CHAPTER IV

ABSOLUTE DUTY IN FAITH

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Chapter IV

ABSOLUTE DUTY IN FAITH

The spirit of the previous chapter, namely the dynamic tension between the ethical and the religious sphere of existence, will continue to blow in this chapter too. But, it is here sought to be studied with special reference to the concept of absolute duty. Duty is an ethical concept: Can it be applied in the religious sphere without any contradiction? To understand rightly the concept of absolute duty to God, Kierkegaard introduces us to its paradoxical dialectics. Faith makes for a simultaneity of the ethical and religious duty on the plane of existence. To elucidate the concept of absolute duty to God, Kierkegaard brings in the commitment of conjugal love as a passion, without overlooking the limitations of the analogy. The introduction of the passion of love is intended to show that the absolute duty to God is not merely a subjective attitude of devotion, but also an existential pathos of action.

I. DUTY AS AN ETHICAL CATEGORY

In Problem I of Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard posits a contrast between the ethical and the religious from the perspective of the particularity of faith. In Problem II, the same objective is sought to be achieved, the perspective however is that of absolute duty in faith. But duty is an ethical concept. What is the ethical, making it what it is? Kierkegaard says, “The ethical is defined as duty.”¹ In the light of this definition, we are emboldened to hold that duty is the core and quintessence of the ethical; the significance of the ethical life consists in the fulfilment of duty.

At this juncture, Kierkegaard may be in perfect consonance with many a moral philosopher. Kierkegaard is characteristically Kantian, in so far as he cannot conceive of the ethical devoid of duty. Kierkegaard however does not construct a moral philosophy of his own, nor does he feel any need for formulating one. For Kant duty, as an ethical category, is construed as a moral obligation, and the notion of obligation implies the idea of moral necessity.

Moral necessity, in the Kantian framework, or duty, for that matter, is innate and can not be derived from experience.

What follows as a corollary is that ethical duty is also, by interpretation, a universal duty, since the ethical is necessarily the universal. Therefore duty is duty, if it has the characteristic of universality. This is implicit in Kant's categorical imperative: Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become a universal law. The argument is consistent in so far as we hold that a moral obligation, or duty, has two intrinsic elements: The action must be specified, and it should have the universal applicability. Hegel rightly says, 'Duty is hardly duty without this element of universality'. What does Hegel mean by this assertion? Hegel takes the individual out into the realm of the manifold, from the realm of possibility, for an involvement in the arena of actuality. Therefore that universality is not to be achieved by a process of estrangement of the self from reality, or by withdrawing from the world of stark reality, but by presenting itself to what is universal, is truly real.

II. DUTY IN THE KIERKEGAARDIAN CONCEPTION

This Hegelian excursion of moral philosophy makes duty an ethico-universal category. But Kierkegaard identified certain problems in the above proposition.

(1) Duty as 'inward relation':

Firstly, if duty is an ethico-universal concept, then, it also follows that duty is a 'congeries of particular propositions'. There has to be an authority to prescribe a series of do's and don't's. If one is to realize one's duty, one has to go to the catalogue of these prescriptions. This strand of thought is a firm conviction of many a deontologist, who employs this catalogue of do's and don't's to compute the standard of one's ethical life. Duty is what is required of me to do, as it is required fo everyone else. Conceived thus, personality is outwardly related to duty. Kierkegaard points out that the problem here is that duty lies outside of personality: 'the individual and duty stands outside one another'. Now this cannot at all be duty in the Kierkegaardian framework. Duty is not what is required of, or imposed on, the individual from outside, but what is incumbent upon him from within. One performs his duty, not because it is imposed upon him, but primarily because one feels obliged by an internal
necessity to perform it. Such a conception discountenances the thought that duty and the individual are mutually exclusive. If the two are mutually exclusive, a way is paved for the personality to become absolute, because personality can outright reject these prescriptions of duty. Kierkegaard in clear terms refutes this claim that duty implies an outward relation. As a counter claim, he states with vehement accentuation that the concept of duty indicates an inward relation. It is this insight that forms a substratum for his development of the conception of duty. He therefore states that duty is not an imposition (paalaeg) but a composition of the individual; it is what is incumbent (paaligger). Viewed thus, we have a new noetic awareness of duty: Duty is not a congeries of particular propositions or definitions; but, instead, it is the expression and hallmark of his inmost nature: it is the clothing that his inner nature clads itself in. Now, individual has duty, not outside of himself, but in himself.

The individual comes to the world duty-bound. It is not the case that he is ascribed duty later. Such an estimate of duty puts the individual in a right orientation towards an absolute duty. He does not lay his hands upon statute books or societal norms to discover his duty, since he has duty in his inmost being. He performs duty, not because there is an external pressure, but because of an internal requirement. If the ethical is essentially duty, and if duty lies inside one's personality, it necessarily follows that the ethical lies not outside, but inside one's personality. Kierkegaard writes:

If one views the ethical as outside the personality and in an external relation to it, then one has abandoned everything, then one has fallen into despair.

So personality has not the ethical outside it but in it and out of this depth it breaks forth. Since then, the ethical lies deepest in the soul, it is not always visible to the eye, and the man who lives ethically may do exactly the same things as the man who lives aesthetically, so that for a time this may create a deception, but finally there comes an instant when it is evident that he who lives ethically has a limit which the other does not recognise.

...for the ethical, as being the internal, cannot be observed by an outsider. It can be realised only by the individual subject, who alone can know what it is that moves within him. This ethical reality is the only reality which does not become a mere possibility through being

6. Ibid., p. 259.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 261
known, and which can be known only through being thought; for it is the individual's own reality.\textsuperscript{10}

(2) Duty as subjectively concrete \textit{vis-a-vis} abstract concept of duty:

Secondly, when duty is understood as a congeries of definite and particular propositions, Kierkegaard argues, such a concept of duty becomes abstract. For duty appears now as an objective law. There is a deduction of an objective corpus of law, morals and customs from the correlative of the world-historical; it is deduced by means of an abstract thought-process. Can this outward and objective corpus of prescriptions constitute an ethical reality? Kierkegaard's answer is in the negative. Performance of duty implies for him a decision, and all decisiveness inheres in subjectivity. Likewise passion for duty exists in subjectivity, or in an existential inwardsness. It is here that the ethical assumes the form of concreteness. Kierkegaard consistently maintains all along that anything pertaining to the realm of objectivity and outwardness is abstract, and is irrelevant to the growth of the existing individual.

\textbf{III. ABSOLUTE DUTY AS A CONCOMITANT OF FAITH:}

This construction aims at serving as a basic framework for our understanding the relation of the individual's duty to God. If there is duty, in the sense of an absolute duty to God, it cannot be conceived elsewhere other than in the domain of the inwardsness and subjectivity. To hold this view is to suggest that absolute duty to God cannot be conceived apart from faith. For it is in faith that one is in one's full subjectivity. As faith is the highest passion in the sphere of subjectivity, duty is the unique and affirmative expression of that faith. Thus faith and duty are inseparable, they exist in an inextricable relationship; they are the two sides of the same coin. In other words, all categories, subsumed under faith, pertain necessarily to duty as well. Therefore, in my analysis of an absolute duty to God, I may have to draw upon the characteristics of faith explicated in the preceding chapter.

The ethical individual is the individual who performs his duty. The ethical, qua ethical, is essentially the universal. Therefore, he who lives ethically lives universally. In this way, the existing ethical individual is not the particular, but the universal, and he is the paradigmatic man. Unless the individual succeeds in

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Postscript}, p. 284.
the task of becoming the universal, it is impossible for him to realise the ethical; but, he who lives universally expresses the ethical. Only such an individual can truly be spoken of as the incarnation of the Kantian ethics of categorical imperative. So he who lives ethically has himself a task of becoming the universal.

The process of the individual becoming the universal may be elucidated in the following manner: The primary duty of the individual is to transform himself into the civic life, as is ordinarily required of a citizen. Kierkegaard has in mind the higher form of personality which can be actualized by transporting the personal life from the state of isolation to that of the civic life. So long as the personal life of the individual is still fettered in isolation, it remains imperfect. Perfection to it is 'through the civic life', which is constituted by the structures of status and role playing in the society. Kierkegaard rightly recognises the temptation the individual oftentimes falls into. The individual may be tempted to condition and conduct his life by his personal predilections, in direct opposition to social goals of the society. He is suggesting here a legitimate telos, a lifestyle, which is commensurable with the universal norm and pattern. He contends that, in the ethical,

the task of the individual is to divest himself of the inward determinants and express them in an outward way.
Whenever he shrinks from this, whenever he is inclined to persist in or to slip back again into the inward determinants of feeling, mood, etc., he 'sins', he is in a temptation (Anfechtung).

(1) The Individual's relation to Duty:

The phrase, 'express them in an outward way', is shaded with a fair amount of fuzziness. One may have to go back to the Postscript for elucidating the phrase. Kierkegaard, with great insight, employs the terms for exhibiting a spatio-temporal dimension of existence, namely the world-historical, the finite realm of the relative ends and the manifold. These are the determinations, denoting the 'outward' aspect of existence, a great deal of which flows out into a civic life. Kierkegaard holds that the particular individual expresses himself as the universal via these determinants of the spatio-temporal outwardness.

But, in talking about an absolute duty to the Absolute, we are entering into a zone, where we have a totally different conspectus and interpretation of life.

12. Fear and Trembling, p. 79.
It is the spectrum of the transcendent, which however has profound psychological and ontological implications for the subjective life of the human spirit. It is precisely here that Kierkegaard takes us beyond the Kantian and Hegelian moral philosophy.

Absolute duty implies the individual's infinite relationship to the Absolute, borne out by an infinite passion. This infinite relationship, however, is decided in time and space through the relationship to something finite and historical. The spatio-temporal costume is the sine qua non of this transcendental mode of expression. This does not mean that the spatio-temporal, in other words, the ethical-universal, is instrumental in mediating this infinite relationship. It rather means conversely that the ethical-universal may be held in abeyance, only to be re-interpreted from this transcendental perspective of human life.

The paradox of faith comes once again to the fore in the treatment of an absolute duty to God: in faith the individual becomes the particular, and, as the particular individual, he is higher than the universal. It is the paradox of faith that the individual concretizes his self as the existing individual, by transcending the ethical-universal sphere of reference, which ordinarily is the basis, providing for an understanding between man and man. In common parlance, the ethical-universal is the determinant for any relationship between human beings. But faith- relation is sustained on the paradox, where the individual determines his relation to the ethical-universal. Herein lies the dynamics of absolute duty to God. In this relationship of duty, the particular, as an individual, stands related absolutely to the Absolute. One might now ask: What becomes of all other duties? In the Kierkegaardian scheme, all ethical duty is rightaway relegated to the position of the relative. All the former ethical relationships and obligations are now reduced to the relative and secondary significance, not for the sake of any higher ethical telos, but for the sake of an absolute telos. Fear and Trembling observes:

From this however, it does not follow that the ethical is abolished, but it acquires an entirely different expression, the paradoxical expression that, for example, love to God may cause the knight of faith to give his love to his neighbour the opposite expression to that which, ethically speaking, is required by duty.14

It follows from this that the ethical-universal is not abolished, when the absolute duty is performed. The ethical is not abolished, because it cannot be done so without risking a grave jeopardy to the absolute duty to the Absolute. Absolute duty does not designate an annihilation of a relative duty of the ethical-universal, for the latter is the substratum of human existence, which is divinely ordered. Removed this substratum, and there is no existence. Faith is what it is, especially in the Christian sense, only when it is being spoken, not only in terms of the beyondness of a space-time component, but also in concrete terms of space and time, therefore in the concrete terms of the ethical-universal. Therefore, the knight of absolute duty to God must, as a prerequisite, continue to exist in the relative realm, performing the ethico-universal duty, precisely in order to realize and exercise his absolute duty to God. The ethical is never abrogated, but may have to be, if God so demands, suspended teleologically. The Fragments, commenting on the significance of the temporal, says, 'the moment in time must have a decisive significance for the man in absolute duty'.

(2) 'Continuity' in Absolute Duty:

The mode of existence for the knight of absolute duty consists essentially in a continuous movement. There must be certain factors, which can give both sustenance and continuity to the movement, for otherwise there is no movement at all. These efficacious factors, which sustain the movement, are 'resignation' and 'repetition'. In 'resignation', one repudiates the ethical-universal for a moment, but in 'repetition', he returns to the ethical-universal, precisely to repudiate it for the sake of the absolute duty to God. This goes on in a circular manner, so long as the individual is an existing individual and simultaneously a knight of absolute duty; the life of faith is not a finished product but a continual process. As a process it is characterized continuously by the absurd. Since continuity is immanent in faith movement, in the movement of absolute duty, too for that matter, the movement cannot but be an involutional one.

Continuity must be perceived as being indispensable to the movement, for without it existence is nothing more than a vacuous rhetoric. It is interesting that philosophers of religion painstakingly labour to discover the genesis of continuity of faith-movement. Kierkegaard, exhibiting his own genius, says, 'the eternal is the factor of continuity'. What kind of an 'eternalness' is conceived

16. Postscript, p. 277
here? Mathematical truth, e.g. 'two plus two equals four', is an eternal truth, for we cannot as yet conceive what it is like having two plus two equalling something other than four. Geometrical truth, e.g. 'a triangle is a three-sided figure', is an eternal truth, for we cannot as yet conceive a situation where we have a round-shaped triangle. It is not such eternalness, that is entertained by Kierkegaard, here. In the first place, we need only to be reminded that Kierkegaard, as an existential thinker, abhorring 'pure' thought, does not entertain any form of 'abstract eternity'. Abstract thought is antipodal to his thesis; abstract thought is arrived at by abstracting from existence. To him, pure or abstract, thought is a sphere, in which the existing individual finds himself therein only by virtue of a mistaken beginning, and this error makes the existence of the individual insignificant.

To answer the query, we would have to turn to the Postscript for possible clues. Kierkegaard here affirms, 'Existence is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite'. In effect, it may be argued that the existing individual is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite. Whereas the finite is commensurable with the relative and the transient, the infinite is homogenous with the absolute and the eternal. It follows then that the aspect of eternity cannot but be immanent in the existing individual. It can be concluded that the immanent eternalness within the existing individual is the factor of continuity. To corroborate it, Kierkegaard opines that this 'concrete eternity' within the existing individual is 'the maximum degree of his passion'. The passion of the eternal and subjective spirit of the existing individual is an essential ingredient in the task of faith appropriation. This appropriation is not a momentary event. It is a continual process, as long as this element of eternity is the animating principle in the life of the existing individual. Absolute duty to God cannot be devoid of the passion of the eternal and subjective spirit of the existing individual.

IV. ABSOLUTE DUTY AND PASSION

Passion plays a crucial role in the realization of the absolute duty to God. Passion does not exist objectively, precisely because 'passion is subjectivity'. It is generally said that the fullest passion is obtained in love, which can exist only in subjectivity: 'Being a lover . . . is precisely a prerogative of subjectivity; for one does not become a . . . lover objectively'. In other words, love is a

17. Ibid., p. 350.
18 Ibid., p. 277.
19. Ibid., p. 117.
20. Ibid.
prerogative of passion, since passion is essentially subjectivity. Kierkegaard is not only concerned about passion in respect of absolute duty, but also introduces the concept of functional correlation, subsisting between love and duty. Of course, the category of love referred to here in the Postscript is the conjugal love. However, love, be it eros or storge or philia or agape, has indisputably an element of passion. Kierkegaard substantiates this truth by way of an analogy of marriage.

(1) Analogy of Conjugal Love:

Discussing the validity of marriage, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous Judge William lays bare the inter-relatedness between love and duty. Judge William thinks of an organic relationship and a functional interdependence between the two. He asserts, 'duty is not one climate and love another, but for me duty makes love the true temperate climate and for me love makes duty the true temperate climate, and perfection consists in this unity.' He insists that love is what duty enjoins and vice versa. He maintains that there is no other duty but love:

Duty is only one to love truly with the inward movement of the heart; and duty is as protean in its forms as is love itself, and it pronounces everything good when it is of love, and denounces everything, however beautiful and specious it may be, if it is not of love... Duty constantly chimes in with love. If you separate them... and make one part the whole, you are constantly in self-contradiction.

In a matrimonial vow, one assumes the responsibility for transforming love into a duty. For the aesthetic man, however, to make love is neither a duty nor a responsibility; he cancels both in love. On the contrary, for the ethical man, to make love a duty is to crown that love with all the required fulfilment. Duty would be too austere and terrible without love, and love, in turn, would be spineless without duty. The ethical man gives vitality to love through duty: 'Duty is the divine nutriment love stands in need of.' Marriage may be purely mundane, if we think of it as an aesthetic aspect of life. But the sense of duty raises it to the ethical level, even as the sense of love takes it to the borders of the religious region. We may venture to say that marriage is 'divine' in virtue of its touching the fringes of the religious stage of life. Its validity does not depend on the externals, but on the internal, sacred and passionate ties, binding two persons in marriage together. Love and duty provide both validity and continuity to the relationship between husband and wife. The essential part in marriage is

22. Ibid., p. 151.
23. Ibid., p. 149.
inwardness, and the concise expression of this is love, and the salient manifestation of this love is duty.

(2) Passion of Love in Absolute Duty:

In the light of our analogy, it can be reiterated that the passion of love is immmanent to the absolute duty to God. For duty is a matter of subjective decision. Even as love is the animating principle of a lover’s duty, 'love is a determination of subjectivity'.

In an attempt to bring out the close relation between duty and the passion of love, Kierkegaard enters into a hermeneutics of the scriptural passage: 'If any man cometh unto me and hateth not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and of his own life also, he cannot be my disciple'. He interprets the passage in a manner that suggests at once the inner tension in the faith-relation:

God, it is he who requires absolute love. But he, who in demanding a person's love thinks that this love should be proved also by becoming lukewarm to everything which hitherto was dear . . . and he who would demand such love signs at the same time his own death-warrant supposing that his life was bound up with this coveted love.

Kierkegaard hopes to accentuate the tension involved by way of referring to his analogy of marital relation:

Thus a husband demands that his wife shall leave father and mother, but if he were to regard it as a proof of her extraordinary love for him, and that she for his sake became an indolent, lukewarm daughter etc., then he is the stupidest of the stupid.

The purpose of Kierkegaard is to corroborate the contention that absolute love necessarily underlies absolute duty. Going by the views of Judge William, we may state that there is a constant conjunction between love and duty. Though the Kierkegaardian characters are not always the spokesmen for him, Judge William however represents to him the perfect ethical man, and, we know, ethical to him borders on the religious.
V. TENSION BETWEEN ABSOLUTE AND ETHICAL DUTY

Kierkegaard, in his discussion of the ethical and the religious categories, is cautious of not being entangled in speculative thought; this he abhors as an existentialist. What he is acutely concerned, in the context of absolute love and duty, is the element of the paradoxical absurd which abides in absolute duty. It is paradoxical and absurd that the knight of absolute duty should become non-committal and lackadaisical to his wife and children, or all his relative duties for the sake of an absolute duty to God. This state of familial indifference is said to have been called for. Absolute duty seemingly causes one both to commit to what ethics prohibits, and at the same time to omit what it prescribes. Therefore the commitment to absolute duty to God seems to be moral bankruptcy. But, if one were to think that such a love and duty, so demanded, be proved and propped by a tepidity and laodiceanism towards everything else, which was dear hitherto, one would have to think of God as revealing Himself as a superlative egoist; such a God would be held responsible for all the moral chaos and decay. Kierkegaard obviously does not intend to suggest such conclusions.

If the individual withdraws his love from his parents or wife and children, such an individual is not worthy of an absolute duty. Absolute duty is a sacrificial act of faith, and for absolute duty to be a sacrifice, acceptable and pleasing to God, the knight of faith must love his dear ones even more dearly at the call of absolute duty. It is this loyalty to, and love for, his people, juxtaposed by its paradoxical opposition to his love for God, which constitutes his act a sacrifice. The individual is here utterly 'boxed' within the sphere of dread and distress, and the anguish in this paradox is that, humanly speaking, he cannot make himself intelligible even to his most intimate friends in the finite realm. The knight cannot save himself from this excruciating anguish, because he has no higher expression in the ethical-universal for his act. As long as he is the knight of absolute duty, he remains in this conflict and tension. It is however possible for him to evade this agonizing tension, and repose himself in the universal, by abandoning his absolute duty. But if he does that, he ceases immediately to be the particular individual, whose religious status consists in being the knight of faith. He can also extricate himself from this existential mortifying agony by fleeing into the cloister. But in so doing, he might be the best monastic athlete,
but he is nowhere near faith, nowhere near absolute duty; for to be in absolute duty is to be in the tension and strenuosity of this dual consciousness of the infinite and the finite.

The dual consciousness is not suggestive of any confusion in one’s reasoning. The gravity of the predicament of the knight of absolute duty consists in the fact that he cannot mediate his act, for, the moment he mediates, absolute duty vanishes. The knight of absolute duty, as an existing individual, is clear of his task in the realm of the finite, he is clear of his status and role, rights and duties as a member of his family and society at large. He knows it to be a great honour to be the universal man, he has a clear understanding of his obligations towards his family. He is equally aware that to become a particular individual for the sake of something beyond the realm would virtually be anathemic to the societal norm-package, which is the foundation of his civic life and existence. He has a clear conviction of his calling to be a paradigmatic man, as a man of stature deeply yearns to be. He is aware that as a paradigmatic universal man, he can have a large following, walking with and beside him on the great and glorious road of the universal. He could not countenance the fact that people could not understand and misunderstand a good and noble individual.

But the situation radically alters, where the individual is greater than the universal. He is no more the ethical but the religious man. The knight of faith knows that greater and higher than all this is another realm of the infinite, which can make its ultimate claim on, and absolute demand of, him. He senses for the first time that this demand has ambivalent effect: On the one hand, it is repellent, but it is also redeeming, on the other. The encountering with the absolute demand of absolute duty makes him restless. The response to it is a radical disjunctive: either a surrender-to or a sundering-away. If he chooses the former, he knows, he is alone to walk the solitary path outside the universal, and that is terrible.

To be sure, he was not arbitrarily dragged into this precarious sphere, for the ‘or’ of the disjunctive was always there. He however chooses to expose himself, where peril and danger stare at him ceaselessly. This is the bondage of freedom. In treading this path, the knight of absolute duty not only knows that he accomplishes nothing whatsoever for the universal, but he also knows that he may become everlastingly the insolvent of the ethical.
Kierkegaard's tragic hero, Agamemnon, can still rest secured in the universal, because his act of sacrifice expresses the higher ethico-universal. Kierkegaard's knight of absolute duty, Abraham, on the contrary, cannot rest assured in the ethical-universal: to the ethical he is lost. This is because he chooses to be the particular over the universal, he chooses to be condemned to be free in relating himself to the absolute duty. The knight of faith realises that his renunciation and sacrifice of the relative duties are an unqualified obedience to, and faith in, God. The tragic hero suspends teleologically one expression of the ethical for the other, but he is not lost, rather he becomes more conspicuous and significant in the universal by virtue of that act. The knight of faith, on the contrary, suspends teleologically the whole of the ethical; therefore he is lost to the universal, being consigned by that act to the solitary state of existence; he struggles all alone in the great tension, but he is reborn to the religious state of faith.

The knight of absolute duty is a solitary self. It is true that the individual, by virtue of his freedom, chooses to commit himself to absolute duty, and that the form, this choice assumes, is 'complete isolation'. Yet, in that solitary state, the individual is not passive, but vibrantly active. The activity is inwardly directed, and has no correspondence whatsoever with the surrounding world, because the individual has reduced himself to nought with the universal, but exists only as a particular. The renunciation of the immediate and the instant does not amount to the individual's absorption in the haze and maze of some metaphysical ruminations. Rather this infinite resignation and renunciation constitute the imperative for an intensive inwardness. The inward action is his great task, an absolute duty to God.

This isolation is not homologous to that of monasticism. It is not a withdrawal from the world of civic life. For the knight, by virtue of the movement of 'repetition', is in the multilamellar relationship with the mundane world, precisely because a constant contact with, and presence in, it, is a necessary condition for making the renunciation a perpetual activity; otherwise absolute duty comes to an end. This dialectical principle must be constantly present in the life of the knight of absolute duty. But, again, the paradox is that this civic life, of which he is a part, has no ultimate significance for him. He is the knight of absolute duty, not because he cultivates civic virtues, but private or personal

virtues, courage, temperance, devotion to the absolute, -- all kept intact, even as the individual maintains his relation with the surrounding environment. Thus, the individual, who commits himself to absolute duty, by sheer paradox, is both foreign to, and friendly with, the world.

Kierkegaard is particular in maintaining the distinction between the ethical duty and absolute duty. For, this way, there is a clear awareness of the conflict, or tension, between the two in the life of the individual. Even in the midst of this conflict, the knight sees that the ethical mandate is not cancelled, but receives a relativized status. It is the conviction of Kierkegaard that the religious stage does not abolish the ethical stage, but only gives it a new garb:

So when . . . it is said that it is a duty to love God, something different is said from that in the foregoing; for if this duty is absolute, the ethical is reduced to a position of relativity. From this however, it does not follow that the ethical is abolished. 29

The ethical command vis-a-vis the absolute imperative, though not abolished, is no longer the telos. In other words, the ethical command is no longer an ideal to be realized, but itself a temptation, 30 that is constantly there because of the simultaneous presence of the ethical and the absolute duty.

VI. EXISTENTIAL PATHOS IN ABSOLUTE DUTY

The 'simultaneous maintenance' of the two relationships, or the 'dual consciousness', constitutes the tension in the life of faith. Tension cannot be done away with, for it cannot be rationally elucidated, it can however be borne with in deep pathos. Kierkegaard believes that pathos is immanent in tension. The man, who has an ethical duty, has to do with another human being, and, if at all he has to undergo some pain or problem in the fulfilment of duty, he has always with him the external to lay hold of. But the knight of absolute duty has to do solely with himself in an intense inwardness and, there, all alone he has to bear the pathos of the deadening weight of tension. He is all the time being misunderstood and, from the point of view of the universal, he is an eccentric and queer creature. Kierkegaard says:

The essential existential pathos in relation to an eternal happiness is acquired at so great a cost that it must from the finite point of view be regarded as simple madness . . . 31

30. See foot note No. 24 in Chapter III.
The existential pathos, spoken of by Kierkegaard, is essentially a pathos of action. But there is a problem here. Action seems to be the precise opposite of inward pathos. Action implies an outward activity. The life of an existential man is concretized in an activity out there, hence, in the realm of the universal. The individual, laden with tension, may repose in action as a medium of catharsis. Action therefore may be said to release all his psychological strain and stress. Action produces, therefore, a needed therapeutic effect in the pressurized individual, flattened by despair and anguish. Seemingly, then, a pathos of action is a sheer contradiction in terms. Kierkegaard hopes to overcome the contradiction by redefining his concept of action in the context of absolute duty. Firstly, action is what is inwardly directed in the realm of subjectivity, where crucial decision takes place. Secondly, we do well to comprehend Kierkegaard's category of action as relevant only to the sphere of the religious. Therefore the concept of 'pathos of action', consisting in inwardness and subjectivity, may be readily maintained.

We may further supplement the truth of the 'pathos of action' by way of an appeal to the 'paradoxical-dialectic' in Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard the test of the religious sphere of life is the paradoxical. Initially, he gives it the form of the dialectics: 'The positive is the index of the negative'. He shows that happiness comes by mean of suffering, certainty of faith by uncertainty, the truth by absurdity. The paradoxical-dialectic reverberates throughout his understanding of absolute duty and, for that matter, of faith as the depth-dimension of human existence. His pathos of action too may be said to lend itself to a dialectical understanding.

(1) Expression of the Existential Pathos:

How does the knight of absolute duty express his pathos? The expression of pathos is so central to Kierkegaard that he devotes a quarter of the Postscript for its treatment. He draws our attention to the two modes of expression, namely, (i) the initial expression and (ii) the essential expression.

(i) Initial Expression:

Initial expression pertains to pathos in aesthetics. It finds expression only in words, and cannot go beyond language. But the pathos, which exists in the realm

32. Ibid., p. 387.
of the absolute duty to God is not a matter of mere words. Language, being a mere abstract medium, is utterly unable to express the pathos of the relationship borne out by the absolute duty. Theology and poetry may stake their claim that they are able to enact pathos in the medium of language, but the truth of the matter is that the initial expression cannot express the existential pathos. By its nature, the latter relates to existence, and not to any abstract medium. Existential pathos can only be expressed in the concrete life-situations of the existing individual. Kierkegaard thinks that existential pathos is best effected in the context of a 'reconstruction' of the individual's mode of existence.33

Kierkegaard considers that reconstruction is a desired effect of the pathos of absolute duty to God. If reconstruction does not take place, the God-relationship is not there. Existential pathos is therefore synonymous with 'religious pathos'. Kierkegaard asserts that religious pathos does not consist in doctrinal propositions, for, in that case, religious pathos would be a mere speculative reflection. The individual then may be said to be luxuriating himself only in the medium of the 'ideality of the possible'. The implication is that such a man is outside of himself, and not within himself, existentially. Kierkegaard is not interested in this. It then follows that the existential pathos consists primarily in 'existing', as validated by the reconstruction of the individual's mode of existence in the 'ideality of the actual'.

The reconstruction consists in the accurate orientation of the life of the knight towards the absolute duty and, simultaneously, towards the relative duty. Substantially the crux of reconstruction is the 'simultaneity of existence', sought to be maintained by the existing individual in the absolute telos and the relative telos. The individual finds an occasion where to authenticate his existence as the knight of absolute duty. He performs the absolute duty to God by way of infinitely resigning the relative duty to his family, and at the same time, having performed the absolute duty to God, he returns to his relative duty. Thus, he must exist in both realms. He must simultaneously maintain a dual existence — that of absolute duty and that of relative duty.

Why does Kierkegaard arrive at such a conclusion? One would have to examine Kierkegaard's basic assumption of existence to know the reasons. In a manner peculiar to his existential-theological assumptions, he states that

33. Ibid., p. 347. Kierkegaard uses such alternate terms for 'reconstruction' as 'transformation' and 'orientation', - all however have the same breadth of meaning.
existence is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite. This postulation involves an inescapable conclusion that the existing individual has a paradoxical constitution of the infinite and the finite. As the infinite, he has the unbounded capacity for an absolute relation, exemplified in duty and devotion to the Absolute, at once transcending all the spatio-temporal conditions and limitations, in short, the finite. As the finite, he is subject to the contingency of existence, to the transient and the perishable. Conceptually, the infinite and the finite are mutually exclusive. But, the paradox is that in the context of faith-relation, or absolute duty to the Absolute, the finite is circumscribed by what it excludes. What is more, the finite presents itself as a substratum for the 'infinite relinquishment' of all relative duties. The infinite relinquishment is not supposed to take place once in a life time, but constantly. Hence the reconstruction of life can be achieved by no other means than the dialectical principle, whereby the existing individual can have such a delicately synthetic existence.

The existing individual in his immediacy is firmly rooted in the finite, which is the medium of existence. But, to qualify himself to be a man of faith, he is bound to yield all his finite realm to the authority of infinite resignation. It is only after this that he can establish an absolute relationship with God and to be able to perform an absolute duty to Him. This implies an exit from the existing world and, seemingly, an entrance into a cloister. But Kierkegaard is quick to add that, if the enterprise were to stop with the interiority of the cloister, there is no pathos which can be understood in the existential sense of the term. Nor is there any possibility of making an existential expression of that pathos. Since faith is existential, the believer, by virtue of the 'double movement', comes back to live in the finite, though he does not have his life in the latter. In communion with other human beings, he establishes his life in the predicates of human existence. But he is careful not to mediate his faith at any time through the finite telos. Existence for him therefore becomes exceedingly strenuous because of this double movement.

Therefore his reconstruction consists precisely in the energetic task of striving to maintain the simultaneity of absolute relationship to the absolute telos with the relative relationship to the relative ends, without any mutation whatsoever. It is not an easy task to absolutize a relationship in one direction,

34. Postscript, p. 350.
35. Ibid., p. 367.
and relativize another relation in the opposite direction, and yet, simultaneously, continue to live in the latter. The profundity of this strenuous exercise lies in the inviolate stillness of the inner life, but, at the same time, in an existential expression of pathos, devoid of any distinctive outwardness. Absolute duty is not a matter of an instant, but of a continual process. Thus, in the striving for the dual maintenance of existence, consists the transformation of the individual's mode of existence.

(ii) Essential Expression:

Whereas the initial expression of a pathos is aesthetic in nature, in so far as it is what is captured in words, 'essential expression' of a pathos is what is expressed in suffering. The question now is: Can absolute duty to God have an essential expression? Kierkegaard answers in the affirmative: The pathos of absolute duty must express itself essentially in suffering. Essential here then means what is fundamental. Suffering in the Kierkegaardian scheme is immanent both in the ethical and the religious stage of existence. It originates on account of the need for infinite resignation. Not only the knight of absolute duty but also the tragic hero suffers. Yet, there is a qualitative difference between their suffering. The suffering of the tragic hero terminates in the ethical telos; suffering here is adventitious. But the suffering of the knight of absolute duty persists essentially in the maintenance of the simultaneity of the dual relationships to the infinite and the finite. It lasts so long as the life of faith lasts, hence it is essential. Therefore the man of faith has the dialectical within him. The pathos of the absolute duty to the Absolute expresses itself in essential suffering.

Religious suffering is contrasted with the life of immediacy, which is the content of all forms of aestheticism. The latter too, may imply at times suffering; but it is said to 'expire' in suffering. But the life of absolute duty, on the contrary, is said to 'exhilarate' in suffering. Kierkegaard reiterates that it is precisely in suffering that the religious life exists. The Kierkegaardian concept of suffering is not merely physical, hence it does not mean the presence of misfortune and the absence of comfort, it is not psychological either. It is rather 'psychic', provided we understand by it the 'pneumatic' or 'spiritual' in nature. What does it imply? To begin with, it involves a 'dying away from immediacy' a recurring

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36. Ibid., pp. 387, 396.
37. Ibid., pp. 412, 414, 432, 446 etc.
theme in the Postscript. The concept calls for our special attention. Speaking of immediacy, Kierkegaard says:

Immediacy is fortune, for in the immediate consciousness there is no contradiction; the immediate individual is essentially seen as a fortunate individual, and the view of life natural to immediacy is one based on fortune. If one were to ask the immediate individual whence he has this view of life he would have to answer in virginal naivete, ‘I do not myself understand it’. The contradiction comes from without, and takes the form of misfortune. The immediate individual never comes to any understanding with misfortune, for he never becomes dialectical in himself; and if he does not manage to get rid of it, he finally reveals himself as lacking the poise to bear it. That is, he despairs, because he cannot grasp misfortune.\[38\]

From what is stated, here, we are led to infer that, firstly, immediacy is essentially the realm of the relative end, or the ‘world-historical’, in conjunction with the immediate consciousness. The meaning is even more transparent in Either/Or, Vol. II, where immediacy denotes the sensual propensity towards the transient and the finite, say, wealth, honour, pleasure, etc.\[39\] Kierkegaard speaks of the immediate life as the life in the ‘moment’, or the ‘instant’, which however cannot reach beyond itself. Further, the immediate individual cannot transcend himself, because he cannot become dialectical in the life of the moment. In his immediacy, the individual is absolutely transfixed to the relative ends. On the contrary, the absolute duty demands that the individual submit his entire immediacy to the authority of infinite resignation. It calls for a death of immediacy, hence its extricable bond with suffering.

Secondly, for Kierkegaard, the ‘dying away from immediacy’ is not synonymous with a flagellation, or a self-torture. Faith is not an asceticism of the monastic life. Flagellation is a feature in the life-style of the monk. How are we to say that a man, shorn of all the aesthetical determinants, is not a monk but a knight of faith? Ordinarily, dying away from immediacy involves the extinction of the individual. Like a consuming fire, it burns the individual to cinders; he is reduced to a mere nothingness. Kierkegaard advocates, in the absolute duty to God, anything but a sordid state of self-annihilation. We then have to grasp the positive content, inherent in suffering in the dialectics of Kierkegaard. The dying away from immediacy is not for the self-annihilation, but for the reconstruction...
of the life of the existing individual. If the death away from immediacy is to result in the self-annihilation, rather than the enhancement of the existing individual, we have only the monastic movement, and not the double movement of faith. Unlike the former, the latter expresses itself in an inward action. To Kierkegaard, 'action in inwardness is suffering.' In other words, the locus of this suffering is inwardness, for inwardness is 'the relationship of the individual to himself before God, his reflection into himself, and that is precisely from this that the suffering derives.\textsuperscript{41}

Thirdly, in this intense examination of himself before God, the individual discovers the claim of ultimacy, God makes on him. God, before whom he stand, may require of him an absolute duty. But, at the same time, the same God requires of him that the individual exist in the finite, which he had infinitely resigned. What follows from this is that the individual cannot yield an absolute duty to anything relative, and yet, he must return to the relative duty, as sanctified by God. The individual finds himself sandwiched between these two claims: This simultaneity of life's orientation constitutes his suffering. Take away the religious component from this hypertension, the category of suffering is a mere monasticism. Take away the religious suffering, it is a mere aestheticism.

Fourthly, Kierkegaard also shows that suffering, the essential expression for existential pathos, is not repellent to the individual. The man of faith invites it upon himself by way of a free choice: the individual decides for himself to enter into the sphere of God-relationship. This however does not mean that the individual bathes himself in a state of euphoria. On the contrary, the life of faith is a struggle. The more so, because the struggle of faith is not periodic; absolute duty to God is not events taking place at intervals. The persistency of suffering constitutes the existential pathos.\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, the 'persistence of the suffering guarantees that the individual remains in the correct position and preserves himself in it.'\textsuperscript{43}

It would now apparently suggest that the knight does rejoice in suffering. Is he a masochist? Does he ever transcend suffering? Is it the case that, finally, suffering is transmuted, in some strange manner, into a rejoicing, and then the knight would be able to transform his status of an existing individual to some 'pure eternal being'? In answering these questions, Kierkegaard reminds us

\textsuperscript{40} Postscript, p. 388.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 391.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 396.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
that firstly the knight is not a masochist. If he were one, he would not be a knight, but a monk. Secondly, suffering ceases, when the faith requires no longer an expression of an existential pathos. Thirdly, and this more importantly, the existing individual cannot be etherialized into a pure eternal being: suffering would remain the essential expression of the faith of the existing individual.

(2) The dialectical element in the pathos:

At the back of these answers, however, there is the Kierkegaardian dialectics between suffering and rejoicing. The problem here is this: Can we say that it is not suffering which is the essential expression for the existential pathos, but the rejoicing? If suffering, the essential expression of the pathos in absolute duty, is annulled at rejoicing, then the religious is correspondingly nullified. But if suffering, as held earlier, is the essential ingredient of the religious, then rejoicing at suffering cancels the essential expression of the pathos, and thereby the religious is nullified. In either case the absolute duty, or faith, is destroyed. One is caught between the horns of a dilemma. Kierkegaard escapes between the horns of the dilemma dialectically: He suggests that both suffering and rejoicing are the mainstay in the existential pathos of absolute duty of God. Since suffering and rejoicing are the polarized categories, they are the two antipodes required for the dialectical solution:

. . . that the existential relation to the absolute . . . is for an existing individual determined only through the negative--the relation to an eternal happiness only through suffering, just as also the certainty of the faith which sustain a relationship to an eternal happiness is determined through its uncertainty.44

The basic assumption in the above solution is that suffering cannot be an attribute of eternal happiness. But, when an existing individual establishes a relationship thereto, this relationship is quite rightly expressed through suffering. The joy, the knight experience, is veritably a joy grounded in the consciousness that the suffering signifies that relationship. Apart from this negative way, we do not have for an existing individual the assurance that he is in absolute duty to God. But this assurance is always in fear and in trembling.

44. Ibid., p. 407. Emphasis is mine.
We may conclude this chapter by way of a critical reflection. We may take note of the identity that Kierkegaard effects between the life of faith and the life of absolute duty to God. The knight of faith, of our preceding chapter, is also the knight of absolute duty. The knight of faith becomes the knight of absolute duty by the exercise of his freedom of choice into faith, the most anquishing of all undertakings of human existence. Hence, absolute duty is not a matter of divine coercion, but a 'volitional concentration' 45 on the part of the existing individual. That there enter into it the categories of the absurd and the paradox is specific to the Kierkegaardian conception of faith, as a depth-dimension of human existence. Faith and absolute duty are spontaneous in the movement towards God-relation, and they are preserved through thick and thin by the volitional concentration. In virtue of the prominence of free choice and autonomy of the will, in his philosophy, Kierkegaard may rightly be called a voluntarist. The autonomy of the free will runs throughout the life and existence of the knight of faith. For an existing individual, to exist is not a mere Cartesian cogito, but an exercise of free will to authenticate his existence; faith-existence is no exception to the voluntaristic law: it is a free surrender.

Volition to Kierkegaard is a distinct category. He goes on to add, 'All relative volition is marked by willing something for the sake of something else, but the highest end must be willed for its own sake'. 46 If there is something that is to be willed for its own sake, then it must be willed absolutely, and everything else may be sacrificed for its sake. It is this contraposition between the relative and the absolute, the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal that is reflected in Kierkegaard's concept of duty, directed to relative and absolute ends.

The volitional concentration, which is a matter of radically free choice, is seminal of absolute duty. This is so, because absolute duty is not on account of a congeries of prescriptions, but on account of free choice inherent in the individual. If an existing individual performs an absolute duty to God, because he is moved or caused by something other than himself, then the autonomy of the will is terminated. In asserting the freedom of will, Kierkegaard is only speaking the mother-tongue of existentialism.

45. Ibid., p. 353
46. Ibid.
In advocating the autonomy of the will, Kierkegaard is, in a sense, Kantian. Kant believed that the autonomous will, which is crucial in playing a decisive role in moral action, is the ‘good will’. But Kierkegaard’s point of departure from Kant must also be noted. Kantian ethical voluntarism, while emphasizing the autonomy of the will, ultimately reduces will to the sovereignty of reason, by emphasising its rational character. But the existential voluntarism of Kierkegaard emphasizes the role of the free spirit of the existing individual. Hence human passion replaces human reason in Kierkegaard; and human passion is a function of the will, and a valid ethico-religious system can be built on the premise of the primal autonomy of the will.

The Kantian good will can be brought to play a significant role in the framework of Kierkegaard. It is the good will, and none other, which can overcome obstacles on the way of performing the absolute duty. The autonomy of the will energizes the human spirit in the task of performing an absolute duty to God. Kierkegaard says that, if there are impediments over which the autonomous will cannot claim the victory, then ‘absolute relationship cannot be there’. In the Kierkegaardian scheme, the impediments may be associated with the death of immediacy or the suspension of the ethical. Impediments are neither imaginary nor of the possible realm only, but are existential and of the actual that pose a potential threat to absolute duty. The knight wills the absolute duty for its own sake in the face of the impediments. It is the good will of the individual that serves as the motive force that overcomes all hindrances.

This insistent voluntarism of Kierkegaard is vibrant throughout his discussion on absolute duty. The existing individual has to say freely either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and make the ‘leap of faith’. If a teleological suspension of the ethical is demanded, he has to exercise his autonomous and radical freedom. Only a radically free moral agent can make a creative choice for an absolute duty.

There is a certain conceptual problem that we may take note of. For Kierkegaard, duty is essentially an ethical concept, before it is applied to the sphere of religion. The ethical is built into the personality; the ethical therefore is innate. If so, going along the Kantian thinking, moral obligation may be suggested as not derived from experience. Then, duty, as the conceptual form of moral necessity, becomes an a priori concept. However, it is equally true

47. Ibid., p. 352
that, during the process of socialization duty is derived empirically. Could it then be said that the individual has duty without reference to God? The answer seems to be in the affirmative. Likewise, duty, being essentially an ethical category, it would seem, cannot be so absolutized as to warrant a suspension of the ethical, as Kierkegaard would have us believe. Absolute duty to God then is not an ethical, but a religious, concept. But in doing this, Kierkegaard has wrenched it away from the realm, to which it properly belongs. For the absolute duty cannot be commensurable with the ethical. If it is heterogenous with the ethical, then it must be of an extraordinary category. In a similar vein, the characterization of the ethical as 'divine and internal' as done in *Fear and Trembling*, lands one into conceptual muddles. It is not clear how Kierkegaard would answer these conceptual dilemmas.

However, to be fair to Kierkegaard, he is primarily a philosopher of religion, and not a moral philosopher. This is amply borne out from the context of his discussion on absolute duty to God. His knight of absolute duty, Abraham, performs the duty to God in the gruesome act of sacrificing his only beloved son, Isaac, when God demands that sacrifice as a proof of his faith. This act of unconditional obedience is duty to God. The knight of faith arrives at this stage only by virtue of a blatant violation of the ethical. If this duty is constituted by its opposite, namely, the violation of the ethical obligation towards his son, the absolute duty is constituted by the paradox and the absurd. It now goes to suggest that the absolute duty does not belong to the category of the ethical, but to the realm of faith proper.

As a student of Kierkegaard, I would like to suggest only an orientation to the solution of the conceptual dilemma. The dilemma concerned is real. It makes for the tension inherent in the commitment to the absolute duty. It is the same individual, who is committed to both the ethical and the religious sphere of existence. Kierkegaard has a tender sympathy to the ethical stage of existence. Whereas the aesthetical is abrogated by the man of faith, the ethical is retained by the religious man. He may occasionally be called upon for a teleological suspension of the ethical. But at any rate, having made the leap of faith, the religious man is to make the reverse movement to the ethical. The conceptual dilemma then only makes for the healthy tension in the life of faith.
It may be concluded that, while duty is an ethical concept, we can still speak of an absolute duty to God, provided that duty is no more seen as congeries of commands from outside, but a demand of human nature from within. Such a duty can only be an absolute duty to God. It persists in relative duty simultaneously. This simultaneity of existence in the relative and the absolute makes for the dynamics of faith. It is in the healthy tension between the two telos that the man of faith exists and practises faith. Whatever insight we obtain here once again illumines the depth-dimension of human existence.