



Re-Searching Unique Experience for Our Experience: Kierkegaard's Question and Method

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Kierkegaard's Question

In *Fear and Trembling* (1983), a phenomenology of faith, Kierkegaard leaves the common ground of the everyday experience of faith. We agree that we live by faith. "We believe that the chairs we sit on will support us. We believe that the weigh scales are accurate. We believe . . ." We make faith appear incidental to the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life. Such faith needs no father to care for it. Yet Abraham was the father of faith.

Kierkegaard journeys to the estranged ground of the literary work of art, the Biblical account of the faith of Abraham. He fulfills the literary work of art by being there. "Finally, he forgot everything else because of it; his soul had but one wish, to see Abraham, but one longing, to have witnessed that event" (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 9). "Occupied" by the "shudder of an idea" (p. 9), Kierkegaard becomes the open place of a question: Who can understand Abraham?

And God did tempt Abraham . . . And He said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off . . .

And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and beheld behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns, and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

(Genesis 22:1-13)

Kierkegaard's Method

Artistic Response to the Text

Responding to this text, Kierkegaard is artist. The relationship between God and Abraham strives for unconcealment in Kierkegaard's stories of how Abraham could have lived the experience with Isaac—how a mother could live the experience of weaning with her child (pp. 10-14). In love, the mother withholds her warmth and sustenance from the child at the right time. And the child lives on by faith in the mother, for who else is the source of sustenance?

Abraham lived by faith, sojourning in a foreign land, daily bereft of the companionship and language of his kin. His homeland was the promise of God. Abraham grew old waiting for the fulfillment of the promise, the birth of his only son, Isaac, through whom his descendants would be named inheritors of the promised land. And each time Abraham looked on Isaac his son, he saw God his father. How could Abraham ever be weaned from one without losing all?

Thematic Response to the Text

Love transforms Abraham's ordeal from murder into tragedy; faith transforms it from tragedy into a "holy and God-pleasing act, a paradox that gives Isaac back to Abraham again" (p. 53). Kierkegaard researches three themes of faith that have come to light in response to the Biblical text.

1. "*Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?*" (p. 54). "In ethical terms, Abraham's relation to Isaac is quite simply this: the father shall love the son more than himself" (p. 57). If Abraham had sacrificed himself, all human beings would understand the selfless act, for he was the father of Isaac—he loved his son more than himself. If Abraham had turned back at any time during the ordeal, all human beings would understand the rational act, for he was the father of Isaac—he loved the son whom he had seen more than God whom he had not seen. More deeply, how could Abraham love Isaac less by loving God more? Yet who can understand Abraham? He was the father of faith—he was willing to lose all, and, at every moment, he believed he would receive all back again.

2. *"Is there an absolute duty to God?"* (p. 68). The tragic hero (for example, Terry Fox), relinquishes one (himself) for the sake of the ethical (universal). Abraham relinquishes the ethical for the sake of one. "For God's sake and—the two are wholly identical—for his own sake. He does it for God's sake because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake so that he can prove it" (p. 60). The tragic hero's relationship to the absolute is determined by his relationship to the ethical, his duty to man. Abraham's relationship to the ethical is determined by his relationship to the absolute, his duty to God. "The paradox of faith, then, is this," Kierkegaard writes, "that the single individual is higher than the universal" (p. 70).
3. *"Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his understanding from Sarah, Eliezer, and from Isaac?"* (p. 82). The tragic hero speaks a universal language. Abraham speaks "in tongues" (p. 114). He speaks the truth that conceals the truth from Isaac, his son. He keeps silence with Sarah, his wife, and Eliezer, his servant. Kierkegaard writes that he longed to "go along on the three day journey when Abraham rode with sorrow before him and Isaac beside him" (p. 9). For he recognized the sorrow of silence—the sorrow of the individual without community. Abraham is cut off from all for the sake of the One who justifies him. Yet, at every moment, faith transforms the ordeal into personal victory. Who can understand Abraham?

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Our Response to Kierkegaard's Text

The question, "Who can understand Abraham?" is permeated by the question, "How ought we to live?" This question is given to us as a possibility for living in faith. There is nothing in the world that we can see or touch that has the name, faith. When we speak of faith, we name a manner of openness, a way of living in the question. We name a man, Abraham. Research in the human sciences begins with the name of a human being, the re-collection of a life. This life is, in some sense, not only one life but our life; it is our ordeal, our possibility.

For many of us, Abraham had long ago ceased to be a man on a journey to obey God. He was already the patriarch and there were no questions in us. But Kierkegaard begins where the Biblical work of art begins, with one moment in the life of a man. Thus, Kierkegaard's re-search mediates between the literary work of art and our forgetfulness of the beginning.

Beginning with one life, Kierkegaard *is* ("lets essentially unfold") (Heidegger, 1977, p. 140) the open place for the concealing-unconcealing of the beginning: faith. Faith is free to be what it is in Kierkegaard's response to Abraham's life, a new work of art.

Kierkegaard, a human being like Abraham, is put into question by the themes of faith that “speak” through this work of art. As he dialogues with these themes, our understanding of faith deepens. At the same time, our awe increases. So Kierkegaard’s writing is not the last word but an other word, a word that finds its fulfillment in us. Forever, Abraham begins his homecoming journey.

References

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- Kierkegaard, S. (1983). *Fear and trembling/repetition*. H. Hong & E. Hong (Eds.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.