A Belief In The Importance Of Ethics In Kierkegaard’s Doctrine

Kierkegaard’s doctrine shows a belief in the importance of ethics, but more importantly, the belief that man can transcend morality and take a ‘leap of faith’ into a different stage of human life. Kierkegaard proposes three stages of human life, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Man transitions into the religious stage when the ethical stage is deemed as not satisfactory to their desires and they embark in search for greater meaning. The popularly referenced example of this is in the story of Abraham where he was instructed by God to take his son’s life.

Naturally, Abraham did not want to kill his beloved son and he knows it to be an unethical act, however, he decided to temporarily suspend the ethical aspect of the act in order to see the action through. This is a performance of the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’, in other words, a suspension of the ethical in order to meet a goal. The faith he put in God and in the righteousness of God’s word allowed him to agree to this unethical commitment.

Kierkegaard believed in a higher law, that God being the benevolent, all-knowing entity that God is, would never act out in a way that would cause Abraham to break God’s religious law. Through this, Abraham’s faith in God might have allowed him to go through such an ordeal with the faith and hope that his son would not die. Abraham went in with the belief that his son must be killed.

There was really no ethically justifiable reason as to why he would kill his son, and by the standards of man, he would have been right to reject God’s command. However, he did not, and only was his son’s life preserved but it showed the merit of his obedience. This level of obedience is very important to the doctrine of Kierkegaard as the line between faith and belief was eloquently depicted in this story. What one believes to be right, based on societal expectations, can easily be blurred. Human beings are less likely to act based on what they deem to be right if there are clear rules in place. But faith can alleviate these circumstantial discrepancies.

To Kierkegaard, the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ allows one to proceed through an action they know to be unethical with the faith that it will result in a better end than what is foreseeable. There are duties that societal norms will not deem understandable, as such, people put their trust in God as he is all-knowing.