

Sin and Faith: Limits of Ethical Reflection

The lecture was given on November 15, 2013 as part of the conference “Kierkegaard and the Present Age,” celebrating the bicentennial of Søren Kierkegaard’s birth, Provo, Utah

1

My point of departure is this statement from *Fear and Trembling*:

An ethics that ignores sin is a completely futile discipline, but if it affirms sin, then it has *eo ipso* exceeded itself. (98-99)¹

By calling ethics a completely futile discipline if it ignores the reality of sin Kierkegaard’s Johannes de Silentio renders all of what we usually call ethics questionable, accuses it of overlooking something fundamental. Ethics, he insists, needs to reckon with the reality of sin. But if it recognizes sin, he asserts, then ethics is no longer just ethics, but has gone beyond itself, turned to religion. This claims that divorced from religion ethics is a futile discipline. Both, utilitarian ethics with its principle of utility, which insists on the primacy of the immediacy of pleasure and pain, and Kantian ethics with its categorical imperative and its emphasis on the universal, are here called into question. The Kantian to be sure would seem to have an immediate rejoinder: Did not Kant in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* make what would appear to be a very similar claim? Morality, we read there, leads necessarily (*unumgänglich*) to religion (BA IX). To be sure, as already the title of his work proclaims, Kant would not have us understand this to mean that morality requires religion as a ground or foundation. The primacy of reason goes unchallenged. Religion is understood rather as the necessary consequence of our finally unjustifiable, but indispensable conviction that our moral actions are not altogether vain, but will contribute to making this world an at least somewhat better place, that the good and the real are linked in a way that surpasses our understanding. As a regulative ideal the idea of the highest good, a state where happiness coincides with what duty commands, where freedom and necessity are in harmony, presides over the moral life. Faith that this ideal

¹ Page references in the text are to Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

is not altogether out of reach is a necessary part of the moral life. The conviction that pure practical reason is sufficient to ground morality goes here unchallenged.

Kierkegaard's Johannes de Silentio calls such confidence in reason into question. Reason alone, he claims, whether instrumental or legislative, is unable to furnish ethics with an adequate foundation: the more deeply we examine its claims, the more we confront the reality of sin and with it the abyss of freedom, an abyss that draws us beyond whatever boundaries reason may have tried to establish for ethics. Sin is a concept that belongs to a religion that refuses to take its place within the limits of reason alone.

Must we agree with Johannes de Silentio on this point? His knight of faith after all proves a very questionable hero. But before asking this question, let me ask another: what is sin? The continuation of the quote I read in the beginning addresses itself to this question:

Philosophy teaches us that the immediate should be annulled. This is true enough, but what is not true is that sin is directly the immediate, any more than faith is directly the immediate. (99)

The reference to philosophy, which "teaches us that the immediate should be annulled," is first of all a reference to Hegel, although it applies equally to Kant. That utilitarianism was rightly criticized by Kant, who called "the principle of one's own happiness ... the most objectionable of the empirical principles,"² is here assumed. Hegel might have agreed. He did indeed accept the doctrine of original sin, but understood it in a way Kierkegaard could not accept:

For the very notion of spirit is enough to show that man is evil by nature, and it is an error to think that he could ever be otherwise. To such extent that man is and acts as a creature of nature, his whole behavior is what it ought not to be. For the spirit it is a duty to be free and to recognize itself by its own act. Nature is for man only the starting point, which he has to transform.³

² Immanuel Kant, Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Beck, Bobbs Merrill paper p. 59.

³ *Hegel's Logic* tr. Wallace, p. 44, cited in the Notes to *Fear and Trembling*, p. 353, n. 33.

By associating sin with the immediate that is lower than the universal, Hegel could be said to have taken here sin out of original sin and to have made it the human condition. And indeed: we are amphibians, belonging both to nature and spirit. The spirit presents us with demands that we shall never quite meet. Too much is the body with its needs and desires with us. But more important in Hegel's understanding of original sin is the basic point, which should be clear even without the Biblical reference: the immediate here is linked to our natural being and to the desires and inclinations that are connected with it. These ought to be annulled, that is to say, we ought to raise ourselves above the immediate, above our animal being, ought to rule over it, impose on it the maxims with which our reason provides us.

On this point there is no disagreement between Hegel and Kant. We could thus say, translating Kierkegaard's statement back into the language of Kant: to affirm our humanity, our freedom, we must subject our natural being to the imperative of reason. Human beings are truly themselves only when they subject themselves to the law with which their own reason provides them, when they are in this sense autonomous. To be sure, again and again our natural being drags us away from what we ought to be. This is how Hegel understood the truth at the core of the dogma of original sin.

But what is the force of this ought? What grounds it? Our essence as human beings? Philosophy has generally answered this question in the affirmative. Hegel might thus answer: the spirit that makes us human; Kant: my own being as a free, rational agent. But what if I choose to do, not just out of weakness of will, but with very open eyes, perversely perhaps, not what Hegel's spirit or Kant's practical reason demands, but what I desire, choose to place my individual desires above the universal, choose to turn my back on what Kant would consider my duty? Do I lose my freedom when I refuse to respect the dignity of every human being? Am I unreasonable when after the most careful consideration of my personal situation, I place my own selfish interests above the universal?

According to Jeremy Bentham every individual cannot help but pursue happiness as he or she understands it. He thought this fact to be sufficient to provide his principles of morals and legislation with an adequate foundation. This makes the self-interest of individuals the basis for all judgments of right and wrong. Utilitarians will of course

insist, as Bentham hints in the footnote, that we need to consider the "number, of interests affected." But why should we, if this is not in our personal interest? As Bentham puts it:

It is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is in the interests of the individual. A thing is said to promote the interest, or to be for the interest, of an individual, when it tends to add to the sum total of his pleasures: or what comes to the same thing, to diminish the sum total of his pains.⁴

Bentham thus begins with atomic individuals whose natural goal is to maximize pleasure and to minimize pain in this life. The immediate is here placed above the universal.

Kant called this the most pernicious of all empirical principles. According to him it fails to do justice to human freedom, which he takes to be inseparably tied to a pure practical reason that demands that we place the universal above the particular and immediate. But how convincing is this? Is the person, who chooses to pursue what is in his or her personal interest and thereby places the immediate above the universal, unreasonable? Must we consider such a person evil? Kierkegaard, to be sure, like Kant and Hegel would object: philosophy is said by him to be right to teach us that the immediate should be annulled. But is it? Does reason provide that claim with adequate support?

Our answer will depend on how much we have packed into our understanding of reason. But what should be clear is that we cannot reduce sin to a matter of nature overwhelming reason. It is easy to imagine a willful disregard of whatever is recognized to be the ruling morality that is not to be understood just as weakness of will, as a surrender to natural passion or desire, but that issues rather from a strongly developed, but self-centered will that has what it considers good reason for choosing to do what best serves personal interest. Kierkegaard — or should I be more careful and say his Johannes de Silentio — would speak here of sin. And of this sin he says rightly that it is not “directly the immediate.” This is to say, what propels us into sin is not the flesh, but the spirit. Sin is not the spirit’s perversion by the flesh, but the spirit's self-perversion. The sinful person refuses to submit to the authority of what he or she recognizes to be the

⁴ Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), p. 3.

moral law. But if sin is a real possibility, we must have a choice to acknowledge or defy the categorical imperative or whatever other moral commandments one may want to invoke, i.e. to suspend the ethical for some other end, to teleologically suspend the ethical. The possibility of sin attests thus to a freedom beyond reason, beyond the categorical imperative, a freedom that is free to reject it. The reality of sin thus opens up a distance between Kantian autonomy, which would bind freedom to the rule of reason, and existentialist authenticity, which does not recognize such a bond and thus cannot ground the moral law in some supposed human essence. Freedom here calls into question the authority of pure practical reason. And thus it calls into question any attempt to found ethics in no more than an understanding of the human being as a free rational agent, be it that of Kant, Hegel, or for that matter Habermas, or even Bentham, calls into question the project of the Enlightenment. I am unable to call a person who says after me the deluge, who cares neither for his neighbor, nor for those who live in some faraway place, nor for coming generations, nor for the future of the environment, unreasonable. His is a different problem: he has a heart of stone. Needed is a change of heart. But what gave him this heart of stone? Historical circumstances? Nature? God? And how do hearts change?

2

Kierkegaard lets us see that Kant's pure practical reason is not quite as pure as Kant would have it be. Although Kant seeks to free morality from its traditional theological supports, he remains in fact indebted to that tradition. This becomes especially important in his third formulation of the categorical imperative in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Consider a passage like the following:

The rational being must regard himself always as legislative in a realm of ends possible through the freedom of the will whether he belongs to it as member or as sovereign. He cannot maintain his position as sovereign merely through the maxims of his will, but only when he is a completely

independent being without need and with unlimited power adequate to his will.⁵

It is evident that we are not sovereigns in the kingdom of ends, but at best members. The sovereign would have to be God. Kant, too, thus measures our everyday human existence by an ideal realm whose sovereign is God, that is to say by a secularized version of the traditional idea of the kingdom of God, a kingdom whose members are all rational agents. In that kingdom what is and what ought to be would coincide. Note that this sovereign does not rule by might or power. According to Kant we recognize the authority of the divine law, because it is the very law that we as reasonable beings have to give ourselves. In that sense the appeal to the sovereignty of God would seem dispensable. And yet, does Kant not rely on this idea of the kingdom of God when he appeals to the idea of the respect that we owe every human being simply in as much as he is a being of reason? Do we not have here a secularization of the idea that human beings are the children of God, created in his image, and that as such they possess a dignity that we ought not to deny? To what extent does Kant's philosophy draw here on and gain affective support from a religious tradition that it would yet leave behind?

Without some such support, is Kant's subjection of freedom to the universal really convincing? Could one not argue that the subjection of freedom to the rule of the categorical imperative is still heteronomy of some sort? Recall Dostoevsky's Man from the Underground who celebrates twice-two-makes-five as the ultimate refuge of a freedom that refuses to allow reason to bind it! This radical freedom, radical because the root of, i.e. presupposed by all free action, reveals itself in the question: Why be moral? This is a freedom that does not belong to human beings in so far as they are members of the kingdom of ends or, for that matter, to some human community, but to the solitary individual who experiences his membership in such a community as something he can himself choose or refuse. Say I face *this* alternative: either spend my life in an effort to maximize my pleasure and minimize my pain or spend my life in an effort to live up to what I take duty to command. Most of us, to be sure, navigate through life without really facing that choice and thus do not confront this ether/or. But is it just because immediate

⁵ Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Beck, Bobbs Merrill paper p. 63.

desires occupy and overwhelm us, or is it because we don't want to confront it, in some sense choose not to confront it? But along with that choice goes responsibility for our refusal. That we face such a choice would seem to presuppose a freedom "higher" or more fundamental than Kantian freedom, i.e. a freedom that is not bound by the moral law but founds its authority. We may want to call someone who chooses to disregard what morality demands evil. But if we call evil an action where the body with its desires just overwhelms the individual's freedom and reason, it becomes difficult to hold the supposedly evil person responsible. That we do hold someone responsible presupposes that we think that he chose to act on his private desires, that he freely chose the evil life.

Kant addresses the issue of evil in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Without going into details, this much seems clear: the very fact that we hold both the good and the evil person responsible for their choice of life forces us to question any too intimate association of freedom with practical reason. If we take them to be inseparably linked, how are we to hold the evil person responsible? But this forces us to question further: does autonomy really imply that I ought to respect equally the dignity of every human being? Do I not owe more to my family or neighbors than to persons whose lives don't intersect with my own? And why not put myself first? Such questioning would dissociate what Kant argues could not be dissociated, namely freedom and submission to the rule of the universal. A person who wants to challenge Kant here may easily grant him that every ought has its foundation in freedom. But more radically than Kant such a person might insist that freedom is not bound by any reality transcending it, not even by the idea of a kingdom of ends or by the universal, that it is a more radical, a more abysmal freedom. Such an existentialist interpretation would insist that freedom is higher than the universal.

It is this freedom to which Kant failed to do full justice in his moral writings. In his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* we do, however, meet with a different conception of freedom. Kant here insists that the acceptance of moral maxims has a subjective ground that cannot be exhibited or understood. There is therefore a finally groundless decision for good or evil. Kant, too, recognizes that the appeal to sensibility or nature or to what Kierkegaard calls immediacy cannot account for moral evil. Reason here perverts itself. Kant speaks thus of radical evil, radical in the sense of being evil in

its *radix*, its very root, because particular evil deeds have their foundation in the self-perversion of the will. The person who is radically evil refuses to subordinate his freedom to the universal. Such an evil person aspires to a godlike self-sufficiency. For the sake of his own individual freedom he suspends the ethical, suspends the categorical imperative. In this case, too, we can speak with Kierkegaard of a teleological suspension of the ethical, but here the ethical is suspended not because of some divine command, but because of self-will. Sin places the individual higher than the universal. And how many of us can say that we are altogether free of such sin?

3

As the phrase “teleological suspension of the ethical” suggests, this understanding of evil and sin poses the problem: how are we to distinguish between the knight of faith and such a sinner or demonic individual? Of the latter Kierkegaard has this to say:

As a rule, we get to know very little about the demonic, even though this is a subject that has a valid claim to be discovered especially in our time, and even though the observer — if he knows anything at all about making contact with the demonic — can use practically anybody, at least momentarily. In that kind of thing, Shakespeare is and remains a hero. That horrible demoniac, the most demonic figure Shakespeare has depicted, but also depicted in a matchless way — Gloucester (later Richard III) — what made him into a demoniac? Apparently his inability to bear the sympathy heaped upon him from childhood. His monologue in the first act of Richard III has more value than all the systems of morality, which have no intimations of the nightmares of existence or of their explanation.

I that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
 To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
 I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
 Cheated of feature by dissembling Nature,
 Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
 Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,

And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them—.

Natures such as Gloucester cannot be saved by mediating them into an idea of society. Ethics actually only makes sport of them, just as it would be a taunting of Sarah for ethics to say to her: Why do you not express the universal and get married. Natures such as those are basically in the paradox, except that they are either lost in the demonic paradox or saved in the divine paradox. (115)

Some human beings nature or history have treated in a stepmotherly way. They don't fit in. They do not feel part of their community and as a result do not experience its laws as binding. The Duke of Gloucester is such a misfit. In almost Nietzschean fashion Kierkegaard suggests that Gloucester became a demoniac because he could not bear the pity to which he was subjected. Precisely because they are misfits, such misfits tend to become outsiders, tend to bury themselves within themselves. Kierkegaard himself, a hunchback of sorts, thought of himself as such a misfit, unable "To strut before a wanton ambling nymph." As outsiders, such misfits tend to become introverted.

Time and again people have been pleased that witches, nisses, trolls, etc. are malformed creatures, and no doubt everyone has an inclination, when he sees a malformed person, to attach to him the idea of moral depravity. What a glaring injustice, since the relation ought to be turned around: existence itself has damaged them just as a stepmother makes the children perverse. The demonic, for which the individual himself has no guilt, has its beginning in his originally being set outside the universal by nature or by a historical situation. (106)

Here Kierkegaard makes nature and history responsible for the origin of the demonic personality. Circumstances let the individual understand him- or herself as outside the community, or, as Kierkegaard puts it, outside the universal. We cannot deny such a person spirit or freedom. But if so, we may not tie freedom and the rule of the universal too closely together. Kierkegaard thus suggests that to be effective morality needs to be supported by a moral common sense that is inseparable from the individual's feeling part of a community. An affective ground is needed to support the authority of the categorical

imperative. And such a ground, Kierkegaard suggests, is inseparably bound up with a sense of being part of a community. In 18th century Protestant Prussia Kant could thus take a robust common sense concerning what was right pretty much for granted and think his moral philosophy in agreement with that common sense. But can we today follow him here? Common sense has certainly not been a constant in history. The past two centuries have shaken our faith in reason in more than one sense: philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche have called the authority of pure practical reason into question, while genocide and an interminable series of wars have made it difficult to preserve one's faith in reason. A Hitler certainly invites the category of the demonic and talk of a teleological suspension of the ethical, here talk of evil. But National Socialism also invites consideration of the proximity of the demonic and the religious.

And what about our own sense of what matters? How robust is the common sense ruling this society? How close are we to the demonic? Kierkegaard's observation that "the observer ... can use practically anybody, at least momentarily" to encounter the demonic would seem to be even more true today than in Kierkegaard's Copenhagen.

4

Kierkegaard insists on the similarity between the demonic and the religious:

The tragic hero, who is the favorite of ethics, is the purely human; him I can understand, and all his undertakings are out in the open. If I go further I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic, for silence is both. Silence is the demon's trap, and the more that is silenced, the more terrible the demon, but silence is also the divinity's mutual understanding with the single individual. (88)

The similarity between the knight of faith and the demonic individual finds expression in the following:

The paradox of faith has lost the intermediary, the universal. On the one side, it has the expression for the highest egotism (to do the terrible act, do it for one's own sake), on the other side, the expression for the most absolute devotion, to do it for God's sake. (71)

Extreme egoism and readiness to complete self-surrender here lie so close together that it becomes all but impossible to pry them apart. This proximity of the religious and the demonic might lead one to argue that the picture that Johannes de Silentio paints of religion, more particularly of Christianity, is itself monstrous. Consider the way he dwells on the notorious passage in Luke:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. (72)

One can get rid of what disturbs one in this passage by suitably clever interpretations that argue that "hate" here means no more than "love less." Johannes de Silentio, however, insists that what it demands of us is exactly a teleological suspension of the ethical. One may try to interpret the text in such a way that the affront that lies in the word "hate" is taken away, but Johannes de Silentio insists on it. Implicit is his vehement rejection of any religion that collapses the religious and the ethical.

We can imagine an interpretation of Christianity that makes of Christ simply an ethical ideal. But such an interpretation overlooks the paradoxical nature of Christ. It may well grant the historical reality of Christ, but it would insist on the paradigmatic significance of this life, while it would deny Christ's divinity and with it lose an understanding of Christ as a savior who robs death of its sting and hell of its victory. When offered an interpretation that insists on Christ's divinity, someone committed to the rule of reason may well feel that Socrates is the preferable hero. At least there are no such extravagant claims attached to him.

Johannes de Silentio challenges such an enlightened view of Christianity with the following either/or:

either there is an absolute duty to God — and if there is such a thing, it is the paradox just described, that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal and as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute — or else faith has never existed because it has always existed, or else Abraham is lost, or else one must interpret the passage in Luke 14 as did the appealing exegete and explain the similar and corresponding passages in the same way. (81)

Note that there are two parts to Kierkegaard's statement of the paradox:

1) that the individual as the individual is higher than the universal
and

2) that the individual as the individual stands in an absolute relationship to the absolute.

The first statement Kierkegaard takes for granted, at least for himself. The fact that supports it is nothing other than that radical freedom that is attested to by the possibility of choosing evil, or, to give it a Christian expression, by the possibility of sin. That is to say, once an individual has grasped his freedom, grasped the possibility of quite deliberately turning his back on the universal, such an individual's acceptance of the validity of values depends on how he or she, as this particular individual, chooses to exist. Such recognition has its foundation in a free act. I may thus choose not to be open to the claims of the universal. But only a person who has become in this sense an individual, who has teleologically suspended the ethical and stared into the abyss where evil dwells can make the second movement and relate himself as this individual to the absolute.

But how then are we to distinguish the knight of faith from the demon. Johannes de Silentio insists in this connection that for the knight of faith to suspend the ethical he first must have recognized in all its weightiness. That is to say, he, too, must have recognized, as Kant and Hegel taught, that the immediate should indeed be annulled. It is thus essential to his analysis that Abraham not only loved Isaac, but loved him more than anything in the world, although one may well wonder whether such a love, which elevates one individual above all others does not already involve something like a teleological suspension of the ethical, at least when the ethical is tied in Kantian fashion to the universal.

Johannes de Silentio leaves this problem unaddressed. Consider the following passage: the knight of faith

knows that it is glorious to belong to the universal. He knows that it is beautiful and beneficial to be the single individual who translates himself into the universal, the one who, so to speak, personally produces a trim, clean, and as far as possible faultless edition of himself, readable by all....

But he also knows that up higher there winds a lonesome trail, steep and narrow; he knows it is dreadful to be born solitary without the universal, to walk without meeting one single traveler. He knows very well where he is and how he relates to men. Humanly speaking he is and cannot make himself understandable to anyone. If he is not viewed in this way he is a hypocrite, and the higher he ascends this path the more appalling a hypocrite he is. (76)

There is a certain security that comes with the ethical, a sense of being at home in the world. But the solitary self transcends the ethical so understood. Fundamental to faith as Johannes de Silentio understands it a fundamental homelessness. This mood of homelessness places the individual outside the universal, outside the community. Heidegger will make such homelessness a necessary condition of authenticity. Authenticity demands a teleological suspension of the ethical.

Fear and Trembling gives us only a very sketchy account of the origin of such homelessness. A hint is provided in the passage that speaks of nature and historical circumstance placing the individual outside the universal, and not because of anything the individual has done: it simply happens. But if freedom is indeed constitutive of human being, such external circumstances can only be said to awaken the individual to what is most truly his own. Then it is more fundamentally our own being that lets us be homeless. It is this fundamental homelessness that finds expression in the story of the fall, the first sin, and the expulsion from paradise. The original sin is the awakening of freedom. This awakening is not itself the result of a deliberate doing for only as a result of that sin does the individual face the choice between good and evil. Only now does the individual confront the certainty of death and thereby gain a sense of him- or herself as this individual. And only now does the individual face the possibility of entering into an absolute relationship with the absolute.

Following Hegel and others, Kierkegaard also thinks of history as a process that ever more decisively has emancipated the individual from the community. And the process is continuing: the balance between individual and community is still being shifted ever more decisively towards the individual. Along with this the ethical dimension has to become ever more problematic. As I said, today we find it difficult to appeal to moral

maxims with the conviction of Kant. We are no longer supported by a similarly robust common sense. We thus find it increasingly difficult to communicate concerning what matters most profoundly, as speaking threatens to degenerate into idle chatter, our love-making into superficial sex-play. Only superficially do these break the profound silence and isolation in which we live. For Kierkegaard, once the former sense of community has been lost, there is no stepping back. The lost community cannot be recovered by returning to the past. All that can save us is the step forward, to faith. “Nur ein Gott kann uns retten,” “only a God can save us,” Heidegger was to say in his *Spiegel* interview. That step to faith, Kierkegaard insists, fully aware of the paradox involved, will return us to the community and thus to the ethical, as Isaac was returned to Abraham and Abraham returned home. But that understanding of faith is shadowed by the specter of demonic pride, a specter Kierkegaard himself raises.

Consider his modern Antigone, who, as Kierkegaard describes her in *Either/Or*, has somehow discovered her father's guilt. She is alone with her discovery; she does not even know whether her father knows and in order not to destroy the happiness of others, she keeps her discovery to herself. But she also has another motive no to let go of her secret:

She is proud of her secret, proud that she has been selected in a singular way to save the honor and the glory of the lineage of Oedipus. When the grateful nation acclaims Oedipus with praise and thanksgiving, she feels her own significance, and her secret sinks deeper and deeper into her soul, ever more inaccessible to any living being.⁶

A develops that sorrow further by letting Oedipus die, depriving Antigone of the only person she could perhaps have spoken to. This Antigone now falls in love. And yet she feels that she cannot share her secret with her lover. But why not? What prevents her from sharing her secret with her lover? Pride is at work here, a pride that brings with it an unwillingness to reveal herself to her lover, a pride that precludes marriage. When Kierkegaard's A describes his Antigone as he does, Kierkegaard is also describing his own inability to get married to Regine Olsen. But to repeat: why could his modern

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 157.

Antigone not have revealed her secret to her love and gotten married? Undoubtedly, this would not have been nearly as interesting as the self-tortures she inflicts on herself. What keeps the modern Antigone from getting married is pride. And it is this pride that lets her become introverted. Kierkegaard's Antigone, who buries herself within herself while still alive, is of course also a self-portrait, or should we say rather a rather a self-caricature against which he had to struggle, which he had had to rework as a good Christian, leading him to suggest that he received something like a divine call, something admittedly incommunicable and thus condemning the individual, who has received such a call, to silence, as Abraham is condemned to silence when he receives God's command to sacrifice Isaac.

5

Let me return to the claim that an ethics that disregards the concept of sin is a "completely futile discipline." To speak of sin is of course to speak the language of religion. But is that language one that we can still use with confidence? Does it not lie behind us? And if so, must we not dismiss the suggestion that ethics, which disregards the concept of sin is an idle science? Or is Kierkegaard here making a point that remains valid even without religious presuppositions? That does indeed seem to me to be the case. What Kierkegaard recognizes is the possibility of placing oneself as this individual outside or beyond the community, a possibility that is inseparable from our freedom. Or, if you wish, what he recognizes is the possibility of choosing to bury oneself within oneself while still alive, like his Symparanekromenoi or his modern Antigone. Or, the possibility of choosing oneself to exist as an outsider. That raises the question: outside of what community? This may be a particular community; we may thus preserve a critical distance from the community into which we happen to have been born, in which we were raised, but in the name of some higher community, of the universal. Such a decision can claim be an ethical decision and as such would always have something tragic about it. Socrates comes to mind and his astonishing self-sufficiency, which at times invites the charge of pride — consider the *Apology*. But we can also imagine someone placing him- or herself outside all communities, even that largest community that is mankind. Only this last step would involve a teleological suspension of the ethical. I do not want to

claim at this point that this is good or bad, only that it is possible. It is possible to exist in such a way that one teleologically suspends the ethical. As I suggested, such a step is demanded by existentialist authenticity. And if authenticity, so understood is indeed possible, the question arises: ought we to exist in this way authentically or is this a temptation to be resisted? Note that this either/or cannot be understood in moral terms, for a presupposition of the moral life is that the duty to do right is beyond question. For morality there would appear no question here. There would thus be no genuine choice. But authenticity claims to be more fundamental than Kantian autonomy. The question “should I choose the moral life?” is taken to be more fundamental than morality and its commands. What is at issue and in question is precisely the authority of moral commands

I have spoken with Kierkegaard of a teleological suspension of the ethical. That telos, as we have seen, can be conceived of in one of two ways: we can suspend the ethical for the sake of God. Morality here is suspended for the sake of that absolute relation to the absolute that provides the key to Johannes de Silentio’s characterization of the faith of Abraham. But we can also suspend the ethical for the sake of our own individual freedom. We can thus distinguish a theistic and an atheistic existentialism. Common to both is that the individual is placed higher than the universal, that is to say also, that the individual is placed higher than the ethical, at least when the ethical is tied to the communal and universal, as it is by Kant and also by Kierkegaard. But theistic existentialism insists that if the individual is to escape despair that individual must ground her- or himself in the absolute. That is to say, it insists that the answer to the problem of individuality can finally only be faith. Atheistic existentialism on the other hand considers such a divine absolute in which the individual could ground itself an escape from freedom, a desperate embrace of a chimera: it insists that in the end we are left alone with our groundless freedom.

6

To say that the individual is higher than the community, or higher than the universal, is to place silence above communication. In *Being and Time* Heidegger was to follow Johannes de Silentio in this privileging of silence. Silence is the issue to which

Fear and Trembling addresses itself with its third problem: was Abraham ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose? Silence, too, appears here in two forms, not always easy to disentangle: there is the silence of the demon and there is the silence of the knight of faith. Consider once more this quote:

The tragic hero, who is the favorite of ethics, is the purely human; him I can understand, and all his undertakings are out in the open. If I go further I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic, for silence is both. Silence is the demon's trap, and the more that is silenced, the more terrible the demon, but silence is also the divinity's mutual understanding with the single individual. (88)

With the last point Kierkegaard is on quite traditional ground. The language of genuine prayer is silence. Prayer is the silent communication between the person who has faith and his God. Silence here does not mean that the person of faith says many things to his God, but does not utter them, does not speak out. There is a higher prayer, a prayer that dispenses with words even in that sense. This is what Kierkegaard has in mind when he speaks of the individual's absolute relationship to the absolute. Such a relationship transcends words. Again, I would not want to deny that such a relationship is possible. What I cannot understand, however, and Johannes de Silentio and Kierkegaard would no doubt agree, is how such an immediate relationship to the absolute could ever yield a command such as the one Abraham faced, who is told by his God to do something quite specific, to sacrifice his son; or a command such as the one Kierkegaard intimates he himself received, when he hints that it was God who commanded him to sacrifice Regine Olsen, as God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's willingness to suspend the ethical confronts us with the paradox that is central to Christianity: that the absolute should descend into the finite and present us with quite specific demands. Reason cannot make sense of the incarnation. Abraham is thus reduced to silence. But his silence invites challenge: I agree with Kierkegaard that silence is the demon's trap, and I would suggest that that trap may even entrap the religious person. I shall return to this point.

Before doing so, let us consider this phrase, silence is the demon's trap? What does Kierkegaard have in mind? To explain the demonic Kierkegaard tells us the story of Agnes and the Merman. It is the story is a story of a seducer, who is disarmed by the

innocence and trust of the woman he wanted to seduce. But let us consider Kierkegaard's merman a bit more carefully: A mixture of Faust and Don Juan, this merman is rather like the seducer of the "Diary of a Seducer." To say that he is like Don Juan is to suggest that he is filled with erotic desire, to say that he is like Faust is to suggest that he is an individual who has placed himself as this individual beyond the universal, has suspended the ethical. Consider this passage:

With the assistance of the demonic, therefore, the merman would be the single individual, who as the single individual was higher than the universal. The demonic has the same quality as the divine, namely that the single individual is able to enter into an absolute relationship to it. (97)

How are we to understand the demonic that here is said to assist the merman who as this single individual is said to enter into an absolute relationship to it? What makes the relationship absolute? To say that the individual is able to enter into an absolute relationship with the divine is to claim that nothing here stands between the individual and the divine, nothing mediates the relationship. In that sense it is immediate. But to what does the demoniac relate himself? What is the demonic? The demoniac does not relate himself to something other than himself. The demonic is the abyss of freedom he bears within himself and that is awakened when he loses his place in a community. The merman has placed himself beyond any community. The telos that lets him suspend the ethical is his own self. To such a merman all relationships to other human beings must become asymmetrical. He must substitute possession for genuine communication. This is why Johannes de Silentio says that Agnes can become the merman's only as prey, but that he cannot belong faithfully to her. That is to say, the merman lacks the strength and the courage to genuinely reveal himself to her. The question we should ask ourselves is: to what extent the merman is not only a figure of Kierkegaard, but of modern narcissistic humanity.

But we have not done justice to the other part of the story. After all, Agnes looks at him, and the merman cannot go through with the seduction. He experiences another person in a way that disarms him and lets his selfish passion disintegrate.

And look! The sea no longer roars, its wild voice is stilled; nature's passion, which is the merman's strength, forsakes him, and there is a

deadly calm — and Agnes is still looking at him this way. Then the merman breaks down. He cannot withstand the power of innocence, his natural element is disloyal to him, and he cannot seduce Agnes. He takes her home again, he explains to her that he only wanted to show her how beautiful the sea is when it is calm, and Agnes believes him. (94)

The raging sea is a figure of sensuousness, sexual desire. Sexual desire fails the merman when Agnes looks at him in a way that communicates love and trust. We can assume that this is how Kierkegaard experienced the look of Regine Olsen. And he, too, was presumably unable to stand up to this look. It proved too much and so he retreated from the other and fled into himself. His failure results in a movement of introversion. What grows out of his desire is something equally tumultuous, but what now rages is despair. What causes this transformation is the challenge presented by another human being; what is demanded of him is that he belong faithfully to another human being. What is demanded of the merman then is that he place his own self lower than the relationship between himself and Agnes; that he place the demands of love higher than the demands of self, that he abandon his attempt to make sexual desire serve his own selfishness. But for that he is too proud, too self-centered, too narcissistic. And yet he is too insecure in this self-understanding, too aware that what presents himself to him in Agnes is the possibility of a much more meaningful mode of existence, to remain simply a merman. This explains his despair.

But let me continue with Kierkegaard's telling of the story.

There is nothing to hinder his becoming a hero. For the step he now takes is reconciling. He is saved by Agnes; the seducer is crushed, he has submitted to the power of innocence, he can never seduce again. But immediately two forces struggle over him: repentance, Agnes and repentance. If repentance alone gets him, then he is hidden, if Agnes and repentance get him, then he is disclosed. (96)

We should note that repentance here remains tied to the demonic:

But now if the merman is seized by repentance and he remains hidden, he certainly will make Agnes unhappy, for Agnes loved him in all her innocence; even when he seemed to her to be changed, however well

he concealed it, she still thought it was true that he merely wished to show her the beautiful stillness of the sea. Meanwhile in his passion the merman becomes even more unhappy, for he loved Agnes with a complexity of passions and in addition had a new guilt to bear. Now the demonic in repentance will probably explain that this is indeed his punishment, and the more it torments him the better. (96)

There is thus a sense in which this repentant sinner treasures his misery. One may ask at this point, why does he not let his love for Agnes take possession of him, why does he not make the decision to belong to her? The answer is obvious enough: he lacks the strength or courage to let go of himself. His pride does not allow it. And so he desperately seeks to hold on to himself and Agnes' love threatens that hold, threatens to take him away from himself. Too narcissistic to return her love, he becomes introverted., occupies himself with phantasies of Agnes, tortures himself as Kierkegaard tortured himself, even as this story is part of Kierkegaard's self-torture. And yet, Kierkegaard, like the merman, is unwilling to get over his pain. He dwells on it, fondles it. Agnes has become the occasion for a solitary game the merman plays with himself. And similarly Regine Olsen was the occasion for an unending play Kierkegaard played with himself. Kierkegaard describes the way the merman developed that play as follows:

If he surrenders to this demonic element, he will perhaps make another attempt to save Agnes, just as in a sense one can save a person with the aid of evil. He knows that Agnes loves him. If he could tear this love away from Agnes, then in a way she would be saved. But how? The merman is too sensible to reckon that a frank discussion will arouse her loathing. Maybe he will endeavor to incite all the dark passions in her, to belittle her, to ridicule her, to make her love ludicrous, and, if possible, to arouse her pride. He will spare himself no anguish, for this is the deep contradiction in the demonic, and in a certain sense there is ever so much more good in a demoniac than in superficial people. (96)

The Merman wants to free Agnes from her love for him and thus save her — as if he were in a position to save anyone. Such action masquerades as being for the sake of the

other. But all this self-torment remains narcissistic or, if you want, demonic. The merman's narcissism demands concealment.

We should note that when Kierkegaard thinks here of the demonic individual what he has in mind is not first of all an individual who does what we would consider obviously monstrous or evil. It is easy enough to imagine a good demon. Imagine, e.g. someone who does a great many good deeds, but in such a way that only he knows that he is the benefactor. He keeps silent. He enjoys the happiness his good deeds bring others, enjoys also his own godlike self-sufficiency that can do without the admiration and praise of others. But just here lurks the demonic. Our benefactor gets his reward by thinking himself a benevolent deity. But such a deity cannot enter into any symmetrical relationship with another person. He remains buried within himself, remains silent.

Kierkegaard is right to insist on the demonic character of such silence. Also on the everyday character of the demonic and of such silence. Suppose you have had an argument with someone close to you. Instead of communicating with the other you sulk in silence. You hope that the other will make the move that will break the silence, but you are too proud to make the first move. This is an everyday form of the demonic.

Or imagine a doctor telling you that someone you love does not have very much time to live. He also tells you that he has not told this to that person, that he thought it would be better not to, but he would not object if you did, although he would not advocate it either. And you keep silent, torturing yourself with what you know, with your secret, but also proud of acting as you do. You justify your silence by arguing that thereby you keep the other happier. It is for the sake of the other's happiness that you keep silent. Kierkegaard recognizes that there is something demonic about such silence, too: it shatters the community between you and the other and builds invisible walls.

7

When can silence be justified? Often the answer is simple enough: e.g. when it does not involve concealment. Suppose two lovers look at the ocean and say nothing. Yet this may be an extroverted silence implying an openness to the other and to the ocean. There is indeed something about the immediacy of love that requires, that demands a suspension of language. This is why the discourse of lovers is so often a

childish babble, a tearing of silence. But here silence is not tied to concealment. Such love also involves something like a suspension of the ethical, if we tie the ethical to the universal. The demands of love, understood here as a relationship between two individuals, each open to the uniqueness of the other, and the demands of the universal are incommensurable. Nor is it clear when love ought to be subordinated to the universal. I would thus suggest, agreeing with Hannah Arendt, that in genuine love we meet with something like a teleological suspension of the ethical.⁷ There is thus a certain analogy between the relationship that joins two lovers and the relationship that joins Abraham to God in Johannes de Silentio's retelling of the Abraham story. For this reason Kierkegaard and of course not just he again and again approaches faith relying on the human analogue of love. Both faith and love insist that the particular is higher than the universal. Such insistence, however, brings with it the danger of a loss of world. But human being is essentially a being in the world. Loss of world means inevitably self-alienation. The lovers must thus return to and take their place in the world. And Abraham must return to Sarah and explain himself to her. Faith and love should not tempt us to forsake the world.

The difficulty I have with Johannes de Silentio's conception of faith is that, try as I may, I cannot finally distinguish his knight of faith from his demon. Kierkegaard himself seems to me a kind of demoniac. One possible reply might be that I lack the faith of Johannes de Silentio's Abraham, not surprising, given what Kierkegaard demands of such faith. Of such a faith I am indeed suspicious. And I would reply to such a reply with a question: what distinguishes such faith from a narcissistic refusal to let go of oneself? Kierkegaard, to be sure, insists that faith is a relation that joins the individual to something other than himself; thus he speaks of faith as an absolute relation of the individual to the absolute. This absolute is infinite. But, to repeat, how can this infinite make a definite demand, such as, sacrifice your son, Isaac! Or, do not marry Regine Olsen! Kierkegaard admits that this is paradoxical. And with it he touches on the paradox of the descent of the divine logos into the visible. Inquiry into the authority of

⁷ See Tatjana Tömmel, *Wille und Passion. Der Liebesbegriff bei Heidegger und Arendt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013).

any ethical system confronts us with this paradox. Reason alone is insufficient to cope with evil. That demands love and faith.

In the Old Testament the gift of the Ten Commandments is the most obvious example of such a descent of the logos into the visible and material. So in a much fuller sense is the Incarnation. Both present us with a paradox that bridges the abyss that separates the finite and the finite. But we can take the problem out of the Christian context: Without a foundation in love and faith the ethical is ineffective and loses its authority. And both confront us with the paradox that the immediate is higher than the universal.

But I cannot follow Johannes de Silentio in his reading of Luke 14:26 and the wedge it drives between God and the community of which I am part. I would suggest that so understood the paradox of faith is itself an expression of the demonic, which invokes God to cover up its own narcissism. To put it biographically, Kierkegaard's attempt to explain his failure to go through with his engagement by invoking God does not make his failure anything more than a failure. Or, to put this point differently, difficult as it is to understand Abraham's decision to obey God and to journey to that mountain in Moriah to sacrifice his son, even more difficult is to understand how, having returned from his ordeal, he is able to sit down at the dinner table with Sarah and Isaac as if nothing had happened. Johannes de Silentio fails, as he knows he must on his own terms, to distinguish his knight of faith from his demon. Yet Kierkegaard is right when he criticizes traditional ethics for not having taken seriously enough the possibility of a demonic existence, and he is right again when he insists that individual existence gains meaning only when the individual in his freedom grounds himself in a reality that transcends him. Such grounding is not achieved by philosophical reflection, but requires faith and hope. And most of all it requires love.

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