one could then believe it?” This “by virtue of the absurd” is what kept Abraham from making himself clear to the rest of the world. Tragic heroes can justify their faith in God with ethics. Doing the ethical is equivalent to serving the divinity for most. But in Abraham’s case he did not have the liberty or ability to reveal his private connection to God. Though such a connection is not one to be made note of since at the second of revelation, Abraham would be forced to confront the ethical he had in fact transgressed in order to prove his faith. Once he takes a step back and returns to the conversation of moral justification, his faith will be tested by the ethics which is the only thing known to the public besides the aesthetics; Abraham will then no longer be able to show proof of his faith due to the seemingly unjustifiable or absurd nature of his reason to act. Any alternative telos of faith besides the traditional religious one would need to be marked by the same paradox. It presents a possibility that if one takes a step back and suspend all levels of Kierkegaard’s structure of existence, he can be released from the paradox as well as the temptations altogether.

4. Examination of faith

A crucial characteristic of faith is the involvement of a trial, which Kierkegaard clearly differentiates from a mere temptation. The idea of a trial is easily understood once it is put in a theological situation where the voice of God demands something seemingly immoral from a man. Kierkegaard says that “Whenever the individual after he has entered the universal feels an impulse to assert himself as the particular, he is in temptation (*Anfechtung*), and he can labor himself out of this only by penitently abandoning himself as the particular in the universal.” Abraham’s path of showing his faith to God as requested of him is, in essence, “a trial” to see if such faith is able to drive him to overcome ethics. However, the road to transgression of the ethical is not as easy as it seems. Too much attention has been paid to the outcome of a man’s action. It would seem that the general public of the time—as well as people who look back on those actions in later times—only care about whether the action achieves a satisfactory result. In this case, one can safely argue that the process of carrying out an act of faith should matter more than the outcome. The reason the proof of faith is so hard to gather is precisely because of the constant struggle, not the glorious finale. The absurdity of a faithful action encourages one to look for the differences between aesthetics and faith—which favors the particular over the universal within oneself. The objective truth, which applies to everyone and can be regarded as a form of the universal, presents itself in the exact same fashion regardless of time and space.

Common people’s judgments on an action are based on such objectivity. The internal movements of faith and what one intends to do about them are invisible to them. The majority do not suffer the conflict between the common perception of ethics and the private divine mission. Many so-called “believers” lack a personal connection to God and therefore have neither the ability nor motivation to perform the necessary transgression over the ethical. Abraham, however, acted on his faith in God despite being unable to shake his attachment to ethics. The anxiety he experiences through his efforts in resisting the temptation of behaving in accordance to ethics is what sets him apart from someone who simply acts on personal desires. The emotional unrest—derived from the process of Abraham rising from the particular to the universal and then turning back to the opposite of the universal—shapes his subjective experience as a faithful individual and allows him to stay true to his mission from within. Though not apparent on the outside, such “fear and trembling” of knowingly suspending the ethical in order to reach for the proof of faith in God provides the audience with a clear distinction between Abraham and many less obvious egoists.

5. The alternate

Up to this point, an alternative telos for faith besides religion would seem quite out of reach, considering all the obstacles in the way of proving true faith. Therefore, a method tailoring a destination to each individual's own faith could be a more adaptable way to go about it. "Faith is a miracle, and yet no man is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and faith is a passion." Perhaps people's daily living experiences could be a suitable place to start with. At first glance, everyday life seems to be far from the extraordinary experiences that religions seem to offer. It is often utterly forgotten that many people require spiritual assistance because of their harsh lives. The exact fear and trembling incited by the entanglement between ethics and faith could be behind every decision one makes in life. It is neither a short-term desire nor a conviction of doing the right thing that helps a person persevere but something that makes one look past the present into the foreseeable future and proceed to work towards that goal. Similar to the virtue of the absurd, no other man can ever figure out other's passion besides their own. It is determined by each person's one and only path of life. Such uniqueness can be compared to Abraham's personal connection to God but not wholly. In this case, God is no one else but the man himself. The necessary condition of realizing a passion is to reach a state of inner peace. Instead of trying to suspend the ethical for faith, the daily struggles of a man and his private passions need to be balanced. Only by finishing the necessary tasks while still maintaining the will to work towards our passions can we truly put our faith into the best use.

Shifting the focus from something as grand as theology to the less appealing day-to-day trifles might appear to be a poor choice of telos for life. The features of these trivial matters do seem to meet the criteria, nonetheless. Making peace with oneself requires no communication with anyone else, so the connection is as private as they come. The suspension of the entire structure of existence doesn't render the trials obsolete, but the only one left would be the individual trying not to think of any other desire or purpose at all. Having faith in oneself is all that is demanded for this alternative telos. Being willing and able to follow one's heart despite all the interference from the outside is no less of a difficult task than what Abraham went through to prove his faith in God. Only in this alternative case, God is replaced by the desire to achieve internal peace. When someone attempts to look for something immaterial that is possibly more than what he can comprehend, it is usually something in the present material world that he could no longer deal with. However, no spiritual pursuit should be based on a weak self-acknowledgement especially when a person is yet to understand and accept himself and where he's at in life. Recognizing the significance of an individual's own existence naturally puts the people on top of divinity, thus prioritizing the particular over the universal in the same way as Abraham in order to seek out where a man's true passion lies beyond both the individual's subjective life experience and the objective truth of the society.

6. Conclusions

Hard as it was for Kierkegaard to shed light on Christianity's long-lasting fixed impression on people, it is even more difficult to convince people that they are in charge of their own narrative. People believe in the credibility of objectivity, which is why they turn to a third party for support in face of obstacles in life. It is often ignored that despite all the help from the outside, it is always the people themselves who make a decision and act on it at the end of the day. It is reasonable to look for an external solution temporarily. However, God's words, whether written in scripture like the Bible or personally delivered like in Abraham's case, simply offer a guidance or something to rely on. While the final destination of each individual varies, the processes require one thing in common: faith in oneself. If anything, an external support only encourages a person to believe himself, since all the tasks are carried out by that person himself and himself alone. Passion as an alternative serves

instincts more than it does for reasons. A leap of faith is more often than not consisted of feelings and emotions instead of cool heads and discretion. Faith in its essence is not to be rationalized, but should be regarded as what fuels people to transgress everything else and act on their own will independently.

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