Who Stands Firm?

The huge masquerade of evil has thrown all ethical concepts into con-fusion. That evil should appear in the form of light, good deeds, historical necessity, social justice is absolutely bewildering for one coming from the world of ethical concepts that we have received. For the Christian who lives by the Bible, it is the very confirmation of the abysmal wickedness of evil.

The failure of “the reasonable ones”—those who think, with the best of intentions and in their naive misreading of reality, that with a bit of reason they can patch up a structure that has come out of joint—is apparent. With their ability to see impaired, they want to do justice to all sides, only to be crushed by the colliding forces without having accomplished anything at all. Disappointed that the world is so unreasonable, they see themselves condemned to un-productiveness; they withdraw in resignation or helplessly fall victim to the stronger.

More devastating is the failure of all ethical fanaticism. The fanatic believes that he can meet the power of evil with the purity of a principle. But like the bull in the arena, he attacks the red cape rather than the person carrying it, grows tired, and suffers defeat. He becomes entrapped in non-essentials and is caught in the trap of the cleverer one.

The man of conscience has no one but himself when resisting the superior might of predicaments that demand a decision. But the dimensions of the conflict wherein he must make his choices are such that, counseled and supported by nothing but his very own conscience, he is torn apart. The innumerable respectable and seductive disguises by which evil approaches him make his conscience fearful and unsure until he finally settles for a salved conscience instead of a good con-science, that is, until he deceives his own conscience in order not to despair. That a bad conscience may be stronger and more wholesome than a deceived one is something that the man whose sole support is his conscience can never comprehend.

The reliable path of duty seems to offer the escape from the bewildering plethora of possible decisions. Here, that which has been commanded is clutched as the most certain; the responsibility for what has been commanded lies with the one giving the command rather than the one who carries it out. However, duty is so circumscribed that there is never any room to venture that which rests wholly in one’s own responsibility, the action that alone strikes at the very core of evil and can overcome it. The man of duty will in the end have to do his duty also to the devil.

There is the one who determines to take a stand in the world by acting on his own freedom. He values the necessary action more highly than an untarnished conscience and reputation. He is prepared to sacrifice a barren principle to a fruitful compromise or a barren wisdom of mediocrity to fruitful radicalism. Such a one needs to take care that his freedom does not cause him to

stumble. He will condone the bad in order to prevent the worse and in so doing no longer discern that the very thing that he seeks to avoid as worse might well be better. This is where the basic material of tragedy is to be found.

In flight from public discussion and examination, this or that person may well attain the sanctuary of private virtuousness. But he must close his eyes and mouth to the injustice around him. He can remain un-defiled by the consequences of responsible action only by deceiving him-self. In everything he does, that which he fails to do will leave him no peace. He will either perish from that restlessness or turn into the most hypocritical of all Pharisees.1

Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a per-son is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God’s question and call. Where are these responsible ones?

Revision #1
Created 2026-03-28 19:26:03 UTC by Dara
Updated 2026-03-28 19:30:57 UTC by Dara