

Good soren kierkegaard: fear and trembling essay example

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Philosopher Kierkegaard was enthusiastic about his philosophical work and linked it to his own challenges with faith. His scholarly work contributes immense knowledge to modern Christianity. As one of the few Christian apologists in recent times, his best modern philosophical ideology is the notion of the teleological suspension of the ethical.

What is a teleological suspension of the ethical?

Teleology refers to 'belief in' and the study of 'ultimate causes' in nature. Teleology is usually associated with religious philosophy and more specifically Christianity. As such, the teleological suspension of the ethical according to Kierkegaard is the act of abandoning the sound religious beliefs to pursue the 'ultimate cause' of the will of God (Kierkegaard 43). In his teleological suspension of the ethical, Kierkegaard presents that people abandon the normal moral commands in support of a total and unwavering faith in God.

The Kierkegaard's example of the teleological suspension of the ethical consists of the biblical personalities of Abraham and his son Isaac.

Kierkegaard reflects the way God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his own son. This command from God was in blatant contrast to the customary norms regarding murder as well as the paternal love and protection. To Kierkegaard, there exists higher authority than what people consider as the proper norms and that in the actual sense Abraham's actions were in response to a higher authority. As such, Kierkegaard opines that Abraham performed a teleological suspension of the ethical. To Kierkegaard the willingness of Abraham to kill and offer Isaac, his own son, as a sacrifice in a bid to please God was the correct thing to do.

Why is the knight of faith who suspends the ethical in this way not simply a tragic hero?

Near the end of Kierkegaard's discussion regarding whether the authenticity of the teleological suspension of the ethical, he introduces two terms to refer to the people who try to suspend the ethical teleologically: the 'tragic hero' and the 'knight of faith'. In the course of his writing, Kierkegaard attempts to find out whether people can teleologically suspend what he refers to as the ethical by referring to the biblical narrative of Abraham and Isaac as perfect illustration.

In the story Abraham disregards the usual moral standard of a father's love for his child. As such, Abraham's faith is his motivation for suspending the ethical. For Kierkegaard, faith is an extremely focused experience and belief than a person has. This definition is quite different from what people consider to be faith today. Abraham had to take what one may refer to as a 'leap of faith', he was hoping that his son would not die but at the same time he was conscious that his son was going to die. This is what Kierkegaard refers to as trusting faith to trust logic on the part of Abraham. To Kierkegaard, a 'knight of faith' is a person like Abraham.

On the other hand, a 'tragic hero' is a person who offers himself to the ethical and to the universal instead of faith, and is prepared to lose the things he considers to be of greatest value to his being. As such, the knight of faith is simply not the tragic hero because the latter is willing to sacrifice the things he loves most for the good of the society and does not have the chance of re-acquiring those things. Conversely, the knight of faith takes a 'leap of faith', that is, he is willing to lose the thing he loves most but at the

same time he is hoping to retain it for his own good. For instance, Abraham, a knight of faith, was willing to sacrifice his own son, but at the same time hoping to become the father a great nation and he was also believing that Isaac would still live, somehow. As such, the knight of faith who suspends the ethical is simply not a tragic hero because his act is ultimately for his own good while the tragic hero performs a selfless deed despite the fact that he is still suffering loss (41).

How is a knight of faith distinguished from a sinner?

A knight of faith is a person who puts complete faith in God and who is willing to act independently and freely from the world in order to fulfill God's command. This is a person who has no connections or pretensions to earthly possessions. A knight of faith is a person capable of embracing life.

Kierkegaard describes Knighthood as an "internal power" and not a depiction of an extraordinary human being. This is clear when he states thus, "this conviction also ennobles the nature and imparts to her a preternatural greatness" (34). As such, a knight of faith takes exception from a sinner in the strict sense that they do not go about terrifying others.

Ideally, when the ethical is suspended like in the case of Abraham, it does not automatically mean that a person becomes a sinner. For instance, if a child performs in a manner that other people consider the child's actions as bad behavior the actions cannot be taken as sin because the child does not even have complete knowledge of its own existence. Nevertheless, the behavior of the child falls short of what people consider morally acceptable. Taking the foregoing as a point of departure, Abraham did not sin by going

against what was considered ethical. He had faith and lived by his faith therefore he was acting on the basis of his faith. As such, a knight of faith justifies acts that are not within the ethical due to the fact that they act in accordance with the commands of a higher than the universal. Accordingly, a knight of faith is distinguished from a sinner in the sense that a knight of faith is an individual whose universally 'unethical' actions are based on the will of God. As such, an action of a knight of faith such as Abraham surpasses reason. A knight of faith respects the ethical while a sinner does not.

Can we really distinguish the knight in the way that Kierkegaard suggests?

There are three criteria that attempt to distinguish a knight of faith. The first criterion is that a knight of faith cannot be compelled to their activities. For instance, one cannot claim that he detests killing but that he cannot refrain from killing children. A knight must be free. As such a knight can stop at any moment. He can repent and renounce the whole act as a temptation. The second criterion is that a knight of faith must be able to respect the ethical. This is in consideration of their critical reflection. A knight should not consider himself so superior that they believe they do not have to respect what other people consider ethical. For instance, this would be applicable to a person like Hitler if he considered himself charismatic to the point that he did not have to respect the ethical. Thirdly, a knight of faith cannot justify his actions by referring to universal principles. However, this does not apply to people who create their own morals. As such, a false knight of faith is dogmatic. In this regard, if Hitler were to argue that he murdered Jews because science revealed that Jews were bestial, he would not meet the

criteria of a knight of faith.

Kierkegaard makes use of the distinction between God and man to present religious faith as the most reliable and authoritative experience that one can imagine. The manner in which Kierkegaard presents a knight of faith to be it is not possible from a universal point of view to distinguish a knight. Not even philosophers can distinguish unethical acts and acts that occur from unconditional commitment to God like Abraham. This is precisely because the paradox of faith dictates that an individual is greater than the universal. This means that a single individual defines the way he relates to the universal through his relationship with God and not his relationship with God through his universal relation (68). This means that the existing philosophical categories cannot distinguish the acts of selfishness from those acts emanating from unconditional commitments. In the ethical point of view in which many people share, the acts of Abraham are unethical hence he is a criminal as per the universal.

As regards the foregoing, there is no certain criterion for judging whether a universally unethical act is from a knight of faith. People may as well think that Abraham's act was motivated by a compulsion similar to that which child molesters have or the inclinations that are borne by individuals who attempt to kill their siblings because of their fixations (21). As such, people cannot assume that people who carry out unethical acts such as murder are acting in accordance to commands from a higher authority therefore knights of faith. If such a scenario were to occur there is a danger of encouraging serial killers and fanatical mass murderers like Hitler to continue killing.

Work Cited

Kierkegaard, Sören. Fear and Trembling. Wilder Publications, 2008.