

## Faith: The Staying Power

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I aim to present a wide-ranging and sustained examination of Kierkegaard's thought especially with reference to his oeuvre—*Fear and Trembling*. Paradox and absurd in its semantic content would exclude reason. Kierkegaard's point is that there is no real way to clasp the absurd—the religious mystery—except through the leap of faith which is a feasible alternative to the trajectory of ethical stage which is an established principle and universally lauded norm. Kierkegaard's vision is to give an enlightened view of the leap of faith which is an alternative to the limit of the ethical stage. I would investigate Kierkegaard's account of faith and its constitutive elements which are grounded in the soul, in the personality, and in the spirituality of the single individual. Furthermore, I would argue that for Kierkegaard, religious understanding—faith—is not different from self-realization, spiritual cultivation; God-realization.

**Keywords:** Faith, Ethical, Religious, Paradox, Absurd **INTRODUCTION:** Kierkegaard saw that modern thought by overlooking subjectivity had really disregarded existence. Existence cannot be grasped clearly from the outside by thought; it can be grasped only from within by personal experiences. Feelings like boredom, melancholy, anxiety, despair, guilt etc. cannot be thought or measured. They are primarily to be experienced in personal life in order to be grasped as they really are. According to Kierkegaard, by grasping existence one can understand thought but by thought alone one cannot understand existence. For Kierkegaard, faith is central to man's personal identity. In the Hegelian System as viewed by Kierkegaard, a person's identity was governed by society, system, institutions and historical morality.

**Faith : Commitment Towards the Absurd and the Uncertain**

According to the Dane, the Hegelian system blunts the individuality, personality, inwardness, passion, spirit, and subjectivity, as it "perfect them as copies."<sup>1</sup> In Kierkegaard's view what is needed is not crass reflection but passion and subjectivity, and "faith is the highest passion in a human being."<sup>2</sup>

Faith is an intensely subjective experience, involving objective uncertainty, and risk which is so vital to it. "Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty."<sup>3</sup> The faith which Kierkegaard stresses is the religious faith. He chose Abraham as the paradigm of faith. For Kierkegaard a life of faith and suffering is more inward and deeper than a life of reason. According to him, man must be unconditionally committed to God. An unconditional commitment and surrender to God are the hallmark of inwardness and eternal happiness. Faith in God leads to happiness. Faith cannot be supported by objective proof. "If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith."<sup>4</sup> Reasoning supported by faith cannot lead to faith because faith "is a free act; an expression of will."<sup>5</sup> Faith in the absurd is not comprehensible to reason. It is a qualitative leap for which there are no rational grounds. It involves a

commitment to the absurd, the paradoxical and the uncertain. This commitment is possible through leap which is a free choice to enter into a faithful relationship with God, in which man stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. All ethical laws are suspended in order to preserve this relationship. The ethical *teleos* becomes relative in order to accomplish the highest teleology of absolute duty to God. The highest teleology according to Kierkegaard is not understood intellectually, but is seized by faith for “faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.”<sup>6</sup> In Kierkegaard’s view faith involves a paradox in which “interiority is higher than exteriority.”<sup>7</sup> It implies that the single individual is higher than the universal and the relation between the single individual and God is of absolute trust and risk. For “without risk faith is impossibility.”<sup>8</sup>

The faithful relationship between the single individual and God requires an unconditional commitment towards God. It is a transcendence of the ethical sphere. The ethical realm is a realm of values and universal norms which is teleologically suspended in order to submit unconditionally to the absurd. The teleological suspension only reveals the depth of commitment of the person to God, as was the case with Abraham. The suspension of the ethical only shows that man has total and absolute duty towards God. The duty towards God calls for obedience based on faith in the absurd. “There is an absolute duty to God; for in this tie of obligation the individual relates himself absolutely, as the single individual, to the absolute. When people now say that it is a duty to love God, it is in a sense quite different; for if this duty is absolute the ethical is reduced to the relative.”<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard calls Abraham the man of faith because Abraham’s commitment to God was absolute and total. Faith in God at times may call an individual to raise himself above the universal and himself to God. To reiterate Kierkegaard’s position, “faith is just this paradox that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal.”<sup>10</sup>

Abraham did not shrink from the absurd even for a moment. He believed in the impossibility, in the absurd. On his way to the mountain where Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac according to God’s command, Abraham did not waver from his faith and trust in God even for a second. His faith in God was unshakeable. There was tension and dread for he was unable to justify to others the act of sacrificing his own son. Abraham could not justify his action to others, for justification can be given only in terms of the universal but as the man of faith he suspended the universal, the ethical and hence he was not able to justify his act of faith to others. He acted as a single individual having a personal and absolute relation to God. On the one hand he was attracted by the ethical which was wheedling him to disobey God’s command; on the other hand, he was attracted by the Divine Will whose obedience would imply disobedience to the ethical, the universal. This was the source of tension and dread for Abraham which he was unable to clarify to others.

Abraham was not able to explain himself to others because he believed in the absurd. The tragic hero can justify his acts at the ethical plane for he believes in the universal which is intelligible to reason but the man of faith believes in the absurd and is unintelligible to others. Expressing cogently the source of dread, Kierkegaard says, “the tragic hero renounces himself in order to express the universal; the knight of faith renounces the universal in order to be the particular.”<sup>11</sup> The tragic hero believes in the universal and not in God. He relies on his own human strength, on his own capabilities. The tragic hero’s act of choice and decision is guarded by the universal. He is guided by reason but Abraham is guided by faith in God. Abraham’s action reveals his commitment to God. Abraham acts by the power of the absurd. He is not able to clarify his acts to others, he cannot talk, for “he speaks a divine tongue”<sup>12</sup>

Abraham is speechless and this silence is full of dread. “Abraham is silent — but he cannot speak, therein lies the distress and anguish.”<sup>13</sup> This inability to explain one’s stand, one’s position to others in a way that it becomes intelligible to others, fills a person with anxiety that is dread. It fills the person with distress as was the case with Abraham. The man of faith is under perpetual distress and tension, as there is a danger of reverting to the universal.

Kierkegaard says, “the knight of faith is kept awake, for he is under constant trial and can turn back in repentance to the universal at any moment, and this possibility can just as well be a temptation as the truth.”<sup>14</sup> Abraham’s dread or anguish comprised in this danger; the threat of reverting to universal and giving up God, it was this danger of reverting to the universal which filled Abraham with dread and intensified his sufferings. To choose the ethical back when one has already chosen God, to choose back the relatively superior when one has already chosen the absolutely superior, made Abraham panic. However, it was through faith that the threat of reverting to the universal was overcome, it was through faith in God that the project of Abraham became possible. Abraham resigned to the will of God in faith; the infinite movement of resignation is possible only through freedom of spirit. Abraham is not a cruel person, but a man of faith who is willing to give God back the best he had; that is his own son Isaac. Abraham is the paradigm case of devotional immediacy. Abraham felt God’s living presence in his own life. God must not be regarded in terms of rational cognition for to treat God in terms of rational category would be destroy that peculiar sense of devotional immediacy. God cannot be seized by objectivity. It’s by faith or subjectivity that an individual relates himself to God. One cannot relate to God on the basis of evidences, and proofs. One cannot believe in God on the basis of evidences and proofs, if one lacks faith in God. Quite contrary to Kierkegaard’s position, William Kingdon Clifford have argued in *The Ethics of Belief* that one must not believe in absence of sufficient evidences. Nevertheless, William James in *The Will to Believe* argues against the impoverished reasoning of W.K.Clifford. James says that where the evidence for important propositions is not clear, one must live by faith or cease to act at all. James holds that at times practical considerations force a person to make a leap of faith. Belief in James’s view is a ‘live, momentous, and optional hypothesis’. He says that one must will to believe what the evidence is not able to support. Similarly, Blaise Pascal; a deeply religious person; in his work *Pensees* {*Thoughts*} holds that the appropriate mode of apprehending God is by faith. Struck by the frail hopes of reason, Pascal proclaimed that the heart has reasons of its own which the mind knows nothing of. But the real clincher in matter of faith came from the Dane who says, “Faith awaits not proofs, but ventures.”<sup>15</sup>

### The Trial of Faith and the Paradox of Faith

The centerpiece of *Fear and Trembling* is the trial of faith which is been experienced by Abraham. The subtitle of *Fear and Trembling* is *Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de silentio*, which speaks of its literary magnitude. However, its philosophical import goes much beyond its literary style and presentation. Kierkegaard’s primary concern in this work is to tackle the theme of faith. The trial of faith experienced by Abraham is the crux of *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard conveys the fact that faith has no place in a system of thought. Thought cannot enter the boundaries of faith therefore a person who has faith in God cannot convey what faith is from a scientific or rational point of view. Faith is more elevated than reason therefore an individual is not able to make himself intelligible to others about his experiences which are faith-oriented. An individual is not able to explain his experience of the Divine. The experience of the Divine is deeply enriching that a person whose frame of mind is tuned to the

frequency of faith finds himself dumb to narrate his faith-experience. Indeed, the pseudonym of *Fear and Trembling* is Johannes de silentio, John of Silence. Kierkegaard employs the story of Abraham and Isaac to illustrate his most embracing message regarding human existence. And the message is simply that God-experience is unique. Experience of the Divine is ineffable and *sui-generis*.

The experience of the Divine is a holy experience which is wholly subjective and has an aura of tremendous spirituality, therefore this experience of the Spirit cannot be grasped by reason. Spiritual experience of an individual cannot be fathomed by reason. Reason cannot fathom faith. Faith cannot be seized by fancy of reason. Faith is inaccessible to reason, precisely for the fact that reason has its narrow limit whereas faith is infinite. Faith in Kierkegaard's view is the paradox of existence.

"For faith is just this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal."<sup>16</sup> By faith and in faith one can demonstrate one's love for God. "He who loves God without faith reflects on himself, while the person who loves God reflects on God."<sup>17</sup> A person who is concerned about his spiritual growth would not be concerned solely about seeking material assets while praying to God. Acquisition of material goods would not cross his mind in his God-relationship. Kierkegaard holds that spirituality implies life rooted in God. There is manifestation of spirit when there is involvement of God in a person's life. A person who has faith does not deflect God rather he reflects God. Kierkegaard is emphasizing the point that faith does not imply attainment of happiness in the after-life rather he is saying that faith leads to happiness in this world itself. "Abraham had faith. His faith was not that he should be happy sometime in the hereafter but that he should find blessed happiness here in this world."<sup>18</sup>

The movement of faith is not possible by reason but by the strength of the absurd, because the object of faith is absurd. By absurd Kierkegaard does not mean something that is logical impossible but what he means by absurd is something that is humanly impossible. Faith is passion for Kierkegaard which implies that an individual should not have half-hearted approach towards spirituality. Man must enter into God-relation with infinite passion. Self-growth is possible when one moves with energy. Self-growth requires action, it comprises doing. Kierkegaard is encouraging people to lead an active life of spirit. Faith in God would certainly bring joy in one's existence, just as it brought in the life of Abraham when he received back his own son Isaac. "Every movement of infinity occurs with passion, and no reflection can bring about a movement. That's the perpetual leap in life which explains the movement, while mediation is chimera which in Hegel is supposed to explain everything and besides is the only thing he has never tried to explain."<sup>19</sup> By the leap of faith that is by virtue of the absurd, everything is possible even what seems humanly impossible. "Everything is possible spiritually speaking, but in the finite world there is much that is not possible."<sup>20</sup>

Kierkegaard maintains that man all alone by himself may achieve only what is humanly possible, but if he has to repose faith in God, he would accomplish even that which is humanly impossible. "In faith I receive everything, exactly in the way it is said that one whose faith is like a mustard seed can move mountains."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, one must have the passion, and enthusiasm of the spirit, to make the leap of faith. It is by this leap that the inward transformation of the self becomes effectual.

Since an individual is endowed with the freedom and with the ability to choose, the individual must go for the leap of the faith by the strength of the absurd. Spiritual growth and



development of the human personality takes effect by passion, by leap and not by mediation or rational compromises. Man discovers subjectivity in faith which reveals his inner self, his inner freedom, his inner spirit. Faith enables an individual to find his true self.

#### PROBLEMA I and II

In *problema I* of *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard deliberates on the subject of teleological suspension of the ethical. Kierkegaard gives the analogy of Abraham and Isaac as it is a compact and critical analogy and by referring to this analogy Kierkegaard is only driving home a much deeper and significant point of absolute commitment towards the Divine, which one faces in one's life. The ethical in Kierkegaard's view is the universal but the individual is particular, and higher than the universal. "Abraham represents faith, and that faith finds its proper expression in him whose life is not only the most paradoxical conceivable, but so paradoxical that it simply cannot be thought. He acts on the strength of the absurd; for it is precisely the absurd that as the single individual, he is higher than the universal."<sup>22</sup> At times a higher *teleos* or purpose of life may require a person to go beyond the universal by suspending the ethical. Human predicament faced by an individual is highly paradoxical that universal norms seem to offer no help. Amidst critical situations of life an individual has as many reasons to do something inasmuch as he has equal reasons to not to do. In such testing situations, the individual has to make a faithful decision. The ethical or the universal is of no help in such crucial time. Decisions, in such absurd moments, emerge by the sheer power of faith in God. Absurdity is grasped by faith and not reason. Faith leads to the knowledge of God. Faith makes a person subjective and not abstract reflection. Faith is a kind of subjectivity, a truth for Kierkegaard. It is by leading a life of faith, a life of spirit, a life of active submission to God's will that one is able to attain self-realization. Obligations, duties and each action have to be an expression of God's will.

The drift of *Problema II* is, there is an absolute duty to God, and the individual relates himself absolutely to God therefore the ethical is reduced to relative. "In the story of Abraham, we find just such a paradox. Ethically speaking his relation to Isaac is this that the father is to love the son. The ethical relationship is reduced to the relative as against the absolute relation to God."<sup>23</sup>

In fact, subjectivity emerges through faith, which is "the highest passion in a human being."<sup>24</sup>

Conclusion: Probably, a fresh take on the problem has been offered, starting from the premise that faith is a fundamental value in Kierkegaardian vision because it constitutes edification of the spirit. The ethical sphere of life is a globally pervasive phenomenon. But the religious stage is worthy of note, because at this stage the knight of faith relates with God. He recognizes his potential to aspire for the divine, for the spiritual and leaps into the faith mainstream. For authentic life, intellectual analysis of beliefs and doctrines is not necessary. He holds in high esteem self-transformation and realization of God, as a key to lived existence.

#### NOTES

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