

Fear and Trembling: Preface

SK lampoons Cartesian doubt and makes an analogy to Christian faith. In his Meditations, Descartes claims that we should doubt all of our sensory experience on the basis of the possibility of an evil demon deceiving us. As this possibility of a deceiving demon is something we cannot positively rule out, Descartes claims that this is sufficient for doubt. Many commentators have reacted to Descartes' claims as redefining doubt as anything that is not absolutely certain. In this sense, any contingent claim is subject to doubt, since any contingent claim is possibly false (only necessary claims remain free of doubt). Doubt, so understood, is easy to have about all of our sensory beliefs. (Indeed, since all of our sensory beliefs about the world concern contingent matters, then all of them are, by this definition, doubtful.) Doubt is too easy, according to SK.

Real doubt is hard. Just try to make anyone you know doubt all sensory beliefs. Can you really do this in a convincing fashion? SK is sure that you can't!

Similarly, SK regards the common notion of Christian faith as too easy. He writes sarcastically, "... it is surely a sign of breeding and culture for me to assume that everybody has faith ..." (27). Shortly after this he writes, "Even though one were capable of converting the whole content of faith into the form of a concept, it does not follow that one has adequately conceived faith and understands how one got into it, or how it got into one" (27-28). *We can take the first goal of Fear and Trembling to be SK's attempt to conceive faith and to understand how one gets into it.*

A Panegyric Upon Abraham

He begins with an interesting modus tollens argument with multiple first premises.

If there were no eternal consciousness in us, ...
 If there were no sacred bond which unite mankind, ...
 If an eternal oblivion were always lurking, ...
 ..., then how empty and comfortless life would be.

Each conditional has the same consequent which is denied by SK; thus implying the opposite of the antecedents! Perhaps we can appreciate *SK's second goal is to develop a way of understanding how a life can be meaningful and it will be connected to what he calls an eternal consciousness.* It is interesting to note what I have left out of the above: his contrasts to the above antecedents are rather poetic expressions of a materialistic and evolutionary picture of human nature.

SK wishes to express the attainment of a meaningful life with a multilayered metaphor: the poet and the hero. Clearly SK is the poet and Abraham is the hero. Each is the better nature of the other. The poet "is the genius of recollection," whereas the hero is "powerless ... as a memory is, but also transfigured as a memory is" (29). SK recounts his version of the Abraham and Isaac story.

The Problemata

He sketches a two world scenario. The real world (cp. the world of Judah and Jack in CM) is imperfect in that it is false that only he who works gets the bread, the "world of spirit" for SK is perfect in this sense. We shall see much later that, for SK, this "dualism" is transformed into different stage of existence. Abraham, who occupies the highest stage, works hard and gets the bread! SK develops the Abraham story in order to exhibit this highest stage (which involves faith and meaning).

At first he says, to understand the Abraham story superficially is to leave out the dread: “The ethical expression for what Abraham did is, that he would murder Isaac; the religious expression is, that he would sacrifice Isaac; but precisely in this contradiction consists the dread ...” (37). He speaks of how he could do the Abraham thing, by “a prodigious resignation ... more ideal and poetic than Abraham’s narrow mindedness” (41). Furthermore, he writes “What Abraham found easiest I would have found hard, namely to be joyful again with Isaac” (41). SK summarizes the Abraham story as follows: “... to be able to lose one’s reason and therefore the whole of finiteness of which reason is the broker, and then by virtue of the absurd to gain precisely the same finiteness ... is the only prodigy” (42).

This is a quick example of SK’s twin goals in **Fear and Trembling**. In other words, everything that SK wishes to say about faith and meaning is in this example. If we can understand it, we can understand SK on these two issues. Of course, SK realizes that he has not given us enough to really understand him, so the remainder of our excerpt now tries to understand this in more detail. He tries to simplify the matter by developing the idea of faith as a double movement with the knights of infinite resignation and faith, respectively, symbolizing the two movements. On pp. 43-45, he describes how these two knights would look like to us, if we observed them on the street. On p. 46, he develops an example of a young swain to “illustrate [the two movements] relation to reality, for upon this everything turns.”

Stage 1. Pick a first order desire and stick with it: “... the knight will have power to concentrate the whole content of life and the whole significance of reality in one single wish ... in one act of consciousness” (47).

Stage 2. *The knight of infinite resignation* gives up the object of his desire, but doesn’t give up his love. “...it is a contradiction to forget the whole content of one’s life and yet remain the same person” (47). Furthermore, “The knight does not annul his resignation, he preserves his love just as young as it was in its first moment, he never lets it go from him, precisely because he makes the movements infinitely” (48). By “infinite,” SK simply means unendingly. In this sense, “Love for that princess became for him the expression for an eternal love...” (48).

In a reference to the two world scenario at the beginning of the **Problemata**, he writes “Fools and young men prate about everything being possible for a person. That, however, is a great error. Spiritually speaking, everything is possible, but in the world of the finite there is much that is not possible. This impossible, however, the knight makes possible by expressing it spiritually ... The wish which would carry him out into reality, but was wrecked upon the impossibility, is now bent inward... (48). SK summarizes this stage as one who “has comprehended the deep secret that also in loving another person one must be sufficient unto oneself” (48) and “In the infinite resignation there is peace and rest; every person who wills it, ... can train oneself to make this movement which in its pain reconciles one with existence” (49).

Stage 3. *The knight of faith* says “I believe nevertheless that I shall get her, in virtue, that is, of the absurd, in virtue of the fact that with God all things are possible” (50). SK makes it clear that the knight’s faith is not a simple hope for the object of one’s desire, because “it has resignation as its presupposition ... So he recognizes the impossibility, and that very instant he believes the absurd” (50)

In order to distinguish between stages 2 and 3, SK claims “For the act of resignation, faith is not required, for what I gain by resignation is my eternal consciousness, and this is a purely philosophical movement ... By faith I make renunciation of nothing, on the contrary, by faith I acquire everything ... It is about the temporal, the finite, everything turns in this case” (51-52). Finally, SK concludes “...to get the princess, to live with her joyfully and happily day in and out ... thus to live joyfully and happily every instant by virtue of the absurd ... this is marvelous. One who does it is great, the only great person.” (53)

SK Question, part 1 (of 3)

1. In your own words, describe Kierkegaardian faith. In your account, please explain the meaning of each of the following passages with explicit attention paid to the underlined phrases in each.

A. “With infinite resignation, he has drained the cup of life’s profound sadness, he knows the bliss of the infinite, he senses the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest things he possesses in the world, and yet finiteness tastes to him just as good as to one who never knew anything higher, ... he has this sense of security in enjoying it, as though the finite life were the surest thing of all. ... He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd.”

B. “Spiritually speaking, everything is possible, but in the world of the finite there is much which is not possible. This impossible, however, the knight makes possible by expressing it spiritually, but he expresses it spiritually by waiving his claim to it. The wish which would carry him out into reality, but was wrecked upon the impossibility, is now bent inward, but it is not therefore lost, neither is it forgotten.”

C. “... for what I gain by resignation is my eternal consciousness, and this is a purely philosophical movement which I dare say I am able to make if it is required, ... for my eternal consciousness is my love to God, and for me this is higher than everything. For the act of resignation faith is not required, but it is needed when it is the case of acquiring the very least thing more than my eternal consciousness, for this is the paradoxical.”

D. “... the knight of faith is the only happy one, the heir apparent to the finite ... to get the princess, to live with her joyfully and happily day in and out ... thus to live joyfully and happily every instant by virtue of the absurd ... this is marvelous. He who does it is great, the only great man.”

Problem I: Is There Such A Thing As A Teleological Suspension Of The Ethical?

SK conceives as ethics as follows: “The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone ...” (55). Conceived in this fashion, SK claims that a person’s “ethical task is to express himself in [the universal], to abolish his particularity in order to become the universal” (56). Given this conception of ethics, you should be able to sense a difficulty for SK when he claims that for faith “... the individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified over against it” (57). In order to put the two together, SK offers what he calls this *the teleological suspension of the ethical*.

In order to put the two together, SK offers what he calls this *the teleological suspension of the ethical*. To appreciate how this can be done, SK offers a contrast to the tragic hero who stays within the ethical and has to make a difficult choice perhaps involving personal sacrifice for a higher ideal. On pp. 58-60, SK tries to tell the Abraham story as a wholly ethical story. The highest ethical ideal for Abraham is to love Isaac. Abraham’s conflict is with God’s will to sacrifice Isaac. Is this a higher ethical duty? No, because no ethical conception of God includes God’s asking for human sacrifice and a proof of faith is not higher ethical ideal. At this point, SK claims “... it is evident the necessity of a new category if one would understand Abraham” (60). He continues, “One who denies oneself and sacrifices oneself for duty gives up the finite in order to grasp the infinite, and that person is secure enough... But one who gives up the universal in order to grasp something still higher which is not the universal – what is that person doing?” (61).

“This is the paradox which keeps one upon the sheer edge and which one cannot make clear to any

other person, for the paradox is that one as an individual puts oneself in an absolute relation to the absolute One's justification is once more the paradox; for if one is justified, it is not by virtue of anything universal, but by virtue of being the particular individual." (62)

For SK, the individual, when construed correctly and this is the trick, is higher than the ethical. By individual he means the individual who by his/her choice has "concentrated the whole content of life and the whole significance of reality in one ... of consciousness" and is able to maintain this concentration as a knight of faith. This individual, for SK, has attained "an absolute relation to the absolute."

Problem II: Is There Such a Thing as an Absolute Duty Toward God?

"... in duty itself I do not come into relation with God. Thus it is a duty to love my neighbor but in performing this duty I do not come into relation with God but with the neighbor whom I love... God becomes an invisible vanishing point, a powerless thought, His power being only in the ethical which is the content of existence" (66).

Interestingly, it appears that for SK as a Christian, God is not *a being* who relates to Christians. For SK, the first stage of faith is a commitment to a finite and temporal object of a first order desire. Through resignation at the level of the universal, this finite and temporal object *becomes* the absolute!

"The paradox of faith is this, that the individual is higher than the universal, that the individual ... determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute ... From this, however, it does not follow that the ethical is to be abolished, but it acquires an entirely different expression, the paradoxical expression – that for example, love to God may cause the knight of faith to give his love to his neighbor the opposite expression to that which ethically speaking is required by duty" (68).

SK Question, part 2 (of 3)

2. Answer the 2 questions posed by SK as subtitles for his sections Problem I and II. Use quotes from the text to support your answer and be sure to define the following terms in your answer: the absolute, teleological suspension, individual, an absolute relation, God, the ethical.

The Sickness unto Death

SK begins and ends his first paragraph with a contradiction of sorts. From "Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self," SK concludes that "Man is not yet a self." In between these sentences is his well-known definition of the self as "a relation which relates itself to its own self."

SK Question, part 3 (of 3)

3. In your own words, try to explain SK's words in these quotes and in doing so give an account of the self and personal identity for SK consistent with his views on faith.

We will skip the **Concluding Unscientific Postscript** for the midterm.