Fear and Trembling – Soren Kierkegaard (Johannes *de Silentio*)

Preface

In this section, Johannes talks about the “fear and trembling” that one experiences when one embarks on the path of faith, a task which takes an entire lifetime to traverse. He also castigates his contemporaries (specifically mentioning philosophy and “the System” – a clear reference to Hegel) who imagine that they can take as their starting point what previous generations laboured for an entire lifetime to accomplish. He outlines two endeavours where this is prevalent; doubt and faith. “In those old days” veteran warriors laboured to preserve their doubt “rejecting the certainties of sense and thought” and walk the path of faith over their entire lifetimes. Nowadays, people believe they can acquire these things in a matter of days or weeks… and then go beyond them, with “worldly wisdom” and “petty calculation” that have no need of faith or the eternal or God.

He closes the section advising the reader that his account has nothing to do with Hegel’s System.

Attunement

In this section, Johannes recounts four alternative accounts of how Abraham’s sacrifice might have played out. In one, Abraham shouts at Isaac telling him that he wants to kill him so his son might think him a monster rather than lose faith in God. In the second, he sacrifices a ram instead and lives out a joyless life. In the third, it’s unclear whether Abraham sacrifices Isaac or whether his hand is stayed by God but it doesn’t matter. The point is that Abraham cannot understand the trial given to him by God and begs God’s forgiveness for having been prepared to sacrifice Isaac. In the final telling, Abraham refrains from killing his son but Isaac sees his father’s intention and loses his faith in God.

Speech in Praise of Abraham

Here, Johannes extols Abraham’s faith. Abraham had faith that he would be a father even though, year after year, his wife failed to get pregnant. He also kept his faith that he would be allowed to be a good father even while committing what would appear to be the most monstrous act for any father to perform.

Hoping for the best, one becomes old because one will be disappointed by life and preparing for the worst one becomes old prematurely. Only the faithful remain eternally young.

Problemata

Preamble from the Heart

In this section, Johannes discusses in detail why Abraham deserves to be praised for his faith and exactly what this faith consists of.

God has demanded of Abraham that he sacrifice his most beloved son, Isaac. Abraham complies. But the important thing here is that he complies, all the while having faith that he would receive Isaac back, not in the hereafter, but in this life. Abraham achieves this through a double movement which sees him receive Isaac back in such a way that this second time he is able to enjoy his son even more than he could prior to the movement.

The first movement is that of *infinite resignation* and Johannes calls the people who make this movement, “knights of infinite resignation” or “knights of infinity”. Such an individual renounces whatever it is that is most precious to him or her in the world; for Abraham, this was his son. Now, this is a serious undertaking and involves much more than just giving up on something. Johannes talks about it as something one must perform, and perform properly, specifically stating that only passion can bring about this movement; as opposed to reflection which is no help here.

So what exactly is this movement? Well, it is not a forgetting and moving on, as it were. Rather, the knight remembers everything and this constitutes the pain involved in the movement, but through her infinite (spiritual) resignation she reconciles herself with finite (worldly) experience. The movement lifts her out of the finite, where her desire is impossible, to the infinite, where the desire is possible but only by being expressed through resignation. “The desire which would convey [her] out into reality, but came to grief on an impossibility, now bends inwards but is not lost thereby nor forgotten”; rather, she never gives it up precisely because she has made the movement infinitely.

So infinite resignation cannot involve sorrow and pining away for what has proven to be impossible. On the contrary, infinite resignation bestows “peace and repose” on those who undertake it precisely because the pain they have endured “reconciles [them] to existence.” The knight of infinite resignation is “enough unto [herself]” and stands undisturbed by others. Because of this, these knights are easy to spot. Their gait is bold and their every action hints at the infinite they have mastered. Nevertheless, none of the above means that their desire has faded or their pain dulled. Both are eternal, hence their existence is not joyful.

It is also worth mentioning that Johannes thinks both men and women are eligible to join this order of knighthood.

The knight of faith doesn’t stop there however but performs one more movement; one that requires such courage that few people are capable of it. In fact, Johannes declares that he himself lacks the capacity for this final step and is struck with terror and horror at just the thought of it. This movement requires one to have faith that what one has renounced will be given back *on the strength of the absurd*.

What does this mean? The knight has renounced his desire as utterly impossible but then gets to take it back again? This happens because in the first movement the desire was completely renounced *in human terms*; it is recaptured only on the strength of the absurd, that is, “on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible.”

Now, it is important to note that the absurd here is not the unpredictable, improbable, unexpected or unforeseen – all of those terms apply to the finite (earthly) where the desire remains completely impossible. The absurd operates in the realm of the infinite (spiritual) where all things are possible. This possibility, the knight grasps by faith, which enables him to stand firm in the face of (human) impossibility. Johannes calls faith the “paradox of existence” because it recaptures what seems utterly impossible to recapture.

Unlike the knight of infinite resignation, the knight of faith does not appear different from normal folk. Nothing about him betrays the infinite because he has made this second movement which has allowed him to grasp the finite once more. He “express[es] the sublime in the pedestrian absolutely”. Also unlike the knight of infinite resignation the knight of faith is quite capable of joy for he has reclaimed what appeared to have been forever lost.

Problema I – *Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?*

The ethical is the universal which means it applies to everyone and at every moment. The single individual, as the particular, has its *telos* (end) in the universal hence his or her ethical task is always directed towards the universal; indeed, to becoming the universal.

To the extent that an individual feels the need to assert him or herself in the particular, instead of the universal, to that extent he or she *sins*. *Temptation* describes the case where that same desire is felt *after* one has already attained the universal. Temptation can be resisted only through *repentance* which is the act of returning to the universal.

This account of ethics matches in its broad outline that provided by Hegel. Johannes’ problem with this is that if this is indeed the highest we can say of human existence, then Abraham does not deserve the glory we (and Hegel) give him as the father of faith because on this account, Abraham was a murderer.

Now, Johannes picks up on the thread left in the previous section. Faith is preserving a belief in the impossible on the strength of the absurd; that is to say, faith is a paradox. The absurd as Abraham stands in relation to the ethical is that “the single individual [as particular] is higher than the universal”. The individual achieves this by traversing through the universal to stand in an “absolute relation to the absolute.” This paradox cannot be mediated or understood. It is completely inaccessible to thought precisely because it has left thought behind and is therefore destined to remain a paradox for all eternity.

If Abraham had been willing to sacrifice his son for a higher expression of the ethical, then he could have joined the ranks of tragic heroes such as Agamemnon, Jephthah or Brutus but there is no possible ethical justification for his action. He stepped beyond the ethical, suspending it in relation to something higher. This something was God.

Abraham did it for the sake of God, because it was a trial, a temptation, given to him by God. We usually think of a temptation as something which diverts us from an ethical duty but in this case the temptation *is* the ethical and the duty is the will of God.

So once more, was he justified? These days, people give justifications by looking at outcomes. A hero is one who acts so that his actions have some benefit. Johannes finds this backwards. Outcomes come last and so “if one is really to learn something from the great it is precisely the beginning one must attend to.” The result can be known only once the whole endeavour is completed, so if one were to judge oneself according to outcomes, one would never begin.

No, Abraham had faith and since faith is a paradox *that* is his justification; and it’s the only justification he can or need ever produce.

Problema II – *Is there an absolute duty to God?*

The ethical is the universal but it is also the divine, so all (ethical) duty is duty to God. The problem with this is that if we leave it there, we aren’t really saying much. “The duty becomes duty to God by being referred to God, but I do not enter into relation with God in the duty itself.” The example Johannes gives is the ethical injunction to love one’s neighbour. It is a duty referred to God but in loving my neighbour, I am brought into a relation with him or her, not God.

Faith resolves this by bringing the single individual into a relation with God (which Kierkegaard also calls the absolute) and this absolute relation determines his or her relation to the universal (ethical). So, there is an absolute relation to God, realised through faith, which is quite different from the relation to the universal (ethical). This doesn’t mean that the ethical is abandoned; only that it gets a different expression, a paradoxical, absolute expression, to that which it has ethically speaking.

This absolute duty to the absolute is important and seems to require absolute commitment. Johannes states that if the individual desires to express her absolute duty in the universal (in effect, doing God’s will by doing what ethics demands) this amounts to temptation. But, *even if she resists this temptation, she is unable to fulfil her duty to the absolute, to God*. Failing to resist the temptation is sin, but it is still sin *even if the absolute duty and the ethical duty are identical*.

Abraham’s ethical duty to Isaac is that of a father to a son, i.e. that he love and protect him. I think Johannes wouldn’t want to say that Abraham *violates* this duty in order to fulfil his absolute duty to God, rather he would say that Abraham’s ethical duty becomes expressed differently as determined by his relation to God; expressed, in fact, in a way that is *un*ethical. This doesn’t make sense, hence the paradox.

Being a paradox, the individual performing the movement of faith, cannot explain his or her actions to another because they won’t make sense. Language, reason, logic, even thought – these things all belong to the universal. Faith, in transcending the universal, operates outside these bounds and is completely unintelligible within them. Even if the absolute could be expressed in terms of the universal, no individual could assess its validity or truth because that truth belongs explicitly to the individual who stands higher than the universal and in direct relation to God. This means that one knight of faith cannot help another. No one can be *assisted* into faith – they either make it on their own or they don’t. It is something completely internal, completely individual.

Johannes now turns to a discussion of the way contemporary exegetes often distort the original meaning of Biblical passages in order to make them acceptable. The example he gives is Luke 14:26 which explicitly gives us the duty of hating our family (and ourselves) before we can be Jesus’ disciple. The word is ‘hate’, not ‘love less’, ‘give less priority to’ or ‘show no respect to’ and yet that is exactly how contemporary theologians attempt to gloss over it.

Instead, we ought to view this passage in the same way we have been discussing Abraham, namely, through the eyes of faith, which means as a paradox. In this way, the absolute duty can lead to what ethics would forbid; to something there can be no justification or explanation for.

In my view, Johannes proceeds to somewhat weakly attempt to take the sting out of the word ‘hate’ by creating a flimsy analogy with Abraham. Abraham loved Isaac but the “ethical expression for what he does is this: he hates Isaac.” But if he hated Isaac, then the sacrifice loses its meaning as a sacrifice. It makes no sense… but that is the nature of a paradox.

He goes on to say that to exist as an individual in the paradox of faith is the most terrifying thing in the world, identifying this feeling with the “fear and trembling” referred to in the title of the book. The tragic hero renounces the self in order to express the universal while the knight of faith does the opposite, renouncing the universal in order to be the particular. The former, although certainly painful, is glorious and earns its exponent universal acclaim. The latter, however, secures only a life of solitude. The tragic hero violates one ethical mandate but never actually leaves the comfort of the universal because he acts in accordance with another (higher) ethical mandate. The knight of faith does not do this. He leaves the realm of the universal altogether and only has himself to rely on. This is what makes faith so terrible. The knight of faith is alone about everything.

Johannes also remarks that the tragic hero’s struggle quickly comes to an end. She makes her infinite movement and can rest in the universal. The knight of faith, however, is forever kept in tension. He is “under constant trial and can turn back in repentance to the universal at any moment”.

Johannes closes this section by repeating something he has said throughout the book. Either faith is an absolute duty to God and is a paradox in just the way he has described or else it doesn’t exist at all and Abraham is done for.

Problema III – *Was it ethically defensible of Abraham to conceal his purpose from Sarah, from Eleazar, from Isaac?*

The ethical is the universal and so it is disclosed. The individual as the immediate is concealed. Ethics then demands that the individual unwrap herself and become disclosed in the universal. Remaining concealed is to sin.

Aesthetically speaking, Abraham ought to have remained silent if by doing so, another could have been saved. But his silence could not save Isaac, and anyway, sacrificing Isaac for his and God’s sake is aesthetically unconscionable. Thus Abraham was not within the circumference of aesthetics.

Ethics demands the infinite movement in the universal and as such, disclosure. Ethically, Abraham ought to have told the parties concerned what he was planning. However, Abraham was beyond the universal and remained concealed (quiet) so he cannot be held to standards that fall within the ethical purview either.

As we have seen, Abraham was acting within the paradox of faith and standing above the universal as an individual (although a different individual than he was prior to rising above the universal) which means that the imperative to disclose oneself dissolves. However, it is not just that Abraham *ought not* *to* speak, rather, he *cannot speak*. As discussed in the previous section, no one can possibly understand Abraham and therefore disclosure is not an option; “if when I speak I cannot make myself understood, I do not speak even if I keep talking without stopping day and night.”

Epilogue

In the epilogue, Johannes brings the discussion back to the beginning in talking once more about the mistake of a generation thinking they can start from where previous generations finished. No generation can learn the one truly important thing, the “genuinely human factor”, from a prior generation; passion. In this every generation must begin afresh. Thus, no generation has, or could have, learned how to love from its predecessors.

Of course the highest human passion is faith and in this more than anything else, every generation must start from the beginning. In addition, Johannes thinks it is ridiculous for anyone to claim that they have gone ‘beyond love’ or ‘beyond faith’. The development and perfection of human passion is always a task for a lifetime. He draws two interesting analogies here. The first is with children who finish playing all of their games by lunch and then look to make new games. Are they more advanced or developed than other children “who could make the games they already know last the whole day? Or does it not rather show that those children lack… the good-natured seriousness that belongs to play?”

The second analogy concerns the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heraclitus, who quipped, “One can never walk through the same river twice.” His student *went further* and added, “One cannot do it even once”, thereby turning the Heraclitian principle that change is all there is into an Eleatic one that all change is illusiory.