

## **Kierkegaard**

### Fear and Trembling

In his book *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard (SK) examines the differences between the aesthetic and ethical realms. The "Diary of a Seducer" is part of the "Either" side of this book—it is a description of the aesthetic realm, which lives entirely in its head, in perpetual repetition of his obsessive behavior—his perpetual seduction of women. The Seducer is condemned to the realm of perpetual pursuit of pleasure—there is no moral standard, all life is lived for the thrill of seduction. The seducer never moves beyond the "chase"—he moves from one seduction to the next, never reaching satisfaction, or completion. This "either" is contrast with the "Or"—the ethical realm, which is characterized as action, in contrast to the inaction of aesthetics.

In *Fear and Trembling*, SK contrasts this ethical realm with the religious realm—indeed, ethical values collide violently with the experience of faith. And, by virtue of the absurd, this description is much more anguishing than even Job, for Abraham, unlike Job, cannot escape a sense of personal responsibility. Job suffers greatly, but his suffering comes from without—it literally comes from the sky in some cases, but Abraham suffers from his own hand. He is responsible for the death of his own son.

*Fear and Trembling* is attributed to a new pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio—who writes from the silence of his inner life--a new, more remote and unfamiliar plan of experience.

A sacrifice like Abraham's raises the question of putting aside the fulfillment of moral obligation for the sake of some higher ideal. With religious faith of this kind, we move from the safe ground of universal values to the paradox and uncertainty of individual faith. Judged by moral standards, Abraham was a potential murderer; when seen as a truly religious figure, he becomes a man of faith.

The religious individual who acts "by virtue of the absurd" is to be sharply distinguished from the tragic hero because the tragic hero is making a moral sacrifice, which, in spite of the personal pain it involves, can be rationally justified by reference to some higher good. The "knight of faith," on the other hand, knows no justification of his actions – they cannot be related to the realm of universal values, or some higher good. If he is great, it is by virtue of some purely personal virtue which defies rational explanation—it is a personal virtue which separates him from his fellow humanity, a virtue that represent a particular, unique relationship with the divine which stands above universal values and prohibitions, such as "Thou shall not kill."

Abraham is confronted with the paradox that accompanies the individual's efforts to express an absolute value within his existence: "Faith is this paradox, that inwardness is superior to the external." In faith, the individual attains a new immediacy, the immediacy of religious faith, which transcends the universal since it puts him into direct relationship with the absolute—he is in an absolute relationship with the absolute. The knight of faith is thereby cut off from others, for he depends entirely and absolutely on himself—the inwardness of faith.

The paradox of faith isolates the knight of faith from fellow humanity – he cannot possibly make himself intelligible to anyone. There is no objective universal principle by which Abraham can justify his behavior; he is plunged into anguish and suffering

and the terrible responsibility of solitude. He has one supreme consolation—faith in God, who, he believes, will give him a new “Isaac” by “virtue of the absurd.”

Faith is hope against hope—it hopes for its life, but, it should be noted, by virtue of the absurd, not by virtue of human understanding, otherwise it would be only practical wisdom, not faith. Faith is what the Greek called “divine madness.” The various determinants of faith are concentrated in the single category of the absurd, for the movement of faith seems paradoxical to the ordinary consciousness from which faith emerges.

The paradoxical is rooted in the antithesis between God and humanity--between God’s understanding of what human life ought to be and humanity’s understanding.