Kierkegaard: The Paradox of Faith

The heart of Christian religion, faith, has long been hard to define and even harder to practice. Because of its elusiveness, faith has often been reduced to formulas and systems so that it can be grasped without personal investment. Religious dogmas, creeds, rituals, and liturgies can be enlivening when they are enriched by faith, but deadening when one reduces faith. True faith animates religious practice. The dialectic of Fear and Trembling, one of Søren Kierkegaard’s most widely read works, aims to draw readers into deeper examination of the nature of faith. The τέλος of Fear and Trembling is its upending of Hegelian notions of faith which attempt to rationalize faith as part of a Systematic philosophy. Through his examination of Abraham’s call to sacrifice Isaac, Kierkegaard draws out the paradoxical nature of faith.

Much of Kierkegaard’s thought is a response to the systematic philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel.¹ In The Phenomenology of the Spirit, Hegel explains what he calls the Absolute Mind, which has complete, clear, and absolute vision of existence and meaning meaning.² The Absolute Mind manifests itself in the human mind partly through art, partly through religion, but neither of these experiences of beauty or of faith truly attain the complete and clear vision of the Absolute Mind. Only philosophy can manifest the Absolute Mind in human consciousness; it is through philosophy that the incomplete manifestations of the Absolute Mind of art and religion find their proper, rational expression.³ This proper rational view is attained by going further: viewing religion and art from the point of view of philosophy so that each may become what it truly is.⁴ Hegel calls this ascent to the Absolute Mind by way of rational philosophy the ‘System’.⁵ Using this System, Hegel can speak about faith using common words and rational concepts. By going further than faith, one actually arrives at the nature of true faith.

Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio, responds directly to the Hegelian System and its insistence upon going further in the preface to Fear and Trembling, saying that his book “is not the System, it hasn’t the slightest thing to do with the System.”⁶ Johannes remarks upon his contemporaries’ unwillingness to stop with doubt or faith; “they all go further,”⁷ he says, they all try to see beyond doubt or faith in order to place each within a rational framework. He says that “even if one were able to render the whole of the content of faith into conceptual form, it would not follow that one had grasped faith, grasped how one came to it, or how it same to be.”⁸ It is the continual grasping of faith that is its true expression, not simply a purported knowledge.

¹ Kierkegaard, 83-84
² Hannay, 10
³ Hannay, 10
⁴ Hannay, 10
⁵ Hannay, 11
⁶ Kierkegaard, 43
⁷ Kierkegaard, 42
⁸ Kierkegaard, 43
of the concept. The prevailing concept of faith in his time was so cheapened that Kierkegaard could no longer call it faith.\textsuperscript{9} To Kierkegaard, faith is a paradox that cannot be given a rational synthesis—faith begins precisely where reason leaves off.\textsuperscript{10}

To show the paradoxical nature of faith and the inadequacy of popular, cheap faith, Kierkegaard engages with the Old Testament story of Abraham’s call to sacrifice Isaac. In the first part of \textit{Fear and Trembling}, four lyrical retellings of the Abraham story ‘attune’ the reader to the paradox of Abraham’s faith. The biblical story \textit{could} have been written differently, but then Abraham \textit{would not be} a model for what it means to have faith; each of Kierkegaard’s retellings illustrates this by falling short of the extraordinary faith that makes Abraham great. In the biblical story, Abraham does not deny God’s request, he does not even tremble at raising the knife, yet he does not, after all, kill Isaac; instead God offers the ram and Abraham sacrifices \textit{it} in the place of his dear, beloved son.\textsuperscript{11} The retellings, in contrast to the original story, highlight the ethical dilemma faced by Abraham and the paradox of God commanding such an act.

Kierkegaard then commences a dialectic in which he considers the faith of Abraham as believing on the strength of the absurd. The word \textit{absurd} refers to that which is normally impossible, but believed to be entirely possible with God. For Kierkegaard, one must make movements toward faith, but the movement of faith itself “must be made continually on the strength of the absurd,” not on the strength of the rational as Hegel proposes. But reason is still involved for Kierkegaard; in fact, it is only by reasoning to the edge of reason that one is ready and able to take the leap to faith.\textsuperscript{12} It is by submitting oneself to the ethical and the universal that one comes to a point that transcends and suspends both.

The ethical and the universal are important terms to Hegel as well. The ethical includes morals and societal duties, while the universal applies to everyone at all times.\textsuperscript{13} Hegel defines the ethical as the universal, but this view creates ‘problematia’ for applauding Abraham as the father of faith. Kierkegaard addresses these problems in his dialectic by examining the implications of the ‘ethical as the universal’ and demonstrating how Abraham would be a condemnable criminal if judged by those implications. If the ethical is the universal, an act must be judged by its underlying intention and value to society.\textsuperscript{14} People who must sacrifice a loved one for the sake of other people are regarded as tragic heroes who choose what was best for society and thus stay within the ethical; this type of act is acceptable. Abraham is not a tragic hero because he raises the knife over Isaac for the sake of God and himself but not for any social value—in fact, he almost destroys the son through whom many nations will come.\textsuperscript{15} Abraham, unlike the tragic hero, is either a murderer along the understanding of the System, or a man of faith.\textsuperscript{16} In contrast to Hegel, Kierkegaard sees the possibility of the particular (rather than the universal) transcending the ethical in relation to God, the Absolute; for there is no other way to explain the paradox of God’s request to Abraham.

\textsuperscript{9} Hannay, 13
\textsuperscript{10} Kierkegaard, 82
\textsuperscript{11} Genesis 22
\textsuperscript{12} Kierkegaard, 75
\textsuperscript{13} Hannay, 28
\textsuperscript{14} Hannay, 28
\textsuperscript{15} Kierkegaard, 88
\textsuperscript{16} Kierkegaard, 85
Another implication of Hegel’s philosophy is that there are no duties to God that are not already universal duties. However, Abraham violates this principle as well, because his duty to God is the opposite of his duty to his son as a father and his own moral conscience. The particular, therefore, can be higher than the universal and be in absolute relation with the absolute, which is God—this can only be acceptable when one is in the position of the knight of faith. The paradox of God calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is that an action that is normally immoral and unethical actually transcends the ethical to a particular relation with the absolute, God.

True faith cannot be reconciled with Hegel’s system of reason because it does not account for the paradox seen in the Abraham and Isaac story. Abraham, “even in that moment when the knifed gleamed, he believed—that God would not demand Isaac.”

This is the “monstrous paradox capable of making a murder into a holy act that is pleasing to God, a paradox which gives back Isaac to Abraham, which no thought can grasp because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.” In order to herald Abraham’s story as an act of great faith, one must accept the situation as a teleological suspension of the ethical—the ethical is suspended for an individual because of that individual’s relation to God, the absolute, and for a greater purpose or telos. Therefore, the ethical cannot be totally universal; faith, with Abraham as its model, does not fit within those bounds. A rational reductionist understanding of faith cannot be reached because faith is innately paradoxical. To say anything less than that is to cheapen faith.

The paradox of faith is also reflected in much of orthodox Christian doctrine, such as the incarnation, the resurrection, and the Trinitarian nature of God. It is perhaps no wonder that these doctrines have been so disputed throughout the centuries; they are absurd according to reason—but not impossible according to faith.

G.K. Chesterton references the cross of Christ as a symbolic paradox that renders it relevant to every part of life: “the cross, though at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms without ever altering its shape.” The implication of the paradox of faith, like the imaginary arms of the cross extending into every part of life, is that one has never completely grasped faith and is continually searching it out. The paradoxes of faith, God incarnate, sin, and salvation must be worked out with fear and trembling. Faith is a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill to be acquired in a matter of weeks. For Kierkegaard, faith is a “monstrous paradox, a paradox capable of making a murder into a holy act that is pleasing to God, a paradox which gives back Isaac to Abraham, which no thought can grasp because faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off.” It is not something we can grasp until we too believe on the strength of the absurd once we too have come to a place where reason can take us no further.

1587 words

17 Kierkegaard, 65
18 Kierkegaard, 82
19 Chesterton, 48
20 Kierkegaard, 42
21 Kierkegaard, 82
References