

Why the *Night Trilogy* Matters

*“Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my Faith forever.”*¹

Ethics begins and ends with the Holocaust. The first killing camps in Dachau and Sachsenhausen in March of 1933, the Nuremberg Laws in September of 1935, Kristallnacht in November of 1938, the Jozefow Massacre in July of 1942, and Auschwitz and Treblinka in their insidious longevity force us to face the ethical question: how do we understand the human person in the face of radical evil. Understanding human nature can be a wearisome undertaking because human beings can be a wearisome kind. What sets a human being apart from robots and beasts, however, is the possibility of virtue. In this essay I will concentrate on faith and courage particular to the works and life of Elie Wiesel. Where were faith and courage during and after 1944, when Elie Wiesel first arrived in Auschwitz? I will attempt to answer this through a reading of Wiesel’s *Night Trilogy*—*Night*, a memoir of death and suffering; *Dawn*, a tale of hatred and violence; and *The Accident*, an exploration of life and love.

In this trilogy of despair, what is to be said of faith and courage? I believe that Wiesel uses despair to affirm faith and courage as human virtues. Moreover in the apparent absence of faith and courage, Wiesel affirms the human in the face of radical evil. Though not synonymous, faith and courage exhibit human excellence.

In his study of the cardinal virtues, Josef Pieper recognizes three levels of human courage—the pre-moral, the properly ethical, and the mystical. These three levels may be

¹ Francois Mauriac. Foreword to *Night*, in the *Night Trilogy*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 9.

understood as three distinctions in which the human person does something courage-like, aimed towards a fully developed image of courage that may never be entirely realized. Pieper writes:

These three basic forms of fortitude—the pre-moral, the properly ethical, and the mystical—all realize the same essential image; man accepts insecurity; he surrenders confidently to the governance of higher power; he “risks” his immediate well-being; he abandons the tense, egocentric hold of a timorous anxiety... Only in the second order is it a “human virtue” in the strict sense; in the first it ranks below, and in the third, above it.²

The pre-moral level of courage is concerned primarily with the human psyche, it is the most basic faculty of risk taking that every healthy human possesses. The properly ethical is Pieper’s second level of courage which for the average human represents the highest attainable degree of fortitude in political life, the soul’s power to remain undaunted in the face of death—“the firmness of mind required lest we forsake the good on account of difficulties.”³ Pieper’s final level of courage is mystical fortitude: “Of this higher degree of fortitude, which the martyr attains, as it were, in one powerful audacious leap, the natural forces of endurance fail. They are replaced by the Holy Spirit of fortitude, which works ‘in us without us’ that we may overcome the darkness and reach the steep shore of light.”⁴

Pieper’s three levels of courage suggest Soren Kierkegaard’s three spheres of existence: self-gratification, duty, and faith properly construed.⁵ According to Kierkegaard the human first

² Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), 139.

³ c.f. *Summa* II-II Question 139.

⁴ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), 137.

⁵ Kierkegaard’s three spheres of existence in *Fear and Trembling* may be better understood as three ways a human person can believe and consequently understand himself. In other words, the human person’s belief in something encapsulates who he is, his way of being.

enters into the “aesthetical” the end of which is self-gratification.⁶ When the person leaves the sphere of pleasure and assumes responsibility, he enters the ethical. In Kierkegaard’s final sphere of existence, the religious, the human leaps into the unknown through faith.

Kierkegaard illustrates these three spheres in the biblical story of Abraham. Despite the old age of Abraham and Sarah, they were blessed with the birth of Isaac. But something extraordinarily obscure follows: “And God tempted Abraham and said unto him, ‘take Isaac thine only son, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering upon the mountain which I will show thee.’”⁷

In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard presents this story of Abraham’s obedience with three possible meanings: that of self-gratification, that of duty, and that of faith. Kierkegaard asks whether Abraham went up to Mt. Moriah because he expected something in return (self-gratification), whether Abraham went up to Mt. Moriah out of an ethical duty, or whether Abraham went up to Mt. Moriah as an irreversible act of faith?

As mentioned above, Kierkegaard’s three spheres may be juxtaposed to Pieper’s three levels of courage in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. The first level of courage, the pre-moral, concerns the “immediate powers of the body”⁸ and may be akin to Kierkegaard’s first sphere, the aesthetical. This courage rests in our vital powers on earth and is manifested in the notion of “egocentric anxiety,” which is made evident in our sub-conscious actions driven by self-preservation. This level may be illustrated by our basic instincts to overcome obstacles to get what we want.

⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1968), 64.

⁷ Genesis 22:2, King James Translation.

⁸ Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), 135.

Pieper's second level of courage, the properly ethical, may be likened to Kierkegaard's second sphere where duty is paramount. Kierkegaard illustrates Pieper's ethical fortitude within the context of expressing an absolute obedience to God which "does not bring us into relation with Him."⁹ Doing one's duty may be conceived as a good, but if Abraham were to kill Isaac out of commitment to an absolute, then the ethical cannot justify the act. Kierkegaard writes that the highest ethical expression is the father loving the son.¹⁰ Abraham clammers up Mt. Moriah knowing that his duty to kill Isaac requires a courage higher than obedience to the universal (the ethical) because the deed is an act of murder. The ethical can neither rationalize nor reconcile the killing of Isaac; it is blind obedience.¹¹

Pieper's final level of courage, exhibited by Kierkegaard's "knight of faith,"¹² is mystical fortitude—"Of this higher degree of fortitude, which the martyr attains, as it were, in one powerful audacious leap, the natural forces of endurance fail. They are replaced by the Spirit of fortitude, which works 'in us without us' that we may overcome the darkness and reach the steep shore of light."¹³ This final, irreversible leap into the unknown marks the knight of faith; his whole being is in this.¹⁴ This actualizes the mystical notion of fortitude. Kierkegaard tells us that faith is not the first immediacy (self-gratification); if it were so, there would be no courage, and

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 78.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, 70.

¹¹ The language of the religious differs from the ethical. In the religious sense, God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as an offering. Though in the ethical sense, God asks Abraham to kill Isaac, a monstrous deed that leaves the human person with a substantial dilemma.

¹² The knight of faith in the religious sphere of existence is different than that of the tragic hero in the ethical sphere of existence. The tragic hero must cede to the powers of the law; it is his duty. To clarify the difference between each individual, Kierkegaard uses the stories of Jephthah, Brutus, and Agamemnon—each must kill their children to appease the moral order.

¹³ Pieper, 137.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, 131.

if there were no courage there would be no faith. For we understand this as “faith by courage.”¹⁵ This final sacrifice of the self may produce a silent void that can only be filled by the Spirit.

Kierkegaard observes in Problem III of *Fear and Trembling* that “silence is the mutual understanding between Deity and the individual.”¹⁶ Silence involves making sense out of something that does not make sense—the question of Isaac. Abraham allegedly reached the ethical, but was ordered by God to then abandon it for something higher. Is this not faith, and his silence not a measure of faith? Abraham cannot speak simply because if he were to speak, his words concerning Isaac would be unintelligible. Though silence hungers for speech, truth exceeds this aesthetical desire to speak.¹⁷ Abraham has reached a relation beyond the ethical that the beauty of language cannot comprehend. It is a “mode of understanding that serves as an alternative to the human tradition of faith and reason” in order to find meaning in a meaningless world.¹⁸ Silence is how we open ourselves to this truth: a beautiful manifestation of understanding the “alien” world from a vantage point beyond an absolute.¹⁹ For the final mode of courage, as Pieper suggests, mystical courage, cannot be perfected on the supposition of hoping in this intercession; but rather, it is the true manifestation of hope in the eternal life (“the truth of things”) that is only seen and recognized in the supreme test of ultimate fortitude.²⁰

If we understand the knight of faith as enacting faith by courage, then Josef Pieper’s first two levels of human fortitude (pre-moral and properly ethical) will not suffice for the human

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, 63.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, 97.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, 119.

¹⁸ Again on page 119 in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard alludes to the complexities that exist between the virtue of faith and the practice of reason.

¹⁹ Lore Huhn and Philip Schwab, trans. George Pattison. “Kierkegaard and German Idealism,” In *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, edited by John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford University Press, 2013), 71.

In contrast to German Idealism, Kierkegaard observes that the inner is greater than the outer.

²⁰ Pieper, 141.

person in his turn towards faith. The courage, whose end is the leap of faith, cannot be a kind of subconscious egocentricity; it cannot be blind obedience; this courage must be of something arduously higher and infinitely greater. Kierkegaard writes, “Faith, therefore, is not an aesthetic emotion but something far higher, precisely because it has resignation as its presupposition; it is not an immediate instinct of the heart, but is a paradox of life and existence.”²¹ Furthermore, faith involves a relationship that presupposes an apparent contradiction; it denies an absolute in order to achieve something far greater! Faith is a passionate virtue; “an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness.”²²



Night, a memoir, begins in the Spring of 1944 when the Nazis invaded and occupied the Romanian town of Sighet. Upon occupation, the Nazis constructed the Jewish ghetto and began deportations to Auschwitz. After his mother and sisters were taken to the gas chambers, young Elie Wiesel and his father were assigned to the labor units in Buna until they were evacuated to the camp of Gleiwitz and finally to Buchenwald. During this time, Wiesel witnessed the hanging of three Jewish boys, observed the fatal desperation of a starving Jew, participated in the apathetic refusal to mourn the dead, and hopelessly watched his father beaten to death, all the while experiencing himself the daily horrors of the camp.

Night illustrates the depths of radical evil and the human person’s fundamental instinct for survival and self-preservation. For Wiesel, once a pious Jewish boy, God is dead. But how

²¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 58.

²² Soren Kierkegaard. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard and Edna Wong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

did God die? We might understand the death of God in terms of four groups at Auschwitz: the Kapos, the suicidal, the apathetic, and the SS. The Kapos²³ beat their brothers and fathers to avoid execution.²⁴ The suicidal sacrificed their bodies for soup.²⁵ The apathetic felt relief when their fathers were beaten to death.²⁶ Finally, the SS followed the orders of their superiors.

Auschwitz will forever be a symbol of ultimate suffering and depravity. Kapos exchanged their families for their own lives. Starving prisoners risked everything for a spoonful of soup. Both determined that self-preservation was the highest end. The Kapos desired life and the suicidal prisoners desired food. By expecting satisfaction in return for their endeavors, they surrendered their lives to death and despair. When his father was beaten to death, Wiesel sat motionless in his bunk, waiting and hoping the officer would not make him the next victim. Like the suicidal and the Kapos, Wiesel lost faith. For the Kapos God equaled survival, for the suicidal God equaled food, for the apathetic God equaled attempted security. These examples demonstrate that both life and food were unsatisfactory ends. If faith cannot be based in a temporal pleasure or emotion predicated in the aesthetical, then self-gratification, Kierkegaard's first problem in *Fear and Trembling*, stultifies the individual from advancing.

The SS officers obeyed the orders of their superiors to imprison and kill Jews. Duty, Kierkegaard's second problem in *Fear and Trembling*, is understood as the individual's obligation to obey commands. The ethical becomes the universal, and as the universal the human person cannot escape obedience to the code of conduct. Conversely for Kierkegaard, the ethical is only relative because the individual may wonder and question his actions in light of

²³ Jewish prisoners assigned by the Nazis to supervise barracks and carry out administrative tasks.

²⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 48.

²⁵ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 67.

²⁶ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 116.

something higher than the ethical. The person by remaining in the ethical, however, never makes the final leap of faith. He presupposes duty as absolute and never journeys into the unknown. In this sense, Wiesel's characters remain tragic. None was a knight of faith.

Dawn, a novel, begins with Elisha contemplating the deed he must carry out, the killing of John Dawson to avenge the death of resistance fighter Ben Moshe. At 18 when living in Paris, Elisha had been recruited to join the Israeli resistance and terrorist network opposed to the British occupation in Palestine. John Dawson, a British soldier, lay captive in the basement of the resistance headquarters. Elisha is to kill him the following morning at dawn. Elisha visits Dawson, hoping the prisoner by some word or deed would justify his execution. Here, the oppressor and victim are in the same room, yet the victim is stronger than the oppressor who has not the will to execute the death sentence. But dawn is fast approaching; Elisha lifts his pistol and kills Dawson.

In *Dawn*, Elisha struggles to justify his duty. He had been ordered by his superiors to kill the enemy, British soldier John Dawson. Elisha dreads doing his duty because he cannot understand it; he is seeking a way out. Elisha hopes that in interacting with Dawson, he will make Elisha hate him, "hate would have made everything so simple."²⁷ Elisha, however, does not hate Dawson; he trembles between the ethical and something higher (the religious), but retreats instead to the gratifying sphere of vengeance and the ethical sphere of duty—he pulls the trigger. *Dawn* symbolizes the choice we all face: do we succumb to self-gratification and duty, or reject it for something higher? Unlike the SS Officers in *Night*, Elisha is tragic because he yearns to transcend the ethical but does not. He is not Abraham; he is not a knight of faith.

²⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Dawn*, 200.

The Accident, a novel, opens with Eliezer struck by a car as he and his lover, Kathleen, are on their way to see a film. He regains consciousness in the hospital, but passes out again. Through a series of flashbacks, the scene shifts to his first meeting with Kathleen. Eliezer speaks of his time in the concentration camp and the story of his family. Kathleen listens, but she cannot understand the painful memories that he frantically drops at her feet. Back in the hospital room, Eliezer regains consciousness, but remains detached. His apathy manifests itself towards Dr. Russel, his trauma physician, Kathleen, even himself. At the end of his recovery, Eliezer's only friend, Gyula, insists on painting in his hospital room and demands that Eliezer stay alive until the painting is completed. When finished, in it lay the inescapable suffering and crimes of the world. Gyula proceeds to burn the painting and with it Eliezer's memories. Eliezer weeps while only the ashes remain.

The Accident portrays Eliezer succumbing to the gravitational pull of self-gratification and the ethical. He is in a constant state of aesthetic consciousness that sees no self-gratification; he chooses not to live. Because Eliezer believes there is no remedy for his illness, he cedes to the angel of death. In his first meeting with Kathleen, Eliezer questioned the necessity of God for man. He states, God is bound to man as they must be one, but this bondage is one of "miserable pride" and "deep pity;" man is merely God's toy.²⁸ This, however, is the beginning of the long and agonizing journey. Because we as humans are constantly subject to betrayal, we are often unable to bind ourselves to others; duty to one another becomes empty. Instead, we must bind ourselves to a perfect Being that is neither thought nor idea nor idol but rather the enigma of love.²⁹ For we are a unity of both the finite and the infinite. The finite is our place on earth and

²⁸ Elie Wiesel, *The Accident*, in the *Night Trilogy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 240.

²⁹ Henri De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheistic Humanism*, trans. Edith Riley (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1967). Man is inherently predisposed to continually make gods for himself, 211.

the possibilities here, while the infinite involves an uncertain appropriation of the highest devotion and affirmation in the God of love—the leap of faith.³⁰ The leap of faith is an objective uncertainty of infinite possibility which reveals the infertility found in the finite ends of self-gratification and duty.

In another flashback to the night before the accident, Kathleen endeavors to help Eliezer with his inner turmoil. She promises to be there for Eliezer only if he promises to let her be there for him. She argues, “You claim you love me in the present, but you still live in the past. You tell me you love me, but you refuse to forget.”³¹ For Eliezer, the past is beyond power; it is the “harsh law of memory” that “poisons the air” and “organizes existence” while depriving spontaneity and possibility.³² The human person suffers not because he is a saint trying to imitate God, but because he is human with weakness and sins.³³ Kathleen ventures to give life meaning; through her love for Eliezer she hopes he will find meaning again. Sadly Eliezer knows of reality and its tragedy— “that man lives while dying, that he represents death to the living.” He acknowledges that the human person can try to establish himself but to no avail.³⁴ Kathleen might symbolize the ethical in this regard as she attempts wholeheartedly to help Eliezer overcome his anguish, but she cannot. Kathleen represents the duty that humans bear to each other, but in this case duty creates nothing. She refuses to leave his side, yet Eliezer still feels pain. Eliezer knows that the ethical is mere duty and not an antidote for human suffering. With no antidote, gratification, earthly pain will never be mitigated. For this reason, a life of pain is not worth living. Even in the hospital room, Eliezer outwardly loves Kathleen because he

³⁰ Coppleston, “Kierkegaard,” 343.

³¹ *The Accident*, 302.

³² *The Accident*, 304.

³³ *The Accident*, 304.

³⁴ *The Accident*, 275.

believes it his duty, though inwardly, there is no love. Like self-gratification, duty cannot and will not achieve the highest inwardness of the human being.³⁵

Like Wiesel in *Night* and Elisha in *Dawn*, Eliezer also lost faith. For him, God is dead, the god of the ethical and self-gratifying. If self-gratification and the ethical are not the highest end then might there be something higher? Might God exist? Though Abraham could not make ethical sense of God's order to kill Isaac, he climbed Mt. Moriah anyway. He trusted that God would provide,³⁶ but Wiesel, Elisha, and Eliezer did not trust in something higher, they remained daunted by human suffering. They had not the courage to become knights of faith.

Can Wiesel's conspicuous despair lead us to faith and courage? Faith is a journey of unceasing torment but not despair. Faith is a passionate virtue as it interprets misfortune and understands suffering.³⁷ If despair is the absence of hope, as Kierkegaard and Pieper suggest, then the loss of faith evinced in the *Night Trilogy* stands as one affirmation in an ongoing dialogue of the human person. Wiesel's trilogy, written from the viewpoint of despair, may also indicate the opposite, a viewpoint of faith and courage. Wiesel's novels seem to lead to the observation that suffering is endemic to the world but alien to us in as much as we are susceptible to its "implacable force of stupid, repulsive power."³⁸ Nonetheless, our passionate inwardness, becomes actualized in the comprehension of suffering—"in understanding suffering as essential."³⁹ As the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky affirmed, human beings cannot organize the world without God; without God the world is against man. "Atheistic humanism

³⁵ Again, we see the inner supersedes the outer.

³⁶ Hope in blessedness, the truth of things. Pieper, 141.

³⁷ M. Jamie Ferrara, "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 227.

³⁸ De Lubac, 173.

³⁹ Robert C. Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge University Press), 177.

inspires great things and a courage which spurs us on to achieve them.”⁴⁰ The one valid insight of a humanism purified of God is that we can have a human faith in either the greatness of self-gratification or of ethical duty. Does this not, however, return the human person to infantilism? If everything is duty and nothing is right, then the human person’s highest temporal purpose becomes ambiguous because it does not expound any particular; rather, duty subjects the individual to total surrender and ceaseless confusion. From this, it may follow that “atheistic humanism is inhuman humanism.”⁴¹

Like Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, the characters in Wiesel’s novels encounter a choice: remain confined to the aesthetic and ethical realms or transcend them to become knights of faith. Such a choice, as evidenced in the *Night Trilogy*, is a qualitative movement of the most pivotal and consequential kind. The human person searches for things to believe in, things that lead him to something. When neither sphere guarantees the hope of being fulfilled, the human person diverts his belief elsewhere, a place beyond temporal security. Hope and fulfillment, as I understand the insight of the *Night Trilogy* to be, is something that cannot come from this world. In this world there is suffering and torment which betrays the human person. The movement of faith, however, supersedes betrayal. For faith is not betrayal, faith is a leap into the unknown; it is something we will only understand in terms of hope, a trust in the truth of things. Indeed, the leap of faith is not merely volition, faith is *true freedom* in its truest form.⁴² Of this freedom, there is life, love, and passion of the most sacred kind. Either we can essentially authenticate our truest self in the leap of faith, or we must accept that temporal pleasure and blind obedience constitute the highest end. I understand the latter as the Holocaust. Only the ashes remain.

⁴⁰ De Lubac, 102.

⁴¹ De Lubac, ix.

⁴² M. Jamie Ferrara, “Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap,” 219.

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