

## Faith vs. Reason

### Reason

Imagine that I own a ship. Others have seen it, and have suggested to me that it might not be seaworthy. But, I manage to dismiss these doubts and overcome them, convincing myself that my ship is safe and sturdy, with no evidence to confirm this—just my steadfast belief. Then, I send a group out onto the ocean in my ship. The ship sinks. They all die.

What do we think of this? W.K. Clifford suggests that what I have done is horribly immoral. Furthermore, even if the ship had NOT sank, I would still be guilty (of negligence). For, I had no right to believe that my ship was seaworthy, when there was no evidence to suggest so. He says, "The man would not have been innocent, he would only have been not found out."

If Clifford is correct, then it is WRONG in this instance to hold a belief without sufficient evidence. This is clear because people's lives are at stake. But, Clifford goes further, claiming that it is wrong to believe ANYTHING without sufficient evidence. We all have a duty to supply REASONS for our beliefs; otherwise, we may perpetuate lies which divide people and negatively affect society. He writes,

If the belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one. Not only does it deceive ourselves by giving us a sense of power which we do not really possess, but it is sinful, because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town.

...

The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery.

...

If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.

...

"But," says one. "I am a busy man; I have no time for the long course of study which would be necessary to make me in any degree a competent judge of certain questions, or even able to understand the nature of the arguments." Then he should have no time to believe.

It is HARD to form beliefs only when you have sufficient evidence. Gathering evidence is time-consuming, and COSTLY—at any moment you may come up against evidence which flies in the face of that which you hold most dear. We like to feel SAFE, and SECURE, and in CONTROL—we feel this way when we hold our beliefs with strong convictions. When our beliefs are NOT firm, we tend to feel afraid, sad, ignorant, powerless... So, humans tend to jump to the conclusion that their beliefs are secure when most of the time they are not.

But, jumping to such a conclusion is a SIN, says Clifford. For, every time we do so, we weaken society—not only by making it more likely that falsehoods are perpetuated, but also by simply undermining the human social habit of testing and inquiring, which we have worked so hard to achieve (and, without which, we are savages).

## Faith

Soren Kierkegaard is famously known as the “father of existentialism”. In his writings, he takes down all of philosophy, reminding us that it was Socrates who was the “wisest” man, and he claimed, “I know nothing, except this one thing: That I know nothing.” So, we are foolish to think that we can use rational proofs to “solve” everything. To take the stance of “Reason” is to try to take an objective standpoint, as somehow OUTSIDE of one’s self—which is impossible.

These were the seeds of later existentialist ideas, which had a tendency to emphasize the inescapability of experiencing the world from a FIRST PERSON point of view—and therefore the importance of subjectivity in everything we “know”, or in the way that we see the world around us. We sometimes find existentialists (or later, post-modernists) going even farther than this, and claiming things such as that the only truth there is is subjective truth, and, even, that truth itself is relative to each individual.

**1. The Universal Ethics:** In this dialectic, Kierkegaard argues, in short, that **faith surpasses reason**. Faith does, in fact, involve embracing a PARADOX, or a contradiction. First, some concepts:

Ethics: The Universal: Morality (“the ethical”) is UNIVERSAL—that is, it is objective, it “applies to everyone”, it “is in force at every moment”, and directs the ends of all people (it “is itself the *telos* for everything outside itself”).

Humans: The Particulars: We, human beings, are “PARTICULAR”—that is, we are single, individual people.

Living Rightly is the Particular Living in Harmony With the Universal: When we, the particulars, align ourselves with the universal, we are living rightly.

Living Wrongly is the Particular Living Against the Universal: But when we, the particulars, stand APART from the universal, we are in a sense rebelling against the ethical, and so living wrongly. When we feel the URGE to stand apart from the universal, this is what it is to experience temptation.

**2. Abraham: Man of Faith:** Now, consider the story of Abraham. God commanded Abraham to kill his own son. And Abraham set out with the intent to follow these orders. We say that Abraham was a great man, and yet, his actions were completely in conflict with what we know (and surely HE knew) to be “the ethical”. For, if anyone were to have

observed Abraham raising the blade to kill his son, surely we would have looked at him as a murderer!

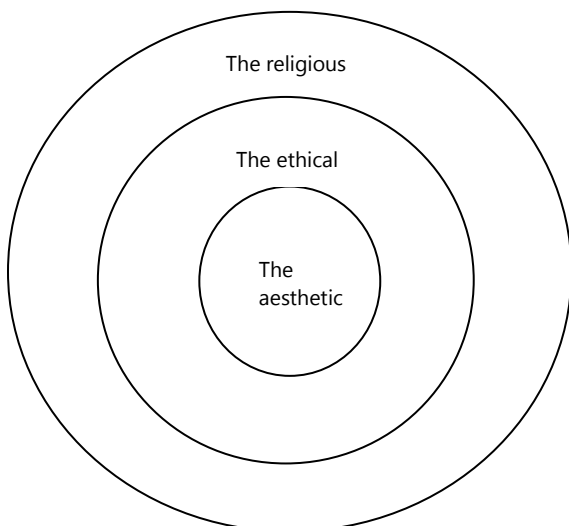
So, why do we say that Abraham was a great man, if he was acting against the universal moral standard? The answer, Kierkegaard says, is faith.

Now, Abraham was going AGAINST the standard of morality, which tells us "Do not kill" and "Love your children" and so on. So, thought of this way, this is how we defined temptation, and said that, if Abraham had acted on this temptation (and killed his son), that he would have been doing something HORRIBLE! But, since we admire Abraham rather than despise him, there must be some way that we can stand "apart" from the ethical in a GOOD way, or a way that is NOT wrong.

This is what it is to have faith. Faith is a PARADOX, he says, since faith, apparently, occurs when "the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal ... not as subordinate but superior to it." We typically think of the universal ethics as some "absolute" which hangs over us. But, through faith, somehow the individual, who normally stands UNDER the umbrella of morality, now stands OVER morality, having somehow risen ABOVE it, so that the individual now "stands in an absolute relation over the absolute." This is the paradox of faith. "Abraham acts by virtue of the absurd, for the absurd is precisely that he as the single individual is higher than the universal."

**3. Three Types of Killers:** Kierkegaard points out that there are basically three ways we might judge a killer. Namely, as (1) A murderer, (2) A tragic hero, or (3) A believer.

These correspond to what Kierkegaard calls (1) The aesthetic, (2) The ethical, and (3) The religious. We can think of this as being three spheres of action.



(1) The Aesthetic: Someone who lives within this sphere is one who pursues the basic pleasures; a hedonist. This person acts as an individual, not in harmony with the ethical.

(2) The Ethical: The person who lives within this sphere is one who transcends the aesthetic, and acts in accordance with the universal morality.

(3) The Religious: The person who lives within this sphere transcends, or rises above, the ethical and lives in accordance with their faith.

(1) The Murderer: To kill within the aesthetic sphere is to act purely for one's self (say, because you WANT to, or in a fit of rage, etc.). Such a person who kills is a murderer.

(2) The Tragic Hero: To kill within the aesthetic sphere is to recognize that, sometimes, one's moral duty is to kill. Though it is wrong to kill, sometimes there are stronger moral reasons which override this duty, making it such that we must kill. Such a person is a "tragic hero". Kierkegaard mentions three examples of this in ancient literature:

- Jephthah: In the Bible, a man named Jephthah, about to go to battle (with the Ammonites) vows to God to offer as a sacrifice the first living thing that comes out of his house when he returns, should God help Jephthah win the battle (see Judges 11). He wins the battle, and returns home. Unfortunately, his own daughter is the first living thing to come out of his home. Knowing that it is absolutely morally wrong to break a vow made to God, he sacrifices his own daughter.
- Brutus: Lucius Brutus (not the famous one that killed Caesar) discovered that his 2 sons were conspiring to commit treason and overthrow the rulers of Rome. The conspirators were sentenced to death, and Brutus watched his sons be executed.
- Agamemnon: Agamemnon led the Greek naval fleet to Troy during the Trojan War. On the way there, Artemis threatened to destroy the fleet unless Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter. He did so, and so the fleet was able to survive and make it to Troy.

Note that, in each of these cases, the "tragic hero" kills their own child, because it is their moral duty (keeping a promise, preserving justice, or for the greater good). Ultimately, they do so because they are bound by some SUPERCEDING moral reason. As such, the tragic hero kills within the sphere of the ethical, doing what is (or what they THINK is?) morally right.

(3) The Knight of Faith: If the ethical sphere is the highest sphere there is, then Abraham should be despised and thought of as a horrible murderer, since he tried to murder his own son for no good reason. So, since he is revered, there MUST be some sphere which supercedes the ethical.

Abraham is being tested, and God wants proof that Abraham will follow, and not question, God's will. Notice that the temptation here is the ethical itself! The temptation is to do what one knows is morally right (namely, not murder)! So, just as the aesthetic

sphere is the temptation of the person trying to be ethical, the ethical is (in this case) the temptation of the person trying to be religious.

Similarly, in the other direction, the ethical person has elevated morality to the status of divinity, morality being what s/he pursues above all other things. But, the religious person transcends morality (something that is purely within the realm of the philosophers) and goes beyond that. The religious person's "divinity" is God Himself.

He calls this act of transcending morality a "**teleological suspension of the ethical**"—literally, a temporary break in morality's sway over us as the "end" we ought to pursue. This is the paradox of faith, that faith transcends that which is supposedly universal; i.e., untranscendable. The ethical stands over everything (or so the philosophers told us), but, by faith, we stand over the thing that stands over everything. Living by faith in God means embracing this **absurdity**, this **paradox**.

Kierkegaard says that our relationship to God ought to inform our relationship to morality—not the other way around. If we think that Abraham ought to have said to God, "Hey! I can't do that! That's wrong!", then we are suggesting that our relationship to morality ought to inform our relationship to God. But, this has things backwards. God is the Absolute, and is superior to EVERYTHING else (including morality).

Faith is irrational. It is the acceptance of paradox. Reason told us that morality was universal. But, to have faith is to go beyond what is reasonable, and embrace the inexplicable, or what makes no sense. No one can truly understand what faith is, nor can the knight of faith explain himself to anyone else. It is a miracle. And any of us could have faith in God.

[Yet, how can we KNOW that we are following God? What if we are wrong!? What if it was really a DEMON asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. (consider the movie, [Frailty](#), for instance). Robert Adams, discussed by Wes Morriston in an earlier reading, argued that we should NEVER go against morality, even if we have reason to believe that God has instructed us to—for, since we are told that God is morally perfect, this evidence outweighs our evidence that God has spoken to us. In short, much like Hume's stance on miracles, Adams argued the evidence AGAINST the "miracle" of God telling us to act immorally is always stronger than the evidence that God has told us to do something immoral.]