

Soren Kierkegaard

Fear and Trembling

Excerpts

A fool can always find a greater fool who admires him

[...]

I wouldn't attach any importance in itself to a difficulty which, by overcoming it, brings a shrewd fellow no further than the most ordinary and simple-minded person has already reached without the difficulty.'

[...]

Even of a person born in humble circumstances I ask that he should not be so inhuman towards himself as to be unable to think of the king's castle except at a distance and by dreaming of its grandeur indistinctly, wanting to exalt it and simultaneously destroying its grandeur by exalting it in such a debasing way. I ask that he be human enough to approach and bear himself with confidence and dignity there too. He should not be so inhuman as shamelessly to want to violate every rule of respect by storming into the king's salon straight from the street - he loses more by doing that than the king; on the contrary he should find pleasure in observing every rule of decorum with a glad and confident enthusiasm, which is just what will make him frank and open-hearted. This is only an analogy, for the difference here is only a very imperfect expression of the spiritual distance. I ask everyone not to think so inhumanly of himself as to dare not set foot in those

palaces where not just the memory of the chosen lives on but the chosen themselves. He should not push himself shamelessly forward and thrust upon them his kinship with them, he should feel happy every time he bows before them, but be frank and confident and always something more than a cleaning woman; for unless he wants to be more than that he will never come in there.

[...]

The knight of faith knows it gives inspiration to surrender oneself to the universal, that it takes courage to do so, but also that there is a certain security in it, just because it is for the universal; he knows it is glorious to be understood by every noble mind, and in such a way that even the beholder is thereby ennobled. This he knows and he feels as though bound, he could wish this was the task he had been set. Thus surely Abraham must have now and then wished that the task was to love Isaac in a way meet and fitting for a father, as all would understand and as would be remembered for all time; he must have wished his task was to sacrifice Isaac for the universal, so as to inspire fathers to illustrious deeds - and he must have been well nigh horrified by the thought that for him such wishes were merely temptations and must be treated as such; for he knew it was a solitary path he trod, and that he was doing nothing for the universal but only being tested and tried himself.

[...]

I will explain once more the difference in the collision as between the tragic hero and the knight of faith. The tragic hero assures himself that the ethical obligation [to his son, daughter, etc.] is totally present in him by virtue of the fact that he transforms it into a wish. Thus Agamemnon can say: this is my proof that I am not violating my paternal obligation, that my duty [to Iphigenia] is my only wish. Here, then, wish and duty match one another. Happy my lot in life if my wish coincides with my duty, and conversely; and most people's task in life is exactly to stay

under their obligation. and by their enthusiasm to transform it into their wish. The tragic hero renounces what he wishes in order to accomplish his duty. For the knight of faith, wish and duty are also identical, but the knight of faith is required to give up both. So when renouncing in resignation what he wishes he finds no repose; for it is after all his duty [that he is giving up]. If he stays under his obligation and keeps his wish he will not become the knight of faith; for the absolute duty requires precisely that he give up [the duty that is identical with the wish]. The tragic hero acquires a higher expression of duty, but not an absolute duty.

[...]

Here again, people unable to bear the martyrdom of unintelligibility jump off the path, and choose instead, conveniently enough, the world's admiration of their proficiency. The true knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher, and in this lies the deep humanity in him which is more worth than this foolish concern for others' weal and woe which is honored under the name of sympathy, but which is really nothing but vanity.

[...]

This is why the effect produced by a Greek tragedy bears a resemblance to the impression given by a marble statue that lacks the power of the eye. Greek tragedy is blind. Hence it takes a certain abstraction to appreciate it. A son murders his father, but not until later learns it is his father. A sister is about to sacrifice her brother, but at the decisive moment discovers that is who it is. Tragedy of this nature is less apt to interest our reflective age. Modern drama has given up the idea of Fate, has in dramatic respects emancipated itself; it observes, it looks in upon itself, takes fate up into its dramatic consciousness. Concealment and disclosure then become the hero's free act, for which he is responsible.