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Faith as the 'Leap of Passion'

I have been reading Søren KIERKEGAARD's book Fear and Trembling *(1843—not my favourite of his works, but marvellous in patches). The book addresses the question, 'What is faith?' It takes Abraham's willingness to kill his much-loved son Isaac, at God's request, as the example—virtually the paradigm—through which to understand the real meaning and dynamic of faith. In fact, the Old Testament provides many examples of faith in action, of faith being lived. But Abraham is called the 'Father of Faith.' His example somehow is the root of all the other portraits of faith through out the Old Testament.*

I. Faith is the Leap of Passion

KIERKEGAARD's first concern is to show that the notion of faith widespread in the religion of his day—and it would still apply to our day—has cheapened it to such an extent that "what is talked about [should] ... not properly [be] called faith at all."[1] KIERKEGAARD makes many distinctions in order to discern the difference between real faith and various alternatives.

Like all existentialists, he says the distinctions that matter in life are not hard to make so much as hard to face. Facing up to faith is extremely difficult: most human beings, especially the religious, falsify faith because they want to avoid what faith asks of them in their action, what it asks them to give in their living. Faith is a step too far, a leap too deep.

Thus in trying to clarify the Old Testament story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, KIERKEGAARD stresses we should be made to appreciate what it was like to be Abraham undergoing the trial of faith. Abraham underwent something inexplicable and painful, and achieved something great.

1 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Fear and Trembling* (tr. HANNAY Alistair). London, 1985. 13.

But what did he undergo, and what did he achieve? Until we can answer—or if not answer then at least delve and explore—these questions, we will never understand faith.

Faith is not a matter of reflection or thinking. Faith starts where thinking ends. You cannot think yourself into faith, because faith is an action—KIERKEGAARD will call this action the *leap of passion*—and no thinking can bring about this action required by faith.

KIERKEGAARD refers to passion as a *movement* we make. In my writings, this is described as a movement of the heart; only passion can move the heart: only passion is the heart making its move, going into action, laying itself open, putting itself forth, giving its sweat, tears, and blood, to existence. This is a *leap* because it is a step out of the safe and known and a step into the dangerous and the unknown. Passion leaps into an abyss.

KIERKEGAARD says that the movement involved in faith "requires passion. Every movement of infinity occurs with passion, and no reflection can bring about a movement. That is the ... leap in life which [accounts for] the movement. ... What we lack today is not reflection but passion. For that reason our age is really ... too tenacious of life to die, for dying is one of the most remarkable leaps."[2]

In effect, giving the heart to existence, on the basis of faith, is accepting death. It is a sacrifice. And sacrifice is at the heart of Abraham's struggle and suffering of the passionate leap required by God if he is to follow faith. His son is not only personally loved by him, the son's very appearance so late in Abraham and Sarah's life is a miracle. God's promise to Abraham that he will be the father of generations to come will be lost if Isaac is killed. Faith demands of Abraham the sacrifice of precisely what he most wants from life, what he most values and is most precious to him.

The willingness of Abraham to make this sacrifice is extraordinarily costly; moreover, no human morality can justify it, for a father killing a son cannot be squared on any ethical grounds possible to imagine. Abraham's action cannot be rationalised, moralised, or made any sense of whatever; it is a leap into the deep and dark abyss, and as such, is radically irrational. Passion is irrational: it exceeds, and defies, the sensible limits within which most people elect to live.

Faith is not that credulity, or naive innocence, of the child which must be outgrown and replaced by a more sober experience. For

2 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling). København, 1843. 71.

KIERKEGAARD, faith sets us the profoundest task, and challenge, of our human existence. What is tested in faith is not whether God exists, but God's love and our love in relation to God's. To attain faith, a struggle and a suffering must be embraced; this is the "genuinely human factor."[3]

KIERKEGAARD says that increasingly in his day—and it is only worse now—people believe the problems of life can be solved by the mind, but the mind's 'solutions' merely make the task, and problems, of existence seem to disappear. Worse, we believe former generations have resolved these problems, entailing that "succeeding generations inherit the solutions without having to face the problems."[4]

To counter this pervasive evasion created by the mind, KIERKEGAARD argues we need "an honest seriousness which fearlessly and incorruptibly calls attention"[5] to the task set by faith, and embraces its challenge with the leap of passion.

"However much one generation learns from another, it can never learn from its predecessor the genuinely human factor. In this respect every generation begins afresh, has no task other than that of any other previous generation, and comes no farther. But the highest passion in a human being is faith, and here no generation begins other than where its predecessor did."[6]

"Faith is the highest passion in a human being. Many in every generation may not come that far, but none comes further."[7]

KIERKEGAARD admires Abraham as a person of faith for —what he loved: God —what he trusted: the impossible, the absurd, the irrational—what he strove with: God.

II. Alternatives to Faith

As well as rejecting the widespread secular belief that faith is a type of regressive childishness to be outgrown as we enter a more adult consciousness of existence, KIERKEGAARD also distinguishes faith from two other stances: 1. the æsthetic stance, which is, if anything, even more pervasive in our day than KIERKEGAARD's; and 2. the ethical stance.

3 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling). København, 1843. 145.

4 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Fear and Trembling* (tr. HANNAY Alistair). London, 1985. 12.

5 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling). København, 1843. 145.

6 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling). København, 1843. 145.

7 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling). København, 1843. 146.

1. The Æsthetic Stance

The æsthetic stance—this is a stance very widespread, and neatly fitting in with *capitalism*. KIERKEGAARD describes it as a way of life in which everything is treated æsthetically. By this he means not reacting to things for their beauty, or artistic merit; rather, "treating something æsthetically is to grasp it in terms of the immediate impact it makes, of how it strikes you in the here and now, of its tendency to attract or repel you. It is to treat life itself as a repository of objects of longing and loathing ... in short as a pool of goods [of whatever kind] to be secured and the lack of them avoided. The æsthetic life is a life dedicated to 'immediacy.' This is a life 'absolutely committed to relative ends.'"[8] "'Absolute commitment' to something relative is intended to smack of contradiction."[9]

In this stance, people seek sensations, experiences, and wondrous events. But because they are dedicated to relativism, their seeking does not lead anywhere and it produces no learning of life lessons. In the æsthetic life there is no passion, only a bee hopping from flower to flower: living for the moment, and living for what you can get.

2. The Ethical Stance

The ethical stance—though KIERKEGAARD would admit there are very many different types of moral codes, his aim is to show that morality of any kind is not to be regarded as an end in itself, but rather, as serving something bigger and more mysterious than morality as such.

He is particularly at pains to show that each and every one of us has a relationship to God, and a duty to God, that can clash with any socially based morality, where we are told that we must serve what people consider their best collective interest. Bob DYLAN drew close to this in his lyric when he sang, "To live outside the law, you must remain honest."

Abraham's willingness to kill Isaac cannot be reconciled to any system of rationality, or of morality, which humans can invent. It makes no rational or moral sense. Rationally, it is insane; morally, it is a crime.

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8 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (tr. HONG Howard V. – HONG Edna H.). Princeton, 1992. 42.

9 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Fear and Trembling* (tr. HANNAY Alistair). London, 1985. 9.

God may have commandments, but what God is doing with the world, and asks us to join in with when we become persons of faith, is deeper and greater, but more perplexing and more sorrowing, than any sticking to the rules of an ethical code can encompass.

This is why faith cannot be explained, or even put into words. It can only be invoked by the story of what faith 'undergoes,' 'does,' and 'achieves.' A story tells faith's deed, its living.

Indeed, the Old Testament has little theology, if any at all; it has little in the way of creeds or doctrines; it has a moral yoke, and a burning love for righteousness and social justice in regard to the whole communal setup, not just the individual.

Yet, the Old Testament is not at all a compendium of moral exhortations; it is a strange and beautiful series of stories, in which persons of faith, who are seeking righteousness and justice, not only betray it, but are placed in testing situations that reverse and render paradoxical what it means to love righteousness and justice.

All Jewish moral concerns are put in a bigger and deeper context of faith throughout the Old Testament stories. The hero or heroine of faith often has to transgress morality to find what morality serves, not as an end in itself, but pointing to something profounder.

Faith requires what God calls "truth in the inward parts," and a change of heart motivation, a change of basic heart stand. The Old Testament is sacred because it tells the story, and stories, of faith.

3. Passionate Faith

Faith is passionate, not æsthetic, not ethical—thus KIERKEGAARD puts faith way beyond the relativising (liberal) æsthetic life, a kind of superficial and desperate eros, and way beyond the universalising (conservative) ethical life, a kind of superficial and rigid thymos.

And faith is not what we start with, as children, but is, rather, what we should aim to end with as adults. "No one goes further." Out of faith comes the holy passion of love's sacrifice.

III. Faith vs. Resignation

KIERKEGAARD has a section where he distinguishes the 'knight of resignation' from the 'knight of faith.' He paradoxically claims that resignation is necessary to faith, but faith is a movement, a step, beyond resignation.

What he means by resignation seems close to what in my writings I have called the *wound of existence*, the inescapable tragedy and suffering of existence that affects every person 'thrown' into this world, though the æsthetic and ethical stances are ways of trying to avoid recognising this.

Resignation implies, then, realising that what we most want from the world cannot be realised; KIERKEGAARD is not speaking here of wanting bad things, but wanting good. The possibility we see in the finite is denied us, by the world's very nature, and through resignation we embrace this sorrowful condition of things.

Faith must 'accept' the woundingness of existence, yet it finds in this loss something that resignation, by itself, cannot find. It finds grounds for hope and meaning in the very loss of hope and meaning.

Viktor FRANKL, who came through the concentration camp, is a supreme illustration of a person of faith having to be resigned, but yet taking some further step in faith not possible to those who are merely resigned.

I think this distinction vital, though I do not think KIERKEGAARD's wrestling with it is his best work. His account does not quite penetrate its inner paradox, though he notes the distinction, and notes it is indeed a paradox to say faith arises just where all hope, all meaning, is lost.

We can put this distinction between resignation alone, and resignation that leads to and includes faith, in another way: is not this the distinction between the so-called religious existentialists, who find in darkness the only real light and fire, who find in suffering the only basis for hope and joy, as opposed to the anti-religious existentialists?

In the former camp I put KIERKEGAARD, MARCEL, JASPERS, BERDYAEV, TILLICH, the later CAMUS, and supremely Martin BUBER. In the latter camp I put NIETZSCHE, HEIDEGGER, the early CAMUS, and supremely Jean Paul SARTRE.

Both camps embrace the inescapable danger, cost, uncertainty and angst of existing; all pitch their tent on the Edge, in the Gap, on the Cross, of existence's wound. Yet for some, this only produces resignation: a strengthening of a sort of existential heroism, an existential 'tough guy' stand; while for others this is the very trial that both destroys pseudo- yet remakes genuine faith.

Both go through the long dark tunnel, the lonesome valley, but in

one stance, this produces resigned acceptance, with its toughening; while in the other stance, this produces the most terrible despair and most grounded faith.

The person of faith 'accepts' in a different way, and somehow emerges from the tunnel changed in a different way, and somehow emerges from the valley to a different place, a *new mystical land* of the heart.

The resigned are loners, but the resigned-with-faith never stand alone, but give themselves away, embracing sacrifice, for their sisters and brothers. Faith is never just faith in God; faith is always also faith in humanity.

In writing an earlier paper on passion, I tried to distinguish these two types of existential struggle and suffering through contrasting BUBER and HEIDEGGER, the person of faith vs. the philosopher of the ontological. I did not resolve it. I do not aim to resolve it here. I want to leave it as a question.

What is the acceptance of existence's wound that makes us stronger and tougher in our isolate stand, and what is the different acceptance of existence's blow and dæmonic fate that reduces us to rubble, or burns us to ashes, yet restores us to a different heroism, a heroism of passion's love—for God, for humanity?

The latter acceptance is just as resigned as the former acceptance; both embrace a savage loss, and say yes to it. Neither believes in religious fairy tales. Both are resigned in the sense KIERKEGAARD defines it, as "renunciation of the human possibility of possessing the whole world."

Yet for one, it is the gate to the proof that the infinite has abandoned the finite, and we are each of us here alone; while for the other, it is the gate to the faith that the infinite must wound the finite to restore it to our care in a new way.

We did not care for the wrong things, but we cared in the wrong way; these things will be returned to our care, but we will care in a new way. This new care will be dead to the old way of caring, and thus it can be called dispassionate; yet, in caring in a new way, without limit or impediment, it can be called the ultimate passionateness.

What is the final demonstration of the foolishness of faith to the one is to the other the profundity that upholds faith. For faith leaps into the abyss not to commit suicide, nor to throw itself away, but to answer a call, and in the trust that it will be upheld.

Resignation renounces the naive hope in the world: that it will deliver to the heart what it wants. Faith loses the world in the same way, but paradoxically restores the heart to love of the world, but in a new way, on a whole new basis.

This new way KIERKEGAARD calls the *absurd*, and I call it the *irrational*. Lost to us as human possibility, the world is 'given back' to us as a divine possibility: the world is regained in faith.

Abraham is not murdering Isaac, nor throwing him away in resigned sadness; Abraham is giving Isaac back to God, so as to receive his son again on a new basis.

IV. Good and Evil Passion

KIERKEGAARD conveys a sense of what Eastern Orthodox Christianity calls the *fallen passions*, and what Buddhism calls *delusive cravings*, in this passage.

"If at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything grand or inconsequential: if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what would life be but despair?"[10]

'A wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions' produces all the nightmares of history, all the big and small soap operas, full of Macbeth's 'sound and fury, signifying nothing'—could a better description of the evil passions as described by the *desert* tradition of Egypt be found?

These passions, despite their noise and tumult, their seeming movement and bogus action, end in *despair*. They do not amount to a hill of beans. They lead nowhere and accomplish nothing. They fill our empty lives, but leave that emptiness worse when their caravan has passed by. Through the delusive cravings and evil passions, we traverse and end up falling into an abyss that is empty, an abyss that is void and vacuous. It sucks our life and our passion down.

But this does not entail, as both Eastern Orthodox and Buddhist monasticism too often suggest, that passion per se is delusive, or passion per se is evil. As the term *fallen* really implies, something true has lost its way and become false; but it can recover, stand up again, and return to honest seriousness and courage towards its task and challenge, by making its sacrificial action. The heart can

10 KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Fear and Trembling* (tr. HANNAY Alistair). London, 1985. 49.

change; the heart that moves in falsity can change direction and move in truth. God will never give up on the human heart.

Thus, there must be no transcending of delusive craving, or evil passion, by ascending into some passionless spiritual state. To aim at this is the huge error in virtually all monasticism, with some important exceptions.

Rather, the delusive craving or evil passion is to be healed and changed—even though this needs a dying—to the true passion of the deep heart that can leap. This is the passion of love's fire, this is the 'burning' in us of faith; such faith heals and restores passion to its true calling, which is to test and prove God's love for the world in our love for the world. Faith tests the nature and dynamic of the only real love we can rely on in this world.

Passion: the finite opening to the infinite, through a wound; passion: the infinite opening to the finite, through a wound.

KIERKEGAARD speaks of faith as the *highest passion*; I prefer to speak of passion as *deep*. And what KIERKEGAARD does not note, oddly, is the parallel between Abraham and Isaac and God and Jesus Christ.

Abraham's agony is a human reflection of something divine. A father called to sacrifice his son: this is the deed that grounds faith, giving to it the vow and promise that upholds it in the abyss where it must leap and where it must struggle and suffer.

But at the last minute this sacrifice is not required of the human—because God is telling the human it is God's sacrifice. Abraham does not have to sacrifice Isaac because God the Father will sacrifice God's only begotten Son, the Logos become divine-human as the Christ.

It is God's faith that is deep, and our faith, leaning on his, becomes deepened. For the sacrifice we make, of the human, out of faith in God, is bound to and leans on the sacrifice God makes, of the divine, out of faith in us.

Praise be to the faith of God in humanity and the faith of humanity in God.

The sacrifice that secures love for the world is irrational, because in it a father sacrifices his child—that another child will not be lost.

Thanks be to the passionate heart of God.

Thanks be to the passionate heart of humanity which carries, as a wound and a burden, the passionate heart of God.

Suggested Reading
HANNAY Alistair, *Søren Aabye Kierkegaard*. London, 1982.
KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Frygt og Bæven* (Fear and Trembling). **København, 1843.**
KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Fear and Trembling* (tr. HANNAY Alistair). London, 1985.
KIERKEGAARD Søren Aabye, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (tr. HONG Howard V. – HONG Edna H.). Princeton, 1992.
LOWRIE Walter, *Short Life of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard*. Princeton, 1965.

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