

Midterm Paper

Student's Name

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PHIL 314: Existentialism Midterm Exam Fall 2024

Essay 1: Fear and Trembling by Soren Kierkegaard

The philosophical work *Fear and Trembling* by Søren Kierkegaard can be used to explore some key existential concepts, especially when focusing on the themes of anxiety, faith, and absurdity. In this essay, I will focus on the themes of absurdity, anxiety, and authenticity, highlighting how Kierkegaard has used them in his work.

Theme 1: Anxiety and Absurdity

In this work, Kierkegaard concentrates on the story of Abraham and Isaac as detailed in the bible. The story is full of anxiety as Abraham faces the dilemma of whether to obey the command given to him by God to use Isaac as a sacrifice or reject it. The story is a clear demonstration of what Kierkegaard refers to as angst or existential anxiety. While anxiety is based on the uncertainty about the existence of human life, absurdity comes in how Kierkegaard finds the life of a human being to be. For instance, the faith that Abraham displays is not founded on rationality but on a “leap” into the absurd, that is, putting trust in God however irrational that may appear. The absurdity is based on the contradiction between religious and ethical demands. That is, religiously, Abraham is expected to be obedient to the command given by God, while on the other hand, ethics would lean towards preserving Isaac’s life. The fact that Abraham chooses to obey God fortifies the theme of absurdity, where human reason cannot understand divine commands, leaving the person with existential anxiety. The author in this case argues that true faith is displayed when an individual embraces the absurd, that is, action without logical basis, and overcoming the anxiety that results.

Theme 2: Authenticity

Authenticity is the second theme that can be explained by the fact that the choice that Abraham makes is directly related to his true understanding of his faith, without paying attention to the judgments of others or external ethical standards. Authenticity in existentialism is used to refer to the ability of an individual to live according to the values they have chosen for themselves without conforming to external pressures or societal norms. Therefore, Abraham's decision in *Fear and Trembling* is seen as an act of supreme authenticity since he prioritizes his relationship with God against rational explanations or ethical codes.

According to Kierkegaard, Abraham's faith goes beyond society's conventional ethical norms. To someone observing from the outside, Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice Isaac appears unethical, though, from the perspective of Kierkegaard, Abraham is acting in alignment with a divinely, higher ordained purpose that is beyond human understanding. Abraham's authenticity is based on his unwavering, solitary commitment to serving God, a decision that isolates him from rational ethics and other people's opinions. This isolation is a feature of existentialist thought, where the person has to face their own choices and existence without the comfort of collective validation or universal truths.

In summary, Kierkegaard effectively covers the themes of anxiety absurdity, and authenticity in his work, *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard by using the figure of Abraham, illustrates how existential anxiety emanates from situations where the rational mind fails to offer meaning, forcing people to face absurdity. Furthermore, the choice that Abraham makes is a reflection of deep authenticity, since he acts according to his faith instead of focusing on societal norms.

References

Kierkegaard, S. (2003). *Fear and Trembling*. Penguin Books.

Flynn, T. (2006). *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

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Essay 2: Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka is a narrative that is rich in existential concepts. By using the story of Gregor Samsa, who bizarrely transforms into a giant insect, this story is a medium that will be used in this essay to explain the themes of alienation, and freedom.

Theme 1: Alienation

Alienation is a central theme in this story. One day, Gregor, the main character wakes up to find himself transformed but is immediately met with an extreme form of emotional and physical alienation. His gigantic new body not only isolates him from society but his family too, a sign of the existential condition of alienation that people living in the modern world feel. His transformation makes it impossible for him to interact with others, work, or even communicate effectively.

Kafka goes ahead to magnify the challenges that Gregor, in his new body is going through by explaining that even his own family, which once depended on him for financial support, immediately rejects him after his transformation. He is increasingly treated with revulsion and disdain by his parents and sister, a process that fortifies existentialist views of human relationships as superficial and fragile.

Moreover, the theme of alienation as depicted by Kafka in this work aligns with existentialist philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, who, through their works, have demonstrated alienation to be a basic aspect of human existence. Gregor's transformation is used as an extreme metaphor for the alienation that people face as they navigate a world that is often hostile to their existence.

Theme 2: Freedom and Responsibility

The theme of freedom and responsibility is another important existential theme presented in Kafka's novella. Although it can be seen as a form of existential liberation, that is, he is freed from the burdens of his family his job, and the expectations of society, Gregor's transformation gives him a freedom that is filled with a huge sense of responsibility, since he feels guilty that he can no longer provide for his family. In existentialist thought, this tension between responsibility and freedom is a common theme, especially in the works of Flynn (2006), who suggests that such freedom comes with the burden of making choices and accepting their consequences.

Even though Gregor is in his transformed state, he continues to feel responsible for the well-being of his family. He worries about their financial situation, listens at their doors, and feels deeply ashamed of his incapability to help. The existential dilemma of human freedom is also displayed in this story with Gregor's paradox of being free from societal roles but still feeling that he should be more responsible. Therefore, through this narrative, Kafka suggests that even in situations when external circumstances dramatically change, the burden of personal responsibility cannot be escaped by the individual. This suggestion is in tandem with the existentialist view that humans are condemned to be free, which means, they have to make choices and take responsibility for the consequences of their choices, no matter their situations.

To conclude, the novel *The Metamorphosis* properly explains the existential themes of alienation freedom, and responsibility. The transformation of Gregor showcases the existential condition of alienation, highlighting the deep separation between the individual and the external world. Similarly, Gregor continues to have a sense of responsibility even in

his transformed form, reflecting the existentialist tension between the burden of responsibility and freedom.

References

Kafka, F. (1971). *The Metamorphosis* Schocken Books, New York.

Flynn, T. (2006). *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

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