

Fear and Trembling

"Faith is a marvel, and yet no human being is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is united is passion, and faith is a passion."

"The knight of faith knows it gives inspiration to surrender oneself to the universal, that it takes courage to do so, but also that there is a certain security in it, just because it is for the universal."

"No, no one shall be forgotten who was great in this world. But each hero was great in his own way, and each was eminent in proportion to the great things he loved. For he who loved himself became great through himself, and he who loved others became great through his devotion, but he who loved God became greater than all of these. Every one of them shall be remembered, but each one became great in proportion to his trust."

In a nutshell

Total trust in an absolute or spiritual reality is not a weakness, but is life's highest expression.

In a similar vein

René Descartes *Meditations on First Philosophy* (p 86)
Immanuel Kant *Critique of Pure Reason* (p 156)
Blaise Pascal *Pensées* (p 226)

Søren Kierkegaard

To Søren Kierkegaard, it seemed that in the modern age, everyone begins by doubting everything. This was exactly the approach taken by the arch doubter of modern philosophy, Descartes. Or was it? Descartes, Kierkegaard notes, was in fact "no doubter in matters of faith." In his *Principles of Philosophy*, for instance, Descartes supported the "natural light" of reason only if nothing contrary to it was revealed by God.

The opposite of doubt is faith, and Kierkegaard had long been fascinated by the story of the Old Testament's Abraham, the "father of faith." *Fear and Trembling* recounts the three-day journey of Abraham to Mount Moriah, where God has seemingly requested he go in order to sacrifice his son Isaac as an offering. Kierkegaard spends the book getting to grips with how Abraham could be willing to do such a thing. Isaac was not just any child, but the only son of Abraham and Sarah, who had miraculously been given him in their old age, after many years waiting. Thus he was especially loved and cherished.

Yet Abraham does not hesitate or question God's request, but saddles up his horses and sets off. When Isaac realizes what is happening he pleads with his father, but Abraham does not, as you might expect, blame his actions on God; instead, he assumes full responsibility. He reasons that it is better that his son believes him to be a monster "than that he lose faith in thee."

What happens? At the last minute, when Isaac is bound and a fire is being stoked, a ram comes into Abraham's vision, and it is clear that the animal, not Isaac, is to be offered up. Abraham has been tested and found to be a man of the greatest faith.

To Kierkegaard, Abraham's absolute willingness seems otherworldly, inhuman. At one level, Abraham is simply a murderer. However, because he is willing to follow through with what seems patently absurd just because God wills it, Kierkegaard argues that his actions represent the height of being human.

Levels of greatness

Everyone can be great in their own way, Kierkegaard says, according to what he loves and what he expects. People who love themselves can be "great in themselves"; those who love others can become great "through their devotion"; but those who love the Absolute or God stand above these. The first

group become great through expecting the possible, the second through expecting the eternal, "but he who expected the impossible became greater than all." Beyond personal strength or self-sacrifice is the greatness of one who is willingly powerless, giving all power to the Absolute. As Kierkegaard puts it, "for he who always hopes for the best becomes old, deceived by life, and he who is always prepared for the worst becomes old prematurely; but he who has faith, retains eternal youth."

Such a person can, to the rest of humanity, seem to follow a path that is mad or absurd, but only because they are not depending on earthly wisdom or reason. If God moves in mysterious ways, then someone who is simply a vehicle for God will also, sometimes, seem to act beyond reason.

Believing the absurd

Resignation, Kierkegaard observes, is actually an act of the ego, making oneself seem heroic. Faith is in fact something much higher, since it means believing even *after* we have resigned ourselves. It means not giving up on our actions *in this world*.

On Mount Moriah, Abraham was willing to make the sacrifice "if that was indeed what was demanded." Because all human rationality had been suspended, Abraham had to believe in the absurd. He effectively had to say to himself, "I don't know the meaning of this, but I am leaving the meaning of it up to God."

Kierkegaard describes Abraham's leap of faith as a "movement," one that appears to demand the giving up of everything – and yet finally delivers everything to Abraham. Not only was Isaac given back to Abraham, he was a new Isaac, even more wonderful than before, who would fulfill the prophecy of prosperity and fertility over many generations. Because he had recognized God as the source of everything first, Abraham now had absolute security of knowledge.

Though a leap of faith is tremendously difficult, by uniting us with what is universal it is the only true security.

Knights of faith

A "knight of faith," Kierkegaard says, transforms the leap of faith into a gait – for this person it is simply a normal way of being. He will happily bet his whole life on a single love, or a great project. In contrast is a person whose life is simply "running errands."

Kierkegaard gives the example of a knight of faith in love with a woman. It seems that his quest is useless and he admits as much. But then he makes one more movement, saying, "I nevertheless believe that I shall get her, namely on

the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible." On a purely human level he admits that his chances of getting the woman are zero, but this very impossibility forces him to make a leap of faith, knowing that only God can bring it about. He must believe the absurd in order for the Infinite to find expression.

The point about Abraham is that he suffers (obviously in great anguish, even going to the extent of tying Isaac up and starting a fire for the offering) while still believing. He is great not because he transcends fear, anguish, and agony but because he lives through them. In doing so, he becomes a master of life. The mistake people make is to read the Abraham story and think his greatness is inevitable, only seeing the outcome while glossing over what he went through to arrive on the other side. If we want to be like Abraham, we should look to how he began, how he acted *before* he was the famous figure of the Bible.

Final comments

Philosophy, Kierkegaard notes, slights faith as something inconsequential. In fact, philosophy cannot really tell us anything about faith, because it is beyond words and concepts. Normal thought cannot comprehend Abraham's actions, because in such situations normal thought is redundant.

As Kierkegaard saw it, faith is in fact "the highest passion in a human being." The universal is expressed through a person, and that person expresses something timeless and limitless. We can all be knights of faith, he believed.

Søren Kierkegaard

Born in Copenhagen in 1813, Kierkegaard was from a well-off and deeply religious family. At 17 he enrolled in theology courses at the University of Copenhagen, but to his father's disappointment was drawn to philosophy and literature. His father died while he was still at university, and after being awarded his degree, he proposed to the daughter of a civil servant. The marriage never happened, however, and he remained a bachelor, living mainly off the proceeds of his father's estate.

He published *Either/Or* in 1843, followed a few months later by *Fear and Trembling*. A year later came *Philosophical Fragments* and *The Concept of Anxiety*, and in 1846 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. He also wrote books under pseudonyms, *The Sickness unto Death* and *Training in Christianity*. Edifying Discourses in Various Spirits (1847) presented what Kierkegaard believed was the true message of Christianity. He became a harsh critic of the Church of Denmark and its worldly outlook.

Kierkegaard died in 1855. Wittgenstein described him to a friend as "by far the most profound thinker of the last century. Kierkegaard was a saint."