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Kant and his successors

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Concepts of Faith - A Kierkegaardian and Mormon Dialectic

Faith is one of those ideas that just begs to be looked at under the lens of philosophy. Even if one doesn't believe in God, believing in something seems to be one of the fundamental aspects of being human. There seems to be an aspect of faith that goes against reason. Sometimes its a small thing like not putting on your seatbelt and having faith that you wont get into an accident. Other times its a big thing like walking across the freeway and hoping not to get hit. In this paper I will examine two systems of faith. The first is from *Fear and Trembling* by Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher. The second is from *Lectures on Faith*, a text from the LDS church about their concept of faith. These two concepts of faith appear on the surface to be antagonistic, primarily because Kierkegaard is generally thought to espouse irrationality while the *Lectures on Faith* seem to describe a rational approach. I'll begin by examining Kierkegaards idea of faith.

Kierkegaard says that faith "is a monstrous paradox capable of transforming murder into an holy act... ..a paradox... ..which no thought can grasp because [it] begins precisely where thinking leaves off." This might seem like a warning to those of us who try to muscle our way around with brainpower that the road ahead is impassible. Fortunately Kierkegaard himself paved the way for us to follow. He explains that he can

describe the various features that make up the paradox of faith without being able to understand it. I think it's a good path to travel.

Kierkegaard dives into the meaty parts of the paradox of faith with the story of Abraham and Isaac. Assuming that we are already familiar with the basics of the story, let's look at where Kierkegaard says the paradox occurs. Abraham is given a son, Isaac, in a miraculous way to fulfill the covenant that God made with him. Then God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. If he kills Isaac, then Abraham will not have his promised progeny. If he does not kill Isaac, he violates his obedience and faith to God, and thereby loses his covenant. How is Abraham's covenant going to be fulfilled if he kills Isaac? This is Abraham's paradox, and yet he is not defeated by it. Abraham is called the father of faith for this very reason. He retains his faith not by denying the paradox, but by making it a part of himself. Abraham believes both that through Isaac he will be the father of many nations *and* that he will kill Isaac. Abraham's faith consists of this terrible dialectic. These two requests from God appear to be at odds with each other. In fact, according to reason they *are* at odds with each other. There is no possible way that both things can happen. This is the nature of the paradox of faith.

The journey to acquire faith is like walking a tightrope that has been covered in Vaseline. It requires a precision of balance that for Kierkegaard is impossible. He does however, describe the approach to faith. Kierkegaard talks about making a double movement into faith. Abraham made the first movement by accepting the fact that he was going to sacrifice Isaac, and he made the second movement by believing that he would retain Isaac in this life so that his promise from God would be fulfilled.

Kierkegaard describes these movements as moving from the finite to the infinite and then back to the finite. Its another way of describing a paradox. By definition the infinite is impenetrable because it has no boundaries or edges to penetrate or cross. Also, the infinite has no possible way of dividing its self or condensing its self to have something finite distill from it. Even so, for Kierkegaard this is the way of faith. In the first movement Abraham decides that he is going to sacrifice Isaac. This cannot be a halfhearted decision. If he hides the thought that maybe God will not have him sacrifice Isaac after all, that somehow God will change his mind, then Abraham does not take the paradox within himself and he loses his faith. He must be infinitely resigned to killing Isaac. It is in this decision that Abraham moves from the finite to the infinite. It is in the finite world that Isaac is his beloved son in this life, right here and now. It is in this life that Abraham's seed will cover the earth. Abraham starts with these things, which are finite. It is in resigning himself absolutely, or infinitely, to eliminate these finite things that Abraham makes the first movement.

But what of this infinite resignation? Kierkegaard uses an example of a young man who falls in love with a princess to help us understand. This young man realizes that it will be impossible for him to actually have a relationship with the princess. However he is not fooled into resigning the love that he feels, only that he will never realize it with the princess. He does not shrink away from his love, but he lets it wash over him, for it is the thing which brings him the most happiness. In this state of love-saturation he must do two things that allow him to make the move into infinite resignation. The first is that he must concentrate the entire meaning of his life into a single wish(pg 47). His

whole life, his entire reason for being must be for his love of the princess. If he does not do this he will never have enough focus to make the movement of infinite resignation because he will always be worried about what is happening with his other interests or wishes. The second thing he must do is turn that single wish into one act of consciousness. Because it is impossible for the young man to bring about the relationship into reality, he makes the mental choice of transforming his love into a “love for the eternal being which, although it denied fulfillment, still reconciled him once more in the eternal consciousness of his love’s validity in an eternal form”(pg 49). In other words, he moved his love for the princess into an eternal space, akin to God who’s love is eternal, where it would never change and where it would always remain. Unless he does this he will always be worried that something has been left undone, so he will go back to do it instead of making the movement. One clear sign that this is infinite resignation is that the princess can now do whatever she wants, he no longer needs to pay attention to her to maintain his love. It is in the eternal realm and needs no more validation, but survives on its own in the young man. He is at peace because no situation can take this love from him. It is true that the memories of the princess cause the young man pain, yet it is in this pain that he is reconciled to life. Infinite resignation becomes a safe haven for those who have the fortitude and discipline to reach it.

So far it seems a mighty task just to reach this first movement. It is difficult, it is painful, and yet this is not faith. Kierkegaard says that “Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith; for only in infinite resignation does my eternal validity become transparent to me,

and only then can there be talk of existence on the strength of faith.” (p52) When someone moves into infinite resignation, they become aware of their eternal value, because it is in the eternal realm where they find their peace and solace. How then is faith any better than infinite resignation? If existence in this life can become peaceful and full of solace, without faith, why would we want it? Remember that this world is a constant reminder of the impossibility of realizing our desire, and that it is only from that pain of that memory that we move to infinite resignation. If we move no further than infinite resignation we are stuck with that pain. We continue to live here because we have to, but we don’t have to like it. When we have faith we continue to live here because we love being here.

After having made the first movement, or the movement from the finite to the infinite, we must now consider the second, or of the infinite back to the finite. Lets continue to use Kierkegaards example of the young man. After he has made his movement into infinite resignation, or believing that he will never have the relationship that he so desires, he makes the second movement, wherein he believes that that he will in this life get the princess. He is both infinitely resigned that he will never get her and completely convinced that he will. He recognizes the paradox that is before him, and instead of balking or crumbling or running away, he takes it into himself. He does this because he believes that for God all things are possible. Kierkegaard says that this young man believes on the strength of the absurd, or the impossible. Kierkegaard wants to make it clear that this absurdness is not something that is merely “the improbable, the unexpected, or the unforeseen.”(pg 52) The young man was convinced

that to get the princess was impossible, and he had used his entire intellectual capacity as well as the whole of his emotional self to maintain this idea in infinite resignation. Abraham knew that he must sacrifice Isaac, and so he had set to it in his heart that he was going to do it even though it broke his heart to do so. The paradox can only exist when there is real absurdity and impossibility. If it is only unlikely that the young man will not get the princess then the risk he takes is not large enough to allow him to commit his whole soul to infinite resignation. He will not have left the finite for the infinite for he still holds on to hope for something in the finite world. It is only in the movement from the finite to the infinite and back to the finite where we find faith, and where we find the paradox. Kierkegaard explains that resignation does not require faith because what he gains when he resigns the finite is his love of God, which is higher than anything. When we talk about it with these terms, the paradox may seem to become a little more real to us. He is saying that having faith means that after forsaking the world and gaining our love of God one goes back and loves the world again. He says that after having won his eternal love for God through infinite resignation "it takes a paradoxical and humble courage then to grasp the whole of temporality on the strength of the absurd, and that courage is the courage of faith. Through faith Abraham did not renounce his claim on Isaac, through faith he received Isaac."(pg 55) We cannot do this with our own strength because it takes everything we've got to renounce the world, we must have "more-than-human powers".(pg 54) Through resignation we lose the world, through faith we get it back.

Now that we have a good understanding of what faith means for Kierkegaard we can ask what he thought of the meaning behind the story of Abraham and Isaac. Is it merely a trial, something that he endured for a season and then was finished with? If this is the case, then might not we also think to ourselves that all of life is a trial and that it will all be over soon? Kierkegaard shudders at this thought. Abraham is not a symbol of one who endures the misery and woe thrust upon him by a paradoxical God. No, he is a symbol of one who relished in the beauty and richness of life because of his faith, a faith only born in paradox. Abraham is significant because he first was strong enough to recognize the paradox, and second because he embraced it.

What are the implications of this paradoxical nature of faith? The first and most obvious question is to ask how Abraham was not a murderer. It says in Gen 21:16 "...thou hast done this thing..." The angel of the Lord spoke as if Abraham had followed through with the act. Suppose he had actually killed Isaac, would he be a murderer then? Kierkegaard says no. Why don't the regular rules or laws of ethics or morals apply to Abraham? Kierkegaard equates the ethical with the universal. He is no relativist in this sense. A person conforms their actions to the universal to remain moral, and if they abandon the universal then they fall into sin. Abraham's ethical duty to his son is obvious, he is required to love him as a father should. Accordingly then, killing Isaac goes against the universal ethical grain. How does Abraham remain a venerated man? He steps over the universal into a higher particular. Simply put, God gave him a personal command that allowed him to jump over the universal. Abraham complied for two reasons, for God's sake and for his own. He obeyed for God's sake because God

required proof that Abraham had faith, and he obeyed for his own sake in order to produce the needed proof. Kierkegaard says this is usually labeled as a temptation, but since the thing that is tempting Abraham is the universal or the ethical, he wants to place Abraham in a different category than one who is being tempted. He says that Abraham is in a position that uniquely relates him to God that is unlike the relationship he had before he had faith. "The paradox is that he puts himself as the single individual in an absolute relation to the absolute" (pg 72). Abraham now has a new relationship with God, an absolute relationship. What this exactly means I don't know, but what Kierkegaard says it does is suspend the universal laws of ethics for Abraham. Because Abraham was following the personal commandments of God in faith, or while maintaining the paradox, he was not a murderer. The next question must then be, does a person of faith have a duty to God that is above the normal ethical laws? In answering this question Kierkegaard begins to reveal his conception of the nature of God. He says that the since the ethical is the universal, acting in harmony with the laws of ethics would put us into a relationship with God. In his words "the duty becomes a duty to God by being referred to God, but I do not enter into relation with God in the duty itself. Thus it is a duty to love ones neighbor" (pg 80). When we then do our duty to our neighbor, we are still not entering into a relationship with God directly, but indirectly through the relationship of our neighbor. This turns all of human existence in on its self, for when we love God we only love our neighbor and it never gets further than that. God, then, becomes invisible and disappears from the world. When we hold Abraham and his act up to this light he is nothing more than a murderer, for his duty to God is his duty to

Isaac. What is different then? Again Kierkegaard turns to this idea of paradox. The idea that there is a higher personal relationship to be had with God than the relationship we get when we act in accordance with our duty to our neighbor. It is only in the paradox that this relationship surfaces. When we are in this special relationship we are exempt from the universal laws of ethics because we have a direct connection. Our relationship to the universal laws of ethics are determined from the direction of the absolute relating to the universal, and not the universal to the absolute(pg82). Ethics claim upon us is based upon our relation to God while we are in the paradox.

It is worth mentioning that the entire time that one is in the paradox of faith they cannot describe or tell another person why they are doing what they are doing. When they attempt to tell someone their answers sound like gibberish. When pressed maybe Abraham would say that it is precisely because he loves Isaac more than everything in the world that it is so hard to sacrifice him. He expresses the paradox, but we cannot understand it. We gain nothing from this communication save that it is a paradox. This turns on the whole of Kierkegaards philosophical system, even though he would deny that he was building a system. This emphasis on the individuals experience of the world, of his existence in it, is the foundation of his thought. Abraham cannot really explain what he is doing or why he is doing it. Because I am not abraham I would not be able to really understand what he told me even if he could explain it, because I am not him. In a state of paradox we can only relate to ourselves and to God. Thus the futility of trying to get a faithful person to speak.

We are now ready to turn our attention to the nature of faith as described in the LDS tradition. As mentioned before I will be using *The Lectures on Faith* as my primary text. A primary distinction that needs to be made here in the beginning is the radical differences of the nature of God between these two views. Kierkegaard believed in the traditional Christian conception the Trinity, that God is immaterial, possessed the omni-qualities, is immutable, impassable, is the unmoved mover, etc... The LDS belief is that God is a perfected man. What they mean by God then needs to be distinguished as God the Father. They believe that he has a body and passions. He is in effect a perfected man. These distinctions will become apparent in our comparisons of the ideas of faith.

The *Lectures* defines faith in its opening section as the 'first great principle' that is the source of all action in all intelligent beings and the source of all power to action(pg 2). Faith is two things then, it is action and it is power. Salvation is defined as having the "glory, majesty, power and dominion which Jehovah possesses"(pg 73). Faith is thus like the first cause in a sense, for it is the first principle of movement and action in the universe -- including God's own actions(pg 21). So, the *Lectures on Faith* claim to go behind the principle that everything that moves must have a cause. They state that the principle that moves God himself and by which he acts is faith. Just as Kierkegaard used faith as a paradox to move beyond rules of logic, the *Lectures* use it as the principle of first action to make the same movement. It seems to me that they also make the movement for the same purpose, to have an interpersonal relationship with God. The only way for Kierkegaard to obtain this relationship is to enter into paradox. It

is only there that he can have access to the relationship because God himself is a kind of paradox. Kierkegaard in a sense attempts to make himself more like God by holding the paradox within him in order to have access to God. In the paradox it is possible for the infinite and the finite to meet. The ultimate expression of this is the incarnation of Jesus Christ, where God(in the Kierkegaardian sense) became man. The LDS position (as far as the *Lectures on Faith* are a part of that view) draws the nature of the relationship between God and man as being dependent upon each others characters. The more that mans characteristics becomes like Gods characteristics, the better man can relate to him.

The focus of *The Lectures* is simply the requirements that rationally allow persons to stand in a faithful relationship of salvation with God. They describe the character a being(God) must have to inspire faithful trust without reservation. They state that human knowledge of God(and importantly his character) comes either from the testimony and traditions of others or from personal experience alone. If God does not reveal himself we have no way of knowing what his character and attributes may be(pg23). They are not discovered through any rules or logic. The *Lectures* then go on to describe some of the characteristics of God, which are: that God was before the world was created and is the same God after it was created; that he is merciful, that he changes not; that he cannot lie; that he is no respecter of persons; and that he is love. Because the *Lectures* are focusing on God's character and not his attributes, when they say that "God changes not, neither is there any variableness in Him," there is no thought of the classical doctrine of immutability. Rather, they are saying that God is steadfast

and reliable in his character. In order to exercise rational faith in God one must be assured that he does not change in his character “because without this, we would not know how soon the mercy of God might change into cruelty”(pg 47). Because the *Lectures* focus on the immutability of Gods character instead of his being they avoid many of the problems of classical christian theology and instead emphasize a God concerned with interpersonal faithfulness and commitment to him.

Next the *Lectures* talk about some of the attributes of God. They discuss his knowledge, power, justice, mercy and truth. They do not emphasize that he has all power, or that whatever is logically possible God can do, but rather that we can trust him as the source of our salvation because he is our invincible ally. He doesn't need unlimited power, but only enough to insure the salvation of those who have faith in him.

How does this relate to the story of Abraham and Isaac? Because faith is an attribute that God possesses, Abraham, in order to be like him(in order to gain his salvation), must at some point in time gain the same kind of faith that God the Father has. This experience could be viewed as one of the experiences Abraham has along the way to his becoming like God. We can see that there is an obvious similarity between the Abraham and Isaac story and the Christian narrative. Isaac symbolizes Jesus Christ (the imagery is strong, Isaac carries the wood for the sacrificial altar on his back, and they both referred to a lamb for sacrifice), Abraham symbolizes God the Father. Abraham was learning something about the anguish of God the Father, and in doing so he could relate to God the Father that much better than someone who hadn't done that. Is the anguish still present? Yes, because God the Father has experienced

even greater anguish in the giving of Jesus Christ to be sacrificed. Does it demean the story to say that this was just a trial for Abraham? The meaning of a trial or a temptation is different for a member of the LDS faith because they have the goal of becoming like God. Each trial or temptation gives them the opportunity to develop their character. In the LDS scriptures it speaks about those who wish to be like God, that “they must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son.”(D&C 101:4) This scripture should get the attention of all who profess the LDS faith! It’s not a pleasant or easy thing to try on God’s character.

The *Lectures* state that “In him the principle of faith dwells independently, and he is the object in whom the faith of all other rational and accountable beings centers for life and salvation” (pg 9). What does it mean that the faith that God has exists in himself independently? I think that it means he has complete trust in himself to carry out his plan. God has, among others, attributes of power, knowledge, and a character of absolute honesty and love that humans don’t have but must have to be like him. Thus, his power resides in the absolute faith he has in his own trustworthiness and steadfast character. He knows he can be trusted. God’s faith differs from ours because of the perfection of his attributes and character. The *Lectures* say “we do observe that God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fulness and perfection dwell... In him every good gift and every good principle dwell(pg 9). Lecture 3 discusses at great length how it is that God’s attributes make him trustworthy and the center of faith for those who trust him. “Let us here observe that three things are necessary for any rational and intelligent being to exercise faith in God unto life and

salvation ... a correct idea of his character, perfections, and attributes.” (pg 39) Further, the nature of God’s honesty, fairness and steadfastness are characteristics necessary for faith (which obviously entails “trust”). The faith that God has in himself is not interpersonal (or relationally dependent) but ours is because it is not independent but dependent on him. The latter is interpersonal of necessity; the former is not of necessity. Faith in God is necessarily interpersonal because we must trust him and his character and attributes make him absolutely trustworthy.

How does the concept of infinite resignation fit with the LDS concept of faith? If God contains the fulness of faith in the LDS concept, does God move through infinite resignation before he arrives at faith? For God to make the movement of infinite resignation he would need something that he both wanted to do with his whole being and that was impossible for him to do. Is there such a thing in LDS thought? I think that there is. Let’s try and work it out. One of the foundational concepts in mormonism is that of free will. It is central to the entire scheme. They believe that we existed before we were born on the earth, and that among other things there was a war over this free will. LDS think it is God’s ultimate desire that we enter into relationship with him and become like him. Coming to earth means a necessary alienation from him. However, God cannot force us to choose to enter into a relationship with him because of our free will. He knows that because of our free will some will not choose him. Is it possible for him to be infinitely resigned to the impossibility of everyone choosing to come back to him? Possibly. If so, where does his faith come in? If he has faith in himself then he must provide his own solution. He devises a plan that will allow everyone to come back

into his presence, at least temporarily. He sends Jesus Christ, which allows everyone to be resurrected and brought back into the Fathers presence for judgement. Everyone that chooses Christ will be able to remain in the Fathers presence, and those who do not will remove themselves from his presence due to their own discomfort. Does this scenario fit Kierkegaards movements of faith? Not entirely, but it was fun to work out. I think that the idea of infinite resignation can work for a mormon having faith in their God, but not for the mormons God himself. Infinite resignation seems to work only inside a faith that is dependent on another.

Kierkegaard and mormonism express similar attitudes about the primacy of having personal spiritual experiences, and about not shrinking from the anguish that is associated with devoting oneself to God. I think that even though their concepts of the nature of God are miles apart, they are aiming at a very similar earthly experience. They both point out that logic will not help someone have a personal spiritual experience, but I hesitate to say that they must then be irrational.