

DALLAS BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

**THE 'ILLOGIC' OF FAITH: *FEAR AND TREMBLING* IN
LIGHT OF MODERNISM**

**SUBMITTED TO
THE GENTLE READER**

FOR

SPRING CONFERENCE

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I. Introduction

Soren Kierkegaard is the primary proponent of the position that faith, true Christian faith, is contrary to the rules of logic. Both for his captivating, superlative eloquence on the matter and for his unique position as the forefather of the Christian existentialist movement, Kierkegaard must be dealt with in any examination of the relationship between faith and reason, in particular an examination of in what sense precisely faith may be called *irrational*. Is it *irrational* because it is contrary to rationality, or is it *irrational* because it is merely non-rational? If the latter, is it in a realm separate to reason, or does it transcend reason?

If we take the orthodox Christian position to be that faith is not contrary to the rules of logic, nor fully describable by them, nor finally irrelevant to them, but rather *transcends* human reason, the question of Kierkegaard's belief on the matter may be rephrased to the simple form: was Kierkegaard right? Was Kierkegaard orthodox? That is to say, did Kierkegaard really think that faith is absurd, or did he hold that it transcends logic, which would seem to be the orthodox Christian position?

There are at least two reasons why we must be cautious in drawing conclusions. One is the difficult nature of a Kierkegaardian text: how hard it can be to understand. The other reason is that Kierkegaard spoke through pseudonyms, thereby masking his own beliefs; the actual intent of the true author must be taken in context of both the philosophical era and the entire Kierkegaardian corpus if we want to find his own beliefs. However, it is possible that even one who is no great expert on the Kierkegaardian corpus may be able to discern what the text is actually saying. It is the contention of this essay that it may be inferred with confidence from the text of *Fear and Trembling* that the 'illogic' so-called of faith is only a correct designation if modernism is presupposed. Furthermore, there are some indications in the text that imply that

Kierkegaard did not really agree with modernism, though his pseudonym in this work does. Even if Kierkegaard did believe that faith is truly contrary to reason, the lesson to be learned from him is that modernism is wrong and faith transcends reason rather than being contrary to it.

II. The Problem

The Introduction to *A Kierkegaard Anthology* sets up the problem of Kierkegaard well: “Knowledge and faith, for Kierkegaard, are polar opposites: knowledge is objectively certain, but it deals only with ‘the possible,’ i.e. the hypothetical (cause and effect, condition and conditioned, premise and conclusion); faith is highly uncertain”¹ Again, “ ‘the reasonableness of Christianity’ is treason to Christianity,” and “Christian truth . . . so far from appearing true to the human intellect . . . constitutes an ‘offense’ to our intellectual faculty as such.”²

However, this is not necessarily what Kierkegaard actually believes, though the Introduction does not go into great detail, its author saying quite simply, “I wish merely to suggest that his position is not quite what it may appear to be on the surface.”³ “His considered viewpoint was not fideistic,” says the Introduction, and in fact “in the *Journals* he speaks of using the understanding in order to believe *against* the understanding, and this was precisely his aim.”⁴

Doubtless much evidence is available in the secondary sources, but the brief material

¹Introduction to *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, ed. Robert Walter Bretall, xvii-xxv (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), xxi.

²Ibid., xxiii.

³Ibid., xxiv.

⁴Ibid.

provided above should serve well enough as an introduction. It is the contention of this essay that, while Kierkegaard may not have held faith to actually be contrary to reason, if he did the belief only makes sense if modernism is presupposed as being correct.

III. The Text of *Fear and Trembling* in Context of Kantian Ethics⁵

Johannes de Silentio is the passionate author of *Fear and Trembling*, or at least he is the pen-name chosen by Soren Kierkegaard for that purpose. *Fear and Trembling* seems to indicate that faith is “absurd,” and that Abraham’s act of faith in Genesis 22 demonstrates this. It is possible, however, that Johannes de Silentio thinks this but Kierkegaard does not. Johannes is speaking within the context of Modernism, of Kant and Hegel, and Kierkegaard’s intent may very well be to show that faith is “absurd” only within that context; implicitly, the goal is to show that the context, Modernism, is a deeply flawed system. This is in fact what he does show us, whether or not it was his intention. The conclusion of *Fear and Trembling* cannot be reached without its presupposed system, which is Modernism.

Johannes opens the first Problem of the book, “Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?” with these words:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which may be expressed from another point of view by saying that it applies every instant. It reposes eminently in itself, it has nothing without itself which is its *telos*, but is itself *telos* for everything outside it, and when this has been incorporated by the ethical it can go no further. Conceived immediately as the physical and psychical, the particular individual is the individual who has his

⁵I am aware of the importance of the fact that Kierkegaard was reacting more to Hegel than to Kant. I will be dealing primarily with Kant, however, because I have read and understood more Kant than Hegel.

telos in the universal, and his ethical task is to express himself constantly in it, to abolish his particularity in order to become the universal.⁶

The influence of Kant is striking. What Johannes seems to be describing is the conception of the ethical as religious at the height of Modernism. The ultimate expression of this was Immanuel Kant, for whom the ethical was the universal and the only religion. Kant's goal in such texts as *Grounding for a Metaphysics of Morals* had been to universalize human ethics through the means of human reason. Gone were any sense of subjectivity in ethical decisions; gone was individuality; gone was the particular. Only the universal, expressed and determined by human reason, remained. This is surely the situation Johannes is describing when he says, "The ethical as such is the universal." When Johannes says that "the particular individual is the individual who has his *telos* in the universal," he is describing the situation in which all individuality is lost in the individual human's being subsumed under the universal ethics. In his response to the first Problem, Johannes will say that there must be individuality in faith; consequently he will say that faith is absurd. The vital premise of faith being *absurd* because of its individuality is that individuality was lost in the first place; therefore Johannes presupposes Kantian ethics.

Furthermore, for Kant the ethical was the *telos*, the goal and end of all religious activity. In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* Kant described a religion consisting entirely of morals and duty; the supernatural played no particular role in this religion. Not only is the individual subsumed under and into the universal ethics in Kant, but the same ethical is the *telos* of religion. God himself is no longer the goal. Johannes seems to be referring to this when he says that the ethical "is itself *telos* for everything outside it." Johannes is preparing to describe

⁶Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 45.

how, through the act of faith, the individual in his personal, subjective relationship with God, is a higher *telos*. This he calls “absurd,” but it would not be absurd in a different context; it is only absurd when the Kantian ethical position is assumed to be correct. It is only absurd if “the whole existence of the human race is rounded off and completely like a sphere, and the ethical is at once its limit and its content . . . His (God’s) power being only in the ethical which is the content of existence.”⁷

According to Kantian morality and religion, the universal ethical laws mediate between the particular human and whatever sort of God he may come to know through the ethical religion. Johannes in *Fear and Trembling* refers to God as “the absolute.” Thus we can restate the Kantian morality and religion in Johannes’ terms: the universal ethical laws mediate between the particular human and the absolute.

In this system, a dictate of the universal (ethics) is the highest *telos* for a human being. Kant had ruled out any direct, unmediated dictates of God, the absolute. Kierkegaard apparently recognized what a problem this was, for according to Scripture God gave unmediated commands to his children; therefore Kierkegaard has his pen-name Johannes de Silentio express how the higher *telos* of the absolute’s command is, in the case of Abraham’s Genesis 22 experience (the supreme example of faith), contrary to the universal *telos*, ethics. Johannes says, “For faith is this paradox, that the particular is higher than the universal.”⁸ “This position,” says Johannes, “cannot be mediated, for all mediation comes about precisely by virtue of the universal.”⁹ Finally, the man of faith “acts by virtue of the absurd, for it is precisely absurd that he as the

⁷Ibid., 58.

⁸Ibid., 46.

⁹Ibid., 47.

particular is higher than the universal.”¹⁰

In the above words may be summed up the position of Johannes de Silentio: because the universal is the mediator between the particular and the absolute (because the ethical is the mediator between a human and God), an unmediated relationship between the particular and the absolute (between a human and God) is absurd. The *because* is vital. It is only absurd if the Kantian system is presupposed. If we entered the discussion without presupposing Kant, we would likely ask: why isn't it ethical to do what God says (why isn't the absolute's dictate an ethical *telos*)? The answer is: because God is not supposed to say anything apart from the ethical. The answer is because Modernism, with the help of Kant, had reduced God to nothing but an authority from which ethics are derived. It is in context of this position that Johannes enters the scene, and it is only having presupposed this that faith is absurd and paradoxical. Johannes says that faith is absurd. This is because in the context of Modernism and Kantian ethics, a Christian faith (and Abraham's experience) is absurd. It is helpful to think of Kierkegaard as a post-Modern critic of Modernism. It is most likely that Kierkegaard's intention is to show that this is the result of Modernism, and that therefore (implicitly) Modernism is flawed. This, at least, is what I think we should take from Kierkegaard.

IV. *Fear and Trembling* in Context of Logic

Let us approach the nature of the logic/faith relationship from the perspective of orthodox Christianity. Here human reason compels us to move beyond reason. In the case of Abraham we could form the syllogism:

A. God exists. God is good; God has our best interests in mind; we should each obey God in all His commands.

¹⁰Ibid.

B. God tells an individual to do any X.

C. Therefore, the individual must do X.

Even if the X in a particular case, as it certainly is in Abraham's, is incomprehensible to the human mind, the individual is compelled to do it. This would be the basic orthodox Christian position.

What if God tells one to do something and His commands just happen to make sense?

For example, God tells a person to tell the truth. Surely this is rational:

A. God exists. God is good; God has our best interests in mind; we should each obey God in all His commands.

B'. God tells an individual to tell the truth.

D. Truth-telling as a universal command is generally logical.

C'. Therefore, an individual must tell the truth (A + B; D + B).

Now, consider a situation in which God tells one to do something and logic, when applied

to the command, just can't make any sense of it:

A. God exists. God is good; God has our best interests in mind; we should each obey God in all His commands.

B''. God tells an individual to slay his son.

D'. Slaying one's son is illogical when logic is applied to it.

These are the premises of Abraham's situation. There is a crisis between two of the premises. Before one can reach a conclusion, one must decide between statements A and D'. On the one hand, logic, when applied to God's command to Abraham, can make no sense of it. On the other hand, it is logical to do what God says. It's all very well and good when human

reason applied directly to a matter agrees with God's direct commands, but what does one do when they contradict?

The solution is obvious: we should go with God's commands; it is only logical to do what the infinite creator of the universe commands and to reject what our finite human minds seem to see:

A. God is good; God has our best interests in mind; we should each obey God in all His commands.

B". God tells an individual to slay his son.

D'. Slaying one's son is illogical when logic is applied to it.

E. A overrides D'.

F. D' is no longer relevant; therefore D' should be abandoned altogether.

G. The abandonment of D' entails not applying logic to God's commands.

This is the correct thing to do. This is the natural, logical thing for the orthodox Christian to do: *God's commands override the human mind's comprehension if the two are ever in conflict. When this is the case, human reason should not attempt to understand God's commands.*¹¹ This is especially the case when we consider that God is infinite, and we are finite; He can see the whole picture. It is quite natural to think that human reason will not be able to see everything that God can see. Human reason forgets its finitude when it pretends to know that God's incomprehensible command is within its comprehension. Faith, true faith, transcends human reason. When human reason forgets this and intrudes into this higher realm, it is true that

¹¹This does not by any means mean that we can not still apprehend and participate in the act of faith; we are more than just rational creatures. We are also creatures of will and of emotions. We will not understand, but our volition will be able to go on without understanding. We will not be able to grasp the act of faith with our reason, but we will be able to describe it with our poetry.

it finds the absurd, but it is reason, not faith, that is out of place.

What does the modernist do? The modernist has presupposed the universal sufficiency of human reason. For the modernist, a different premise is more important:

A. God is good; God has our best interests in mind; we should each obey God in all His commands.

B". God tells an individual to slay his son.

D'. Slaying one's son is illogical when logic is applied to it.

E. D' overrides A.

F. A is no longer relevant; therefore A should be abandoned altogether.

G. The abandonment of A entails calling God's command contrary to logic and absurd.

The modernist in his creed that human reason is all-sufficient chooses the application of human logic over God's commands, reaching the conclusion that faith is illogical. This is the path taken by Johannes. Johannes de Silentio has presupposed that modernism is correct.

V. What was Kierkegaard's Intention

What was the intention of Soren Kierkegaard in writing *Fear and Trembling*? Was it to say that faith is truly illogical and absurd, or to say that it is such in light of modernism and that modernism is therefore wrong?

The secondary sources no doubt hold the solution to this question. In this section, however, I will look at several points in the text of *Fear and Trembling* that indicate implicitly that modernism is wrong and thereby that Kierkegaard thought so. The intention of this essay is to see what may be learned from Kierkegaard directly, without the use of secondary sources.

The problem with Johannes is he is simultaneously trying to work within modernism and show that the modern conception is insufficient. He says that faith is good, the paradox is

good, the absurdity is good; at the same time he says that they are paradoxical, absurd, contradictory, but the latter only by presupposing modernism. For example, with one breath he says, based on modern principles, that faith is absurd; with another breath he says that faith is good. Is absurdity good? If Johannes really meant it, yes. If Johannes is just a nuance of Soren, perhaps not.

For one example, consider the following statement: “Modern philosophy has permitted itself without further ado to substitute in place of ‘faith’ the immediate.”¹² This seems to refer to the modern period’s reduction of transcendent religion to immanent religion. In modernism, nothing is transcendent; all is immanent. Yet Johannes’ treatise describes a faith in which there is a teleological suspension of the ethical, an absolute superseding of the universal: in other words, a transcending of the universal. So to which position does Johannes adhere? It seems possible that Kierkegaard held to the transcendent notion of faith, but opted to speak through his pseudonym Johannes, who held that faith is not transcendent. Yet Johannes couldn’t help letting a little bit of the intent of Kierkegaard shine through here.

¹²Ibid., 59.

Another example is the inability of Johannes to clearly remove from Abraham the charge of murder. If Abraham is still within the ethical, he is a murderer. What can change this other than a higher ethic? Yet for Abraham there is no “higher expression for the ethical such as would ethically explain his conduct.”¹³ If modernism is correct and the ethical is everything, Abraham is a murderer. Abraham is not. This, according to Johannes, is because there are higher things than the ethical: Abraham is justified by going beyond the ethical. Yet Johannes had to resort to a “higher expression for the ethical” in order to justify Agamemnon. The justification of the tragic hero was an ethical justification; Abraham has no such *ethical* justification. What he has is a *non-ethical* justification. Surely this means that the ethical still applies. We would expect Johannes to say that “of course it does apply, and Abraham is a murderer, yet a murderer in contradiction to a higher realm than ethics in which he is not a murderer.” Yet Johannes does not say this: he seems to think that Abraham is *not* a murderer. Surely Johannes is inconsistent in his application of modernism. Does this mean that Kierkegaard was aware that modernism is incorrect, or does it merely mean that he is unknowingly demonstrating its flaws through Johannes? Surely the first option can at least be called a possibility.

For a different approach to the same problem, consider the idea presented in *Fear And Trembling* and especially in the third Problem (“Was Abraham ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose before Sarah, before Eleazar, before Isaac?”) that deals with language and its inabilities. Language, for the moderns, was closely bound up with universals. Modernism subsumed all religion under universal ethics. In its arrogance modernism leaves no language other than “murderer” to describe the non-ethical, the non-universal (the knight of

¹³Ibid., 48.

faith, Abraham). Yet Johannes is vehemently opposed to the idea that Abraham is a murderer. Therefore, I contend that it is most likely that Kierkegaard is aware that universal language does not apply to Abraham. This means that Kierkegaard was most likely aware that Modernism's claim that universal reason and language could explain away the entire universe, was wrong.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, Modernism is in opposition to Christianity. This is not necessarily to say that the mere elevation of human reason is in opposition to Christianity. Saint Thomas Aquinas held that reason should generally be obeyed in its dictates; one of its dictates, however, is to go beyond it. However, Modernism claimed more for human reason: it claimed that human reason can know everything, and it is this against which Kierkegaard makes his attack. The confusing thing about Kierkegaard is that, through his pen-names, he uses the flawed system to oppose the flawed system. Whether he was indirectly calling for a rejection of the premises of Modernism or not, what we can learn from him is that, though we can hold a very high view of reason, we must reject the premise of Modernism that holds human reason to be supreme.

Works Cited

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