

The Absurd and the Incomprehensibility of Faith in *Fear and Trembling*

At the core of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* lies the question: what does it mean to have faith? Writing under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard explores this question through the biblical story of Abraham, in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. Johannes considers the view that Abraham's actions represent the highest expression of faith and explores the implications of such a claim. He draws two key conclusions: (1) Abraham's faith necessitates a recourse to the absurd, and (2) Abraham's actions are incomprehensible— they cannot be understood.

This paper will examine how Johannes arrives at these conclusions. First, we will explore the *incomprehensibility* of Abraham's actions through the distinction between the *tragic hero* and the *knight of faith*. Next, by contrasting the *knight of infinite resignation* with the *knight of faith*, we will uncover a crucial aspect of the *absurd*.

The claim that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is *incomprehensible* lends itself to the questions: incomprehensible to who? What, then, is comprehensible? For Johannes, Abraham's actions cannot be understood through the language of *ethics*. In *Problem 1: Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?*, he writes "Abraham's relation to Isaac, ethically speaking, is quite simply this, that the father must love the son more than himself" (pg 49). By being willing to kill his son, Abraham suspends this ethical obligation. But in isolation, this does not imply that Abraham's action is unethical. Johannes admits that "the ethical has within its own scope several gradations" (pg 49). In other words, it's possible for Abraham's decision, which suspends his ethical obligation to his son, to remain in the realm of the ethical if it can be justified in a "higher expression of the ethical".

This category of ethical expressions that suspends lower ethical obligations for higher ones is characterized by Johannes' archetype of the *tragic hero*. The *tragic hero* is best described as the "beloved son of ethics" (pg 99)— someone whose actions always assume the highest ethical expression possible, independent of the personal cost incurred. To explain the *tragic hero*, Johannes tells the story of Agamemnon, who sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia so that the Greeks can safely sail to Troy. In this example, Agamemnon clearly suspends his ethical obligation to his daughter. However, his decision is *justified* in the ethical realm because he has a higher ethical obligation to his whole fleet than to his daughter. He suffers unbearably through a tragic loss so that his action has a "telos in a higher expression of the ethical" (pg 51). Thus, for the *tragic hero*, there is no teleological suspension of the ethical as a whole.

In Agamemnon's story, his sacrifice is *justified* and can be *comprehended* by the rest of society. Johannes thinks that this *comprehensibility* is derived by the *mediation* that the ethical provides to his action. For Johannes, "The ethical is the universal, and the universal applies to everyone" (pg 46). Since every human being's ethical task is "to express himself in [the universal]" (pg 46), ethical actions are synonymous with actions that are understood by society at large. Agamemnon's actions are *mediated* through the *universal* and are therefore comprehensible.

In contrast to the *tragic hero*, we have the *knight of faith* as epitomized by Abraham. For Johannes, Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac does not have its telos in a higher expression of the ethical— there is no justification in the *universal* for the murder. Why then does Abraham suspend his ethical duty to his son? Johannes suggests that the telos of Abraham's decision transcends the *ethical* framework that we use to evaluate the morality of others' actions. At the moment he decides to kill his son, Abraham "as the single individual became higher than the universal" (pg 58). Through his faith, Abraham "stands in absolute relation to

the absolute” (pg 48) and abandons moral considerations. His commitment to God (i.e. the absolute), is higher than his commitment to the *universal*. This is the essence of faith for Johannes. Abraham’s greatness is fundamentally different from that of the tragic hero— “while the tragic hero is great by his ethical virtue, Abraham is great by a purely personal virtue” (pg 52).

But why is Abraham *incomprehensible*? Why does this difference in rationale leave the *knight of faith* far less understood than the *tragic hero*? Johannes argues that Abraham’s absolute duty to God is fundamentally a *private* one. It is not *disclosed*; it has no witnesses. If Abraham tried to make himself comprehensible to others he would need to speak— he would need to explain himself. But “Abraham keeps silent— he *cannot* speak” (pg 100). For Johannes, “the relief in speaking is that it translates [him] into the universal” (pg 100). In other words, to speak and to be understood by others is to appeal to the *universal*. But Abraham leaves behind the *universal*, defies it, in order to stay true to his absolute and *private* duty to the absolute as carried out by his faith. This leaves Abraham *incomprehensible*— no one can understand him. The *ethical* realm, on the other hand, “demands disclosure” (pg 99) and “punishes concealment” (pg 75). In Agememnon’s story “the significance of his deed [is] certainly obvious to everybody” (pg 102), which allows him to be *comprehensible* by society at large. Thus, the *tragic hero*’s considerations are entirely *disclosed* when his actions express the highest form of the *ethical*, but the *knight of faith*’s considerations are entirely *private* and unintelligible when his actions express the highest form of faith. In this way, Johannes concludes that Abraham’s decision is *incomprehensible*.

But Johannes thinks that Abraham’s difficulties do not end with the loneliness and anxiety that accompany his *incomprehensibility*. In order to be the *knight of faith*, Abraham was required to step into the realm of the *absurd*— he needed to believe in the occurrence of

events that are preposterous to human experience. Johannes explains this recourse to the *absurd* by way of contrast between the *knight of infinite resignation* and the *knight of faith*.

Johannes's *knight of infinite resignation* is an intermediate step along the path to becoming a *knight of faith*: "Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that whoever has not made this movement does not have faith" (pg 39). Infinite resignation involves an absolute willingness to immolate the ethical and the finite world for the sake of the infinite (i.e. God).

This archetype is best exemplified through a man who is obsessed and completely defined by his love for a princess: "to concentrate the whole content of life and meaning of actuality into one single wish" (pg 36). His act of infinite resignation comes when he decides to make the "movement" by renouncing the possibility of being in a relationship with the princess.

Importantly, this knight does not recourse to the absurd. He has no hopes that a miracle would allow them to be together in the distant future: "he assured himself of the impossibility". But he still "keeps his love just as young as it was in the first moment", for his resignation is still infinite.

According to Johannes, Abraham has certainly made the movement of infinite resignation, but the element of resignation is not what makes him the epitome of faith. Instead, it was that Abraham "believed that God would not demand Isaac of him" (pg 29) even though he was still willing to sacrifice Isaac if God demanded. Abraham undertook a "double movement" where he "regained his original condition" (pg 29) and received Isaac with joy. For Johannes, this reception of Isaac in joy is utterly incomprehensible when viewed from the lens of ordinary experience. If Abraham was only a *knight of infinite resignation*, he would've been willing to sacrifice Isaac—renouncing the finite for the infinite—but would not be able to do anything but keep "Isaac with pain" (pg 29) after God stops him from killing Isaac.

The second movement of the “double movement”—believing that God would revoke his demand—is only made possible by faith that is carried out “by virtue of the absurd” (pg 30). For Johannes, Abraham’s faith required the astonishing admission that his belief appears impossible from the perspective of human experience. Abraham renounces the finite, just as any *knight of infinite resignation* would, but simultaneously believes that he will obtain the finite back by virtue of the *absurd*. His faith lies precisely in the belief that God’s goodness, even as expressed by the finite nature of daily concerns, would not allow him to kill Isaac even though human experience would suggest that this is impossible. This is why the highest expression of faith requires a recourse to the *absurd* for Johannes.

But Johannes’s concept of the *absurd* goes beyond this “belief in the seemingly impossible” in a way that is inextricably tied to *incomprehensibility*. In his discussion of Abraham’s teleological suspension of the ethical, Johannes writes “Abraham acts by virtue of the absurd, for the absurd is precisely that he as the single individual is higher than the universal” (pg 49). In the conception, the *absurd* is portrayed as a mechanism through which Abraham is able to follow through with his “absolute duty to the absolute” and leave the *ethical realm* behind. From this point of view, we see that Abraham acting out the *absurd* is tantamount to making himself *incomprehensible* to others, and both are required by faith. For Johannes, this is a paradox. Abraham’s life is “not only the most paradoxical that can be thought, but so paradoxical that it cannot be thought at all (pg 49)”. In this way, the absurd is not just an epistemic challenge but the very foundation of faith itself. Abraham’s faith defies reason, resists articulation, and remains irreducible to ethical justification—rendering it not only incomprehensible but wholly paradoxical.

From this analysis of the *absurd* and *incomprehensibility*, we find that a particularly radical conception of *faith* begins to appear—one that ridicules the idea that *faith* is an easy task to

achieve. This conception of *faith* is also one that cannot be reduced to words as it points out the limitations of language to express ideas that transcend the *universal*. *Faith*, then, transforms into something elusive. It is both something that is “appalling” (pg 53) and “the highest passion in a human being” (pg 108). Johannes’s account reveals that faith is neither a mere comfort nor a simple virtue—it is an unsettling paradox that demands both total surrender and an unshakable hope in the impossible. To truly have faith is not to merely believe in God, but to step beyond the common understanding and ethical systems that binds us as human beings, to embrace the *absurd* and remain utterly *incomprehensible*.