

FEAR AND TREMBLING



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Fear and Trembling
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(Abbé's Library)

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CONTENTS

<i>Prelude</i>	3
<i>Tribute to Abraham</i>	11
<i>Problemata</i>	20
<i>Preliminary Expectoration</i>	20
<i>Problema I</i>	45
<i>Problema II</i>	57
<i>Problema III</i>	69
<i>Epilogue</i>	97

FEAR AND TREMBLING
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"When Tarquin the Proud walked through his garden and silently struck down the tallest poppy heads, his son understood the message—but the messenger did not."

—Johann Georg Hamann

Foreword

These days, we're not just seeing clearance sales in stores—there's one going on in the world of ideas too. Everything is being sold off so cheaply that you have to wonder if, in the end, anyone will even bother to buy.

Every self-proclaimed expert who keeps close tabs on the "amazing progress" of modern philosophy—every professor, every tutor, every student, and every casual or serious philosopher—doesn't just stop at doubting everything like Descartes did. No, they go **even further**.

Now, maybe it's not polite to ask them where exactly they're going with all this doubt, but out of courtesy, we just assume they've already completed that first step: doubting everything. Because otherwise, how could they claim to go "further"? That first step must be so simple now that no one even bothers to explain how to do it. You'd think someone looking for guidance might at least find a small tip—some little bit of advice on how to handle such a massive task.

"But didn't Descartes already do that?"

Yes—Descartes, the wise, humble, and honest thinker whose work you can't read without being moved, **did** do it. And he actually said what he meant, and did what he said. That's incredibly rare in our time.

Importantly, Descartes never doubted **in matters of faith**. (As he often says, reason should only be trusted so far as it aligns with divine revelation. Above all, he believed that whatever God reveals should be trusted more than anything else—even more than our own reason, no matter how convincing it seems.)

Descartes didn't shout "Fire!" and declare that everyone must now doubt everything. He wasn't a noisy night watchman; he was a quiet, solitary thinker. He understood that his method applied to his **own personal journey**, grounded in his own prior confusion and flawed knowledge.

("I'm not trying to teach a method everyone should follow," he writes. "I'm only showing how I've tried to direct my own thinking... But once I finished the kind of education that usually earns someone the title of 'learned,' I totally changed my view. I realized I was full of doubts and errors, and all I really got from my education was a growing awareness of how little I actually knew.")

The ancient Greeks—who, let's be honest, knew a thing or two about philosophy—believed that **learning how to doubt** was the work of a **lifetime**. You don't become skilled in doubt in just a few days or weeks. It took an old, battle-tested philosopher—someone who had kept his balance through every trap and temptation—to really master it. He stood firm, denying both the so-called

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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certainty of the senses and the supposed certainty of logic. He wasn't swayed by ego or sentiment. **That** was the hard-won place he reached after a life of struggle.

But nowadays? **That's where everyone starts.**

In our time, nobody stops at faith anymore—they all move beyond it. And asking *where* exactly they think they're going might seem a little impolite. So, to keep things civil, let's assume they've all already **attained faith**, otherwise it would be a strange thing to claim they're going further, wouldn't it?

Back in the day, things were different. Faith wasn't something you mastered overnight—it was the work of a **whole life**. And when an old believer reached the end, after fighting the good fight and staying true to his faith, his heart was still young enough to remember the **fear and trembling** of youth. Maybe he had learned to manage it as a man, but **no one** completely outgrows that feeling—unless, of course, they've decided to skip straight past it as quickly as possible.

The point that those wise, ancient figures finally reached after a lifetime?

That's where people today begin. So they can go further.

The writer of this text isn't a philosopher—not even close. He hasn't understood “the System,” whether it even exists or whether it's finally been completed. Just thinking about it is enough to make his head spin, especially when it seems like everyone today must have enormous minds to hold all these enormous ideas.

But even if someone managed to translate **everything about faith** into logical concepts, that doesn't mean they truly **understand faith**—not how you enter into it, or how it takes hold of you.

This writer—again, not a philosopher—is, to put it *poetically and politely*, a **freelancer**. He doesn't build systems, doesn't endorse them, doesn't swear by them, and doesn't pledge allegiance to them. He writes because writing is a luxury for him—one that becomes more enjoyable the fewer people read what he writes.

He knows exactly what fate awaits him in an age that's traded away passion for academic scholarship—an age where, if you want readers, you must write in such a way that your work can be **casually skimmed during an after-dinner nap**, and present yourself like some cheerful young gardener from the classifieds—hat in hand, glowing letter of reference in tow, humbly recommending yourself to a discerning public.

He knows what's coming: to be completely ignored.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Or worse—he suspects that overly eager critics will come after him again and again. Even more dreadful, some **ambitious archivist**—a paragraph-munching academic who always seems ready to “save scholarship” by butchering other people’s work—might reduce his writing into **tidy, digestible summaries**, just like that poor soul who, in service of punctuation science, structured his sentences by counting exactly **50 words per period and 35 per semicolon**.

So let me make one thing clear, he says, with the deepest respect to all those meticulous system-makers:

“This is **not** the System. It has **nothing** to do with the System. I wish all the best to the System, and to the Danish investors backing the System—though I doubt it will end up becoming much of a tower. But still, I truly wish them all happiness and success.”

Respectfully,

Johannes de Silentio

Prelude

There was once a man who, as a child, had heard the beautiful story of how God tested Abraham—how Abraham passed the test, kept his faith, and was given back his son, against all odds.

As the man grew older, he read that same story again, and admired it even more. But something had changed—life had separated what, in a child's innocent heart, had been held together. The older he got, the more often his thoughts returned to that story. His passion for it grew stronger and stronger, yet he understood it less and less.

Eventually, he forgot everything else—so completely was he absorbed by this story. His soul had just one desire: to see Abraham. He had one longing: to witness that moment in person.

He didn't care about seeing the beautiful lands of the East, or the earthly wonders of the Promised Land. He didn't wish to gaze upon the pious couple blessed by God in old age, or the noble figure of the aged patriarch, or the bright, youthful Isaac. He wouldn't have minded if the whole scene had played out on some desolate plain.

What he longed for was to walk beside Abraham on that three-day journey—with grief ahead of him and Isaac by his side. He wanted to be there in the moment when Abraham looked up and saw Mount Moriah in the distance, to witness the instant he left the donkey behind and continued up the mountain with Isaac.

It wasn't about painting a vivid picture with his imagination—it was about feeling the terror of the moment, the tremble of the soul.

This man wasn't a philosopher. He didn't feel the need to "go beyond" faith. To him, nothing seemed greater than to be remembered as the father of faith—and even more glorious, just to *have* faith, whether or not anyone ever knew.

He wasn't a scholar or theologian. He didn't even know Hebrew. Maybe if he had, he could've easily "explained" the story of Abraham.

But that wasn't what he wanted.

I

"And God tested Abraham and said: Take Isaac, your only son, the one you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a burnt offering on a mountain that I will show you."

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It was early in the morning. Abraham rose promptly, saddled the donkey, and left his tent, taking Isaac with him. Sarah watched from the window, following them with her eyes as they traveled down the valley—until they disappeared from view.

They rode in silence for three days. On the morning of the fourth day, Abraham didn't speak, but lifted his eyes and saw Mount Moriah in the distance.

He left the servants behind and, taking Isaac's hand, walked alone with him up the mountain.

But Abraham thought to himself: "*No. I will not hide from Isaac where this road leads.*"

He stopped, placed his hand on Isaac's head in blessing, and Isaac bowed to receive it. Abraham's face was full of fatherly love, his eyes kind, his voice full of strength and reassurance.

But Isaac didn't understand.

His heart could not be lifted up. He fell to Abraham's knees, clung to him, pleaded with him—begging for his life, for his future. He spoke of the joy he brought to their home, the sorrow that would come in his absence, the loneliness.

Abraham lifted the boy to his feet again and continued walking with him, hand in hand, his voice full of comfort.

But Isaac still didn't understand.

They climbed the mountain. Still, Isaac could not understand.

Then, for a moment, Abraham turned away.

And when Isaac saw his father's face again—it had changed. Abraham's eyes were wild, his expression terrifying. He grabbed Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and shouted:

"Foolish boy! Do you think I'm your father? I am a pagan! Do you really believe this is God's command? No—it's my own desire!"

Isaac trembled and cried out in despair:

"God in heaven, have mercy on me! God of Abraham, have mercy! I have no father on earth—so be my Father instead!"

But Abraham said quietly, to himself:

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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"Lord in heaven, I thank you. It is better that he believes me a monster, than that he lose faith in you."

When a child must be weaned, the mother blackens her breast—because it would be cruel for it to appear beautiful when the child can no longer nurse.

The child thinks the breast has changed, but the mother remains the same—her gaze just as gentle and full of love.

Blessed is the one who never had to use anything more terrible than that to wean their child.

II

It was early in the morning. Abraham rose quickly. He held Sarah close—the bride of his old age—and Sarah kissed Isaac, the child who had taken away her shame, the child in whom all her pride and all her hope for the future rested.

Then they rode on, in silence.

Abraham kept his eyes fixed on the ground the entire way—until the fourth day. Then he lifted his eyes and saw Mount Moriah far in the distance. But immediately, his gaze dropped again to the earth.

Without a word, he arranged the wood for the offering. Silently, he bound Isaac. Silently, he raised the knife.

Then he saw the ram—just as God had foreseen.

He offered it in sacrifice, and they returned home.

— — —

But on that day, Abraham grew old. He could never shake the thought that God had truly asked this of him.

Isaac flourished, just as before. But Abraham's eyes had grown dim, and he never saw joy again.

When a child must be weaned, the mother—like a shy maiden—hides her breast, so the child will no longer see her as he once did. In that moment, he has a mother no more.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Fortunate is the child who didn't lose his mother in some other, more terrible way.

III

It was early in the morning. Abraham got up right away. He kissed Sarah—the young mother—and Sarah kissed Isaac, her joy, her delight, the light of her life.

Abraham rode on, lost in thought. He reflected on Hagar and the son he had once sent out into the wilderness.

He climbed Mount Moriah.

He raised the knife.

It was a quiet evening. Abraham rode out alone. He returned to Mount Moriah. He fell to the ground, face down, and begged God to forgive his sin—that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that as a father, he had forgotten his duty to his son.

He often took that same lonely path, but he never found peace.

He couldn't understand how it could be a sin to offer his very best to God—the thing for which he would have gladly given his life a thousand times over.

But if it was a sin—if he hadn't truly loved Isaac in that moment—then he couldn't understand how it could ever be forgiven.

For what sin could possibly be more terrible than that?

When a child must be weaned, the mother also feels sorrow—that she and the child must grow apart. This child, who once lived beneath her heart, then later rested at her breast, will no longer be so near.

So they mourn this small sorrow together.

Blessed is the one who kept the child close—and never had a greater sorrow to bear.

IV

It was early morning, and everything was ready at Abraham's house. He said goodbye to Sarah, and Eliezer, the faithful servant, walked with them for a while before turning back. Abraham and Isaac continued on, united in purpose, until they reached Mount Moriah.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Even though Abraham calmly and gently prepared everything for the sacrifice, at the very moment he turned away and raised the knife, Isaac saw that his father's left hand was clenched in anguish. A chill ran through Isaac's body—but Abraham lifted the knife.

Later, they returned home. Sarah ran out to greet them. But Isaac had lost his faith. No one in the world ever spoke of what happened. Isaac never told anyone what he had seen, and Abraham never suspected that anyone had witnessed it.

When a child is weaned, the mother prepares stronger food, so the child doesn't waste away. Lucky is the one who has that kind of nourishment ready.

This is how the man we've been speaking about reflected on the story. Every time he came home from his pilgrimage to Mount Moriah, he collapsed in exhaustion, folded his hands, and said, "No one was ever greater than Abraham—who could possibly understand him?"

Tribute to Abraham

If there were no eternal consciousness within us—if everything rested on nothing but a wild, churning force that, twisting through dark and chaotic passions, produced everything, whether grand or trivial—if beneath it all lay a deep, unfillable emptiness—then what would life be, if not despair?

If that were the truth—if there were no sacred bond uniting humanity—if each generation came and went like the leaves of a forest, if one replaced another like the birdsong that fades as quickly as it came—if each generation passed through the world like a ship through the sea or like the wind across a barren desert, aimless and without fruit—if eternal, ever-hungry forgetfulness lay waiting to devour everything, and no force was strong enough to resist it—how hollow and hopeless life would be!

But that's not how it is.

Just as God created man and woman, he also created the hero and the poet—or the speaker. The poet can't do what the hero does. He can only admire, love, be moved, and find joy in the hero's greatness. And in that, he too finds happiness—no less than the hero himself. For the hero represents, in a way, the poet's highest self—the part he loves most. And he's glad that it's not him, glad that his love is pure admiration.

The poet is the genius of remembrance. He can't act—he can only remember what has been done. He doesn't try to take it for himself, but guards it fiercely, as a sacred trust. He chooses whom to honor with his heart, and once he finds that person—the hero—he goes from door to door, singing and speaking, so that everyone else may admire and take pride in the hero too.

That is the poet's great act, his humble offering. It is his faithful service in the house of the hero. And if he stays loyal to that love—fighting day and night against the sly power of forgetfulness, which would try to steal the hero from him—then he has fulfilled his purpose. Then he and the hero are united, in spirit and love, for the poet is like the hero's better self: powerless, like memory itself, but radiant too, like memory can be.

That's why no one who was truly great will ever be forgotten. Even if it takes time, even if misunderstanding casts a shadow over the hero, the poet—the one who loves him—will still come. And the longer he waits, the more devoted he'll be.

No, no one who was truly great in life will be forgotten. But each person was great in their own unique way, and each was great in relation to what they loved most. The one who loved himself became great by relying on himself. The one who loved other people became great through his dedication to them. But the one who loved God became greater than all the rest.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

Everyone will be remembered, but their greatness was also tied to what they hoped for. One became great by hoping for what was realistically possible. Another became great by hoping for eternal things. But the one who hoped for what seemed impossible became the greatest of all.

Each person will be remembered, but their greatness also depended on what they struggled against. The one who struggled with the world became great by overcoming it. The one who struggled with himself became great by overcoming himself. But the one who struggled with God became greater than them all.

That's how people have fought their battles—man against man, one against thousands. But the one who wrestled with God was greater than all of them.

Throughout history, some people have overcome everything with their own strength. Others gave up everything through strength. Some depended only on themselves. Others were strong enough to sacrifice everything. But the one who simply believed in God was greater than all of them.

There have been people who were great because of their power, others because of their wisdom, their hope, or their love. But Abraham was greater than all of them. He was great with a strength that looked like weakness, with a wisdom that seemed foolish, with a hope that seemed like madness, and with a love that required self-denial.

By faith, Abraham left his homeland and became a foreigner in the land God had promised him. He left something behind—his understanding of the world—and brought something with him: his faith. Without that, he never would have gone. He would have thought the idea was completely irrational.

By faith, he lived as a stranger in that land. Nothing reminded him of the life he had loved. Everything was unfamiliar, and that unfamiliarity could have easily led to sorrow. And yet he was God's chosen one, someone God was pleased with.

If he had been exiled—if God had rejected him—then maybe it would make more sense. But as it happened, it almost looked like his faith was being mocked.

There was another person in the world who was also exiled from the land he loved. He hasn't been forgotten. His sadness and his search to recover what he lost are remembered.

But Abraham? He didn't cry. He didn't complain.

Yes—it's human to grieve, and to weep with others. But it's something greater to believe. And it's even more blessed to witness someone who truly believes.

By faith, Abraham received the promise that through his descendants all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Time passed—at first, the promise still seemed possible, and Abraham believed. Then more time passed, and it started to seem unreasonable—and still, Abraham believed.

There was another person in the world who also held on to a deep hope. Time passed, and night began to fall on his life. He wasn't so broken by disappointment that he forgot what he had hoped for—so he, too, won't be forgotten. He felt sorrow, but sorrow didn't betray him the way life had. In sorrow's bittersweetness, he still held on to the hope that hadn't come true.

It is human to feel sorrow, and it is human to mourn with others who are grieving. But to believe—that is something greater. And to witness someone who believes—that is even more blessed.

From Abraham, we hear no song of sorrow. He didn't count the days while waiting. He didn't watch Sarah suspiciously, wondering if she was getting too old. He didn't try to stop the sun from moving, so that time wouldn't age her—and with her, the promise. He didn't sing her sad songs to soothe their disappointment.

Abraham got old. Sarah became the object of ridicule. And yet—he was the one God had chosen, the one promised that through his descendants all the earth would be blessed.

So wouldn't it have made more sense if he hadn't been chosen by God at all?

What does it mean to be God's chosen one?

Does it mean being denied the dreams of your youth, only to receive them late in life, when they're hardest to enjoy?

If Abraham had lost his faith, he could have given up.

He could have said to God:

“Maybe this isn't your will after all. I'll let go of this dream—it was my only one, and it meant everything to me. My heart is still sincere; I hold no bitterness toward you for denying me.”

Even then, he wouldn't have been forgotten. He could have inspired many with that example. But he wouldn't have become *the father of faith*.

Because while it's admirable to let go of your dream, it's even greater to hold on to it *after* you've let go.

It's great to embrace the eternal, but it's even greater to take back what is earthly—after first surrendering it.

Then came the fulfillment of time.

If Abraham hadn't believed, maybe Sarah would have died heartbroken.

And Abraham, numbed by grief, might not have recognized the promise when it was fulfilled—he might have looked at it like some lost dream from his youth.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

But Abraham *did* believe. And because of that, he stayed young.
The person who always expects the best is often worn down by life and becomes old.
The one who constantly prepares for the worst grows old before his time.
But the one who believes—*he* keeps a kind of eternal youth.

That's the deeper miracle in this story.

Sarah, even though she was old, still had the desire to become a mother.
Abraham, though gray-haired, still longed to be a father.

On the surface, the miracle is that their hope actually came true.
But on a deeper level, the miracle of faith is that they still *had* the hope at all—and faith preserved that hope, and with it, their youth.

Abraham received the promise fulfilled—he received it with faith.
And the fulfillment came both as promised and as believed.
(For even Moses struck the rock with his staff, but he did not believe.)

So there was joy in Abraham's home—joy when Sarah stood as a bride, celebrating her golden wedding anniversary.

But it wasn't over yet. Abraham would be tested one more time.

He had already battled against the most cunning force of all—*time*.
He had stood firm against that quiet enemy that never sleeps, that ancient force that outlasts everything. He had resisted time—and he had held on to his faith.

Now, all the horror of that lifelong struggle was about to be compressed into one moment.

"And God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt sacrifice on a mountain that I will show you.'"

So now, after everything, it was all going to mean nothing? Worse than if it had never happened at all? Was God just mocking Abraham? God had done something incredible—He made the impossible happen—and now He was going to undo it? Was it all just a meaningless act? But Abraham didn't laugh at the promise the way Sarah had when it was first announced. He didn't treat it as foolishness.

Now, everything seemed like it had been for nothing. Seventy years of faithful waiting, and only a brief moment to enjoy the fulfillment—was that all? Who would be so cruel as to take the staff out of the old man's hand, or worse, ask him to break it himself? Who would demand that a man

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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bring sadness to his own old age? Who would ask him to harm the innocent child—and make him do it with his own hands?

And yet Abraham was the one God had chosen. And this was the God who was testing him. Everything was now going to be lost—the future hope of generations, the promise that through Abraham's descendants all the world would be blessed. It was as if that promise had only been a passing thought in God's mind, and now Abraham himself would have to erase it.

The promise had become part of Abraham's life, long before Isaac was even born. It had been shaped by years of prayer, struggle, and hope. Isaac was the fruit of his entire life—the blessing he had carried in his heart—and now that fruit was going to be taken away too soon, before it could fully grow. And what meaning would be left if Isaac had to die?

There would be no peaceful, meaningful farewell—no final moment where Abraham could look at Isaac and bless him with all the love and hope he had carried. No chance for Abraham to pass on that blessing with joy and dignity. Instead, he would have to say goodbye in a way that would leave him behind—still alive, but alone. Death would separate them, but Isaac would be the one it claimed.

Abraham wouldn't be laying his hand on Isaac in blessing, but in violence. Not as a joyful old man giving his legacy, but as someone worn out by life, destroying the very thing he had lived for. And it was God who was asking this of him.

How terrible that message must have been. Who could ever deliver such a command to Abraham? Who could even bear to speak those words to him? But it wasn't a human being—it was God Himself who put Abraham to the test.

And still, Abraham believed. And not just in some vague future after death. He believed for *this* life. If his faith had only been about the life to come, then maybe it would've been easier to let go—easier to walk away from this world. But Abraham's faith wasn't like that. That kind of belief—just hoping for something in the distant future, after this life—isn't really faith. It's a distant, uncertain possibility that feels more like despair than hope.

Abraham believed that he would grow old in the land God gave him, respected by the people, blessed through Isaac, the child he loved more than anything. And it's not enough to say he just fulfilled the duty of a father's love—his love for Isaac was deeper than that, as shown in God's command: "Take your son, your only son, the one you love." Jacob had twelve sons, and he loved one especially. Abraham had only one—and he loved him.

Abraham believed, and he didn't doubt. He believed in something that made no logical sense.

If he had doubted, he might still have done something impressive, something heroic—because that's the kind of person he was. He would have gone up to Mount Moriah, cut the wood, lit the

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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fire, drawn the knife. He might have prayed to God and said, “Please don’t reject this sacrifice. I know it’s not the best thing I could give—you promised me a son, and now I’m offering my own life instead. What is an old man’s life compared to that of the promised child? But it’s the best I can give. Let Isaac never know what was asked, so he can continue his life with hope.” Then Abraham might have taken the knife and killed himself.

People would have admired him for that. His name would’ve been remembered. But there’s a difference between being admired and being a true example for people who are suffering—someone who gives others hope and direction.

Abraham believed. He didn’t pray for a way out. The only time he ever tried to change God’s mind was when God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Bible says, “And God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham, Abraham, where are you?’” And Abraham said, “Here I am.”

Now, ask yourself honestly: when you saw serious problems approaching in your life, did you answer like that? Or did you wish you could hide? Did you hope something would take the pressure away? Or maybe you were strong—but didn’t you hesitate, didn’t you want to turn back to your comfort zone?

And when the moment came and life called you forward, did you speak up clearly? Or did you quietly mumble, uncertain?

Abraham didn’t hesitate. He answered clearly, calmly, and confidently: “Here I am.”

Then the Bible says, “Abraham got up early in the morning.” He acted like it was an ordinary day. He didn’t drag his feet—he got up early and went straight to the place God had told him about.

He didn’t say anything to Sarah. He didn’t say anything to Eliezer. Who would have understood him? The nature of this test meant that he couldn’t explain it. He had to carry it alone.

He cut the wood, tied up Isaac, lit the fire, and picked up the knife.

Now think about this: many fathers believe that losing their child is the worst thing that could happen, the end of their future. But Isaac wasn’t just any child—he was the child of the promise. No father has ever lost something as meaningful as what Isaac represented to Abraham.

Yes, many fathers have lost children. But in those cases, it was clear that it was God’s will—it was something that happened to them. In Abraham’s case, *he* was the one who had to do it.

That made it a much harder test.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Isaac's life was in Abraham's own hands. And Abraham stood there, an old man, with all his hope resting in his son. But he didn't doubt. He didn't look around in panic. He didn't cry out to God. He didn't beg.

He knew God was testing him. He knew this was the hardest thing he could possibly be asked to do. But he also knew that if God asked it of him, he had to do it—no matter how painful.

And so, he lifted the knife.

Who gave Abraham the strength to raise his arm—who kept it from falling weakly at his side? Anyone who really pictures this moment is left frozen in shock. Who gave Abraham the inner strength so that his vision wasn't clouded—that he could still see Isaac clearly, and also the ram? Anyone who truly imagines being there might as well go blind from the intensity of it.

And yet, in real life, people rarely become physically paralyzed or blinded by this story—and even more rarely does anyone describe it in a way that truly does it justice. Because, of course, we all know the outcome: *It was just a test.*

But imagine if things had gone just slightly differently.

Imagine that when Abraham was standing on Mount Moriah, he started to doubt. Imagine he hesitated, looked around nervously. Suppose that before he picked up the knife, he happened to notice the ram—and God told him to sacrifice the ram instead of Isaac.

Then Abraham would have gone home, nothing would have seemed different: Sarah would still be there, Isaac would be safe. Life would go on.

But deep down, *everything* would have changed.

His return wouldn't have been one of faith—it would have been a retreat.

The saving of Isaac wouldn't have been a miracle—it would have felt like luck.

The reward wouldn't have been honor—it would have been shame.

And his future? Possibly ruined.

He would not have known what faith really was. He would not have known what it meant to be favored by God. He would only have known how terrifying it is to walk up Mount Moriah.

And Abraham would still be remembered. Mount Moriah wouldn't be forgotten either.

But it wouldn't be remembered like Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark came to rest.

Instead, it would be remembered as the place of failure—as the mountain where Abraham *doubted*.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

Honorable father Abraham! When you came down from Mount Moriah, you didn't need any reward or tribute to make up for what you had almost lost—because in the end, you didn't lose anything. You gained everything. Isaac was still yours. God didn't take him from you after all, and you were able to sit down and share a joyful meal with him in your tent—just as, in eternity, you dwell with him forever.

Father Abraham, worthy of all respect! Thousands of years have passed since that day, but your name has never been forgotten. No one had to come later to rescue your memory from being lost—because every language, every people still remembers you. And still, you reward those who admire you more generously than anyone else. You bless your admirer forever in your presence, because the power of what you did captures both the heart and the imagination.

Respected father Abraham! You are like a second father to the human race. You were the first to understand and bear witness to the deepest kind of passion—a passion so great that it turns away from fighting the forces of nature and creation, and instead chooses to struggle with God.

You were the first to know this highest form of passion: the sacred, pure, and humble expression of what even the ancient pagans once called “divine madness.”

Please forgive the one who has tried to honor you with these words, if he hasn't done it well. He spoke out of humility, because it was what his heart longed to say. He spoke simply and briefly, because that was fitting.

But he will never forget that before you could keep Isaac, you had to raise the knife.

He won't forget that in all of your 130 years of life, you never went beyond faith—because faith was already the greatest thing a human being could reach.

Problemata

Preliminary Expectoration

There's an old saying that comes from the physical world: "Only the one who works gets the bread."

Strangely, this saying doesn't actually fit very well in the physical world, where it's supposed to apply. In reality, the external world is full of imperfection. Again and again, we see people who don't work still getting the bread—and sometimes those who do nothing, who sleep through life, end up with more than those who work hard.

In the external world, everything belongs to whoever happens to possess it. It follows the law of indifference—things don't care who owns them. The person who holds the magic ring gets its power, whether he's a wise man like Noureddin or a lucky fool like Aladdin. If someone has wealth, it doesn't matter how they got it—they still have it.

But in the spiritual world, it's different.

There, an eternal and divine law rules. In the spiritual world, it doesn't rain on both the just and the unjust. The sun doesn't shine on both the good and the wicked. There, the rule truly is: only the one who works gets the bread. Only the one who suffers anxiety and struggle finds peace. Only the one who is willing to go through the depths of darkness can rescue what he loves. Only the one who is willing to raise the knife receives Isaac.

If you refuse to do the work, you don't get the reward—you get tricked instead. Like the gods tricked Orpheus by giving him only a ghost of the woman he loved. They tricked him because he lacked courage, because he wasn't strong—because he was just a musician, not a man.

In the spiritual world, it's not enough to have Abraham as your ancestor—or to come from a long line of great people. If you won't do the work, you're like the women in Scripture who, it is said, give birth to wind—nothing comes of it. But the one who *does* the work, who truly struggles and strives—he is so full of life and strength that it's as if he gives birth to his own father.

There's a kind of shallow knowledge that tries to treat the spiritual world the same way as the physical world. It thinks that knowing about something great is enough—that nothing else is required. But that kind of thinking doesn't feed the soul. That kind of person goes spiritually hungry, even though everything around them seems to be turning into gold.

And what do they actually *know*?

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Thousands of ancient Greeks knew all about the victories of Miltiades. But only one man—the future general Themistocles—was kept awake at night because of them.

In the same way, generation after generation has known the story of Abraham by heart. But how many people has it kept awake at night?

The story of Abraham is unusual in that it always comes across as noble and impressive—even when people don't fully understand it. But just like everything truly meaningful, it still requires real effort and deep reflection to understand it properly.

The problem is that many people don't want to do that work, yet they still want to talk about the story. So they speak in Abraham's honor—but how do they do it? They reduce it to something ordinary, something easy to explain. They say, “What's great about Abraham is that he loved God so much, he was willing to give up his best.” That sounds good, and it's technically true—but the phrase “the best” is vague. People just say “Isaac” and “the best” like they're the same thing, and they do it so casually that someone could be smoking a pipe while thinking about it, and someone else could be kicked back with their legs up, just listening comfortably.

If the rich young man in the Gospels had actually sold all his possessions and given the money to the poor, we would praise him the same way we praise anyone who gives up something valuable. But even if he had done that, and even if we couldn't fully understand his sacrifice without effort, he still wouldn't be in the same category as Abraham—even though he, too, would have sacrificed “the best.”

What gets left out in how people tell Abraham's story is the anxiety. See, you don't have any moral obligation to money. But a father does have the highest moral and emotional obligation to his child. That's what makes the sacrifice so extreme. But anxiety is an uncomfortable subject—too intense for many people—so they skip over it. And yet they still want to talk about Abraham.

So people talk, and as they do, they casually swap the terms “Isaac” and “the best” as if they mean the same thing—and it all sounds fine. But imagine there was someone in the audience who couldn't sleep at night, someone deeply disturbed. That's where the real danger lies.

He goes home and decides to imitate Abraham—because, after all, his son is “the best” too. Now imagine the preacher finds out. Maybe he confronts this man with all the seriousness and moral authority he can muster and shouts: “You monster! You disgrace to society! What kind of demon possessed you to think of murdering your son?!”

This preacher, who felt nothing while giving his sermon about Abraham, now feels powerful and passionate as he lashes out at this man. He feels proud of himself. He tells his wife, “I'm a true

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preacher! I've never spoken with such power before. When I talked about Abraham on Sunday, I wasn't moved—but this, this was the real thing.”

Now suppose the man calmly and respectfully replies, “But I was just doing what you preached about on Sunday.” If the preacher had just a little too much confidence in his own understanding, this might be enough to shake it completely.

And yet—it's not hard to see how such a situation could happen. The only mistake the preacher made was not realizing what he was really saying.

Honestly, it's surprising that more writers haven't used situations like this in serious literature—instead of all the nonsense that fills most plays and novels. Because this situation is where comedy and tragedy are fully intertwined.

The preacher's sermon might have been ridiculous on its own—but when you see what it caused, it becomes deeply, painfully ridiculous. And yet, it all makes sense.

Or imagine a different version: the man who tried to imitate Abraham doesn't argue back. He actually feels guilty. The preacher goes home thrilled—not just proud of his sermon, but also feeling like he's an incredibly effective counselor. After all, he stirred the congregation with his sermon on Sunday, and on Monday, he stood like a flaming angel, guarding morality—bringing to life the idea that sometimes, preachers really do practice what they preach, contrary to the old saying: *“Things don't happen in the world the way the preacher preaches.”*

But suppose the man who tried to imitate Abraham wasn't convinced by the preacher's angry rebuke. Then his situation is genuinely tragic. Maybe he ended up being executed, or sent to a mental institution—in short, he suffered in the eyes of society. But in another sense, I think Abraham may have made him happy. Because the one who truly puts in the work—the one who truly strives—does not perish.

How do we explain the contradiction in that preacher's message? Is it because Abraham has some special right to be considered a great man, so that whatever he does is automatically considered noble—but if someone else does the same thing, it's seen as a terrible sin?

If that's the logic, I don't want to be part of that kind of empty praise.

If faith can't make the act of being willing to kill your own son into something holy—then let Abraham be judged the same way we'd judge anyone else for that action.

And if someone doesn't have the courage to go all the way with that line of thinking, to actually say out loud that Abraham was a murderer, then maybe it would be better for them to find that courage than to keep praising him without really thinking it through.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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From an ethical standpoint, what Abraham intended to do was kill Isaac. From a religious standpoint, he intended to sacrifice Isaac to God. The anxiety—the thing that can keep a person awake at night—comes from that exact contradiction. And that contradiction is essential to understanding who Abraham really was.

Or maybe Abraham didn't actually do what the story says he did. Maybe, given the culture and context of the time, it meant something very different. If that's the case, then let's just forget the story entirely—because what's the point of remembering the past if it can't mean something to us in the present?

Or maybe the preacher simply forgot the most important ethical detail: that Isaac was Abraham's son.

When faith is taken out of the story—when it's made null and void—what's left is just the bare fact that Abraham intended to kill his son. And without faith, it becomes very easy to misunderstand the story and treat it like any other case of attempted murder.

But that's exactly the kind of faith that makes the story difficult to grasp.

As for me—I'm not afraid to follow a thought to its full conclusion. Up to this point, I haven't avoided any. And if I ever encounter a thought so disturbing that I can't go any further, I hope I'll have the honesty to say, "This thought frightens me. It stirs something strange in me. So I won't pursue it. And if I'm wrong to avoid it, I trust I won't escape the consequences."

If I had come to the conclusion that Abraham was just a murderer, I honestly don't know if I could stop myself from losing all reverence for him. But even then, I probably wouldn't say it out loud—because some thoughts are too heavy to share with others.

Still, I don't believe Abraham is just a myth. He didn't become famous while sleepwalking through life, and he didn't get there because of some lucky twist of fate.

Can someone speak openly and honestly about Abraham without risking that someone might misunderstand and try to copy what he did, maybe even going mad in the process?

If I thought that risk was real, I would rather say nothing about Abraham at all. But even more importantly, I certainly wouldn't try to tone down or water down the story—because doing that would make it even more dangerous for someone who's vulnerable. When you reduce Abraham's story to something ordinary, you remove its true depth and turn it into a trap.

If we present faith as it really is—if we acknowledge it as something total and absolute—then I believe it's safe to speak about it in our modern world. After all, our time is hardly overflowing with faith. And it's not by *killing* that someone becomes like Abraham; it's only through *faith*.

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The same applies to love. If we reduce love to a passing emotion or a physical feeling, then we misrepresent what it truly is. And when we then talk about the powerful things love has achieved—those immortal acts—people who misunderstand may try to imitate them and end up deeply misled. Everyone has fleeting emotions, but if people act on them thinking they're following in the footsteps of true love, both the original deed and the imitator are diminished and ruined.

So yes—it is appropriate to speak about Abraham. Because when something great is truly understood in its greatness, it can never do harm. Greatness is like a double-edged sword—it can destroy, but it can also save.

If it were up to me to talk about Abraham, I'd begin by showing how deeply religious and God-fearing he was—someone truly worthy of being called God's chosen. Only someone like that could be put through such a test. But who among us is like that?

Then I'd describe just how much Abraham loved Isaac. And I would call on all the good spirits in the world to help me find the words, so I could express a father's love in its full intensity. I would hope to describe it so vividly that there wouldn't be many fathers, anywhere in the kingdom, who would dare to say they loved their child like Abraham loved Isaac.

And if a father doesn't love like Abraham did, then even just *thinking* about sacrificing his child isn't an act of faith—it's a spiritual struggle. It's a crisis of the soul. And that's something worth talking about—perhaps over many Sundays. There's no need to rush through it.

If the story is told properly, the result might be that many fathers would stop and say, "Before anything else, I'd just be happy if I could learn to love the way Abraham loved."

And if, after hearing both the greatness and the terror of Abraham's act, someone truly believed he was called to walk that same path, then I'd get on my horse and ride with him. At every step of the way toward Mount Moriah, I would remind him:

"You can still turn back.

You can admit that you misunderstood your calling.

You can confess that you don't have the courage.

And you can say honestly that if God wants Isaac, then God Himself must take him."

I believe such a person would not be rejected by God. He could still be blessed like everyone else—just not in this life, not *in time*. Even in the most faithful ages, wouldn't people have judged him this way?

I once knew someone who could have saved my life, if he had been more generous. He told me very honestly: "I know what I could do. But I'm afraid. I don't know if I'll have the strength to follow through. I'm scared I'll regret it later."

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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He wasn't a hero. He wasn't magnanimous. But does that mean we should stop loving him? Of course not.

So, after I had spoken and led the audience into the deep, difficult struggle of faith—the kind of intense passion it demands—then I couldn't be blamed if someone misunderstood and thought, "*This man clearly has faith; maybe if we just follow close behind him, we'll be fine.*" Because I would make it very clear: "*I don't have faith. Not even close.*"

By nature, I'm a sharp, analytical thinker—and for people like me, it's incredibly hard to make that leap of faith. But I don't think that difficulty is something special or impressive. It's not a badge of honor—especially when someone who overcomes it only ends up where the simplest, most humble person may arrive without nearly as much struggle.

When it comes to love, at least poets are around to honor it. Every so often, you hear a voice that can capture the beauty and greatness of love. But faith? No one talks about faith with the same honor.

Philosophy claims to go deeper. Theology, meanwhile, sits around dressing itself up, trying to appeal to philosophy—flirting with it, marketing its ideas like it's trying to sell something. People say it's hard to understand Hegel, but understanding Abraham? That's supposed to be easy. Going beyond Hegel—that's considered incredible. But going beyond Abraham? Supposedly anyone can do that.

As for me, I've spent a lot of time trying to understand Hegelian philosophy, and I actually think I've done a decent job of it. I'm confident enough to say that when I can't understand something in his work—despite putting in the effort—it's probably because he wasn't being very clear.

All of that, I do without any real stress. It's straightforward enough.

But when I try to focus my mind on Abraham, it's a completely different story. It's like I get wiped out. Every time I reflect on his life, I hit a wall—a massive paradox I just can't get through. No matter how much effort I put in, no matter how much I want to understand it, I can't move forward. I can't even get a single inch closer. I push with everything I have, and at the same moment, I'm completely stuck—paralyzed.

I'm not unfamiliar with great and noble actions in the world. I admire them. My soul connects to them. And I genuinely believe that when heroes of the past did great things, they were doing them for all of us—for me, too. In those moments, I say to myself, "*Now your cause is at stake.*" I can mentally put myself in the place of the hero. I can imagine being that person.

But I can't do that with Abraham. When I try to get to his level, I fall. Because what Abraham did confronts me with a paradox that I can't resolve.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Still, I absolutely do not consider faith to be something low or unimportant. Quite the opposite—I believe it's the highest thing a human can reach.

And I think it's dishonest when philosophy tries to replace faith with something else—something more manageable—and treats faith like it's insignificant.

Philosophy can't produce faith, and it shouldn't pretend it can. But what it *should* do is understand its own limits—recognize what it *can* offer—and not take away from what faith actually is. And it certainly shouldn't cheat people by acting like faith is nothing at all.

I'm not a stranger to life's struggles or dangers. I'm not afraid of them, and I face them head-on, willingly. I've known fear, and I don't run from it. My memory is loyal—like a faithful wife—and my imagination is like an energetic helper, always working. She keeps me company, always painting scenes for me. And it's not just pretty landscapes or peaceful moments—she also brings terrifying images to life. I've seen frightening things with my own eyes, and while I don't avoid them, I also know this: no matter how brave I am, that bravery is nothing compared to the courage of *faith*.

I can't make the leap of faith. I can't just shut my eyes and throw myself confidently into something that defies logic. It's simply not possible for me. But I'm not bragging about that. I'm not proud of this inability.

I truly believe that God is love. That thought has deep emotional truth for me. When I feel it, I'm overwhelmed with happiness. When I don't, I miss it terribly—more than a lover longs for the one they love. But even though I believe in God's love, I don't *have faith*. I lack that kind of courage.

To me, God's love is so different from everything in this world that I can't reconcile the two. I don't whine about that—I'm not that weak. But I also won't pretend that faith isn't greater than anything I've achieved. Faith is something far beyond me.

I'm able to live my life just fine. I'm happy and content. But it's not the happiness of *faith*—and when you compare the two, my kind of happiness is actually closer to unhappiness. I don't bother God with my little problems. I don't worry about the small details of life. I just quietly admire the idea of divine love and try to keep that ideal pure. But faith goes further—faith believes that God cares about even the smallest things.

I'm content to take a lesser place in life. Faith, in its humility, dares to take the highest place. And yes, that really *is* humility. I'll never deny that.

Sometimes I wonder: is there *anyone* in our time who can actually make the leap of faith? If I'm right, most people are probably more proud of their flaws than of their strengths. The only thing they might take pride in is doing what is clearly imperfect.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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My soul resists the way people talk about great figures from the past—talking about them as if they were so distant, as if a few thousand years makes them completely unreachable. I prefer to speak about them like they lived yesterday, to treat them as real, relatable human beings—and let their greatness be the only thing that truly separates them from us.

If I were called, like Abraham, to go on such a profound and terrible journey as the one to Mount Moriah, I know what I would do. I wouldn't be so cowardly as to stay home. I wouldn't hesitate or keep stopping along the way. I wouldn't conveniently “forget” the knife to buy myself more time. I'm certain I would arrive exactly on time, fully prepared—maybe even too early, just to get it over with.

But I also know what else I would do.

The moment I got on the horse, I would say to myself:

“Everything is lost. God wants Isaac. I will sacrifice him. He's my greatest joy—but I will give him up. And still—I believe God is love, and always will be.”

But in the realm of time, in this life, God and I would no longer speak the same language. We'd have no way to truly communicate anymore.

Maybe someone today would be foolish enough—or jealous enough of greatness—to try to convince both himself and me that *if I* had actually carried out what I described, it would have been even greater than what Abraham did. He might argue that my enormous act of giving something up was more noble, more poetic, and more ideal than Abraham's supposed “smallness.”

But that would be the greatest lie.

Because my so-called “giant resignation” was only a substitute for faith. I couldn't go any further than making the movement of giving something up forever—giving up Isaac, letting go of the finite in order to return to myself. That's the most I could do. And because of that, I couldn't have loved Isaac in the same way Abraham did.

Yes, I might have had the resolve to go through with the act, and that would show courage—in human terms. And yes, I would've had to love Isaac with all my heart—otherwise the whole thing would just be meaningless, maybe even wrong. But I still wouldn't have loved like Abraham. Because if I had loved like him, I would've been able to stop at the last moment—not out of hesitation or fear, but from faith. I would have arrived at Mount Moriah on time, not late—but I wouldn't have been able to return to joy afterward the way Abraham did.

In fact, I probably would've ruined the whole story.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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If I had received Isaac back, I wouldn't have known what to do. Abraham found it easy to be happy again with Isaac. But I wouldn't have. That would have been the hardest part for me—being happy again, fully, as if nothing had happened.

Someone like me, who gives something up completely—who lets go with the whole intensity of his soul, on his own strength and responsibility—only gets Isaac back with pain, never with peace.

So what did Abraham do?

He didn't arrive too early, and he didn't arrive too late. He saddled his donkey and took his time walking the road. The entire way, he believed. He believed that God wouldn't actually require him to give up Isaac—but he was still fully willing to do it, if that's what God asked.

He believed *in the face of the absurd*—because by human reasoning, there was no point in discussing it. It made no sense to believe that the same God who demanded the sacrifice would, in the very next moment, take back that demand.

Yet Abraham climbed the mountain. And even when the knife was raised, even then—he still believed that God would not take Isaac.

Maybe he was surprised by the outcome—but when he received Isaac back, it wasn't just joy. It was *more joy* than the first time. Because Abraham had made not just one, but two movements: first giving Isaac up, and then receiving him back *in faith*. And that's why his joy was even greater than before.

Let's take this further. Imagine that Isaac had actually been sacrificed. Abraham still believed. He didn't believe that he'd be blessed in the afterlife—he believed that he would be happy *here*, in this world. He believed that God could either give him Isaac back or bring Isaac back from the dead. He believed in *spite* of how impossible that sounded—he believed by virtue of the absurd, because all logical human reasoning had long since broken down.

It's easy to see how deep sorrow can drive someone to madness, and that alone is hard enough. It's also clear that some people have strong enough willpower to hold on just enough to stay sane, even if it makes them a little strange—and I don't look down on that. But what Abraham did is something entirely different. He lost all normal understanding—he gave up everything finite and familiar—and then, somehow, *through the absurd*, he got it all back again. That thought terrifies me. But I'm not going to pretend it's a small thing. On the contrary—it's the only true miracle.

People tend to think that faith isn't very sophisticated, that it's just for simple-minded people. They think it's clumsy or unrefined, not something that involves deep thought. But that's

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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completely wrong. Faith involves the most subtle, most extraordinary form of reasoning. Its logic reaches heights I can describe a little—but never fully grasp.

For example, I can easily perform what you might call a “leap into infinity”—letting go of the finite and diving into something bigger. I’ve trained myself to do that, like a tightrope walker who’s used to that kind of movement. I can let go. I can make the leap. But I can’t do what Abraham did.

That next step—the step of faith—I can’t do it. All I can do is stand in amazement.

Think about it: If Abraham, when he got on his donkey to head to Mount Moriah, had told himself, *“Well, Isaac is lost anyway. I might as well sacrifice him here at home rather than go all the way to Moriah,”*—then I wouldn’t need Abraham as a role model. But that’s *not* what he did.

And I know that because Abraham was genuinely joyful when he got Isaac back. He didn’t need time to process it, or ease himself back into ordinary life. He was immediately, completely happy with Isaac again. That’s how I know he had faith. If it had been me—or anyone like me—we might have loved God, but not believed. Because the person who loves God *without* faith always turns inward and reflects on themselves. But the person who loves God *with* faith turns outward and reflects on God.

This is where Abraham stands—on that peak. The last step he made was beyond “infinite resignation” (giving everything up forever). He went *further*. He reached *faith*.

All the watered-down versions of faith that people settle for—those lazy, half-hearted attitudes like, “Maybe I won’t have to give it up,” or, “Let’s not worry until something happens,” or, “You never know, things might work out”—all of that belongs to life’s mediocrity. Anyone who has truly resigned everything has already completely rejected that kind of thinking.

I don’t understand Abraham. I can’t learn from him in any ordinary sense. All I can do is be amazed.

If someone thinks they can develop faith just by looking at the outcome of Abraham’s story—thinking, “Oh, it turned out fine in the end, so I’ll trust too”—they’re deceiving themselves. They’re skipping the most important part: the first step of faith. They’re trying to squeeze practical advice out of a divine paradox. That’s not faith.

In fact, our time is so far from faith that we don’t even believe in miracles that turn water into wine. We’ve gone further—we’ve found ways to turn wine into water.

Wouldn’t it be better if we just stopped at faith? Isn’t it disturbing that everyone wants to go “beyond” it?

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When people today claim they don't want to stop at love—when they insist on moving past it—where do they end up? Usually, it leads to worldly scheming, shallow thinking, small-mindedness, and everything else that makes us question whether humanity even has a divine origin at all.

Wouldn't it be better if people stood firm in faith—and once they're there, make sure they don't fall?

Because faith must always be renewed—again and again—and always *in the face of the absurd*. And yet, here's the miracle: when someone does that, they don't lose what's finite and ordinary in life—they gain it back, fully and completely.

As for me, I can describe the movements of faith—but I can't perform them myself.

It's like someone who wants to learn how to swim: you can strap them into a harness and suspend them from the ceiling, and they can practice the motions in the air. They can describe how swimming works, but they're not really swimming. That's how I am with faith—I can explain the movements, but if I actually had to dive into the water, maybe I could swim—but I'd be doing something different.

I wouldn't be making the movements of faith. I'd be doing the movement of *infinity*—giving something up completely, forever. But faith doesn't stop there. Faith goes beyond that: after making the movement of infinity, it makes the return movement—*back into everyday life*. Back into the finite. The person of faith regains what they gave up, but by trusting in the impossible.

Lucky is the one who can make those movements! That person performs real miracles. I'll never get tired of admiring them, whether they're Abraham himself or a servant in Abraham's household, whether they're a famous professor or a poor maid. It doesn't matter to me who they are. I only care about whether they can make the movement of faith.

But I'm always watching closely. And I don't let myself get fooled—neither by others nor by myself.

You can recognize the people who have made the infinite resignation—the ones who've given something up forever. They carry themselves in a certain way: light, bold, almost weightless. But those who have faith—they're much harder to spot. That's because on the outside, they often look almost exactly like average, ordinary people—what you might call “middle-class nobodies.” And both infinite resignation and faith completely reject that shallow kind of life.

I'll be honest: in my experience, I haven't yet found a clear, true example of someone who lives with faith. But I won't say they don't exist. Maybe the person next to me is such an example. Still, I've been searching for years—and I haven't found one.

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People travel all over the world to see sights: rivers, mountains, distant stars, strange birds, bizarre fish, weird cultures. They gape at existence like tourists in a trance and think they've seen something meaningful.

That kind of thing doesn't interest me.

But if I knew where a true "knight of faith" lived, I would walk there on foot, no matter how far. That would be the only wonder I truly care about. I would never leave that person's side. I'd watch how they live, study their every move. I would consider myself set for life. I'd divide my time between observing them and practicing the movements myself.

And I'd spend the rest of my life just admiring them.

As I said before, I haven't actually met anyone who lives with true faith. But maybe I can imagine such a person.

Here he is. I'm introduced to him. The moment I see him, I instinctively take a step back in disbelief. I clap my hands and whisper to myself, "Dear God! Is *this* the person? Is this really him? He looks like nothing more than a tax collector!"

But it *is* him.

So I get a little closer, observing every detail—looking for any small signal that might give him away. Maybe a subtle glance, a facial expression, a quiet sadness or a mysterious smile—anything that might reveal something infinite beneath the surface. But no. I study him from head to toe, looking for even the smallest crack through which something extraordinary might peek out. Still nothing.

He's completely ordinary. His steps are steady and grounded. He walks with the confident stride of a man completely rooted in everyday life—no different from a well-dressed middle-class man taking a casual Sunday stroll. He's fully part of the world. No hint of mystery, no trace of that aristocratic "otherness" that usually marks the people who've made the infinite resignation.

He enjoys everything around him. He takes part in all the little details of daily life, and he does it all with such care and effort that you'd think he was just an ordinary man completely absorbed in the world.

He does his job. Watching him work, you might think he was some obsessed office clerk with a passion for Italian bookkeeping—he's that precise and focused.

On Sundays, he takes a break. He goes to church. Nothing about his expression suggests anything divine or transcendent. If you didn't already know who he was, you'd never pick him out of the crowd. His enthusiastic hymn-singing shows, at best, that he has a strong pair of lungs.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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In the afternoon, he goes for a walk in the woods. He enjoys everything he sees—people, crowds, buses, the sea. If you passed him on the promenade, you'd probably assume he was just a successful businessman out enjoying his weekend.

He's genuinely happy—but not in the way a poet would be. I've tried to find some hint of poetic depth or spiritual mystery in him, but there's nothing there.

In the evening, he walks home. His stride is steady and tireless, like a mailman. Along the way, he thinks to himself that his wife is probably making his favorite dinner—say, roast lamb's head with vegetables. If he happened to run into someone who shared that interest, he could walk with them all the way to the city gates, passionately talking about the meal like someone who runs a restaurant.

As it turns out, he doesn't even have four shillings to his name. But still, he fully and confidently believes the dish will be waiting for him at home. And if it *is* there, it will be a sight to behold. The upper class will admire him, and the common people will be inspired by how joyfully and heartily he eats—because his appetite is massive, greater even than Esau's.

But if the meal *isn't* there—amazingly—he stays exactly the same.

On the way home, he passes a construction site and has a brief chat with a man there. During the conversation, he casually outlines an entire building plan on the spot, as if he had every resource he'd need to make it happen. The stranger walks away thinking he must be a wealthy investor. And this man, this quiet “knight of faith,” thinks to himself: *Well, if I really wanted to, I could probably make it happen.*

Later, he sits by an open window and watches the neighborhood: the kids playing in the street, a rat scurrying down a plank, the everyday bustle. He's absorbed by all of it, at peace in the moment—like a carefree sixteen-year-old girl.

And still, he's no genius. I've looked for any sign of exceptional brilliance in him, but I've found nothing.

In the evening, he smokes his pipe. If you saw him then, you'd swear he was just the local butcher, zoning out after a long day. He seems laid-back, almost like he doesn't care. But in reality, he treasures every moment of life—he buys every second at full price. And he doesn't do *anything* unless it's done through the power of faith—through *the absurd*.

And still—yes, I admit it—part of me could feel envious, even angry. Because this person has made every movement. He's fully gone through the movement of infinite resignation—giving up everything he loved and valued most in life. He's felt the deep sadness that comes with that, he's known the peace that comes from letting go of everything. And yet, even after all that, he enjoys the simple, everyday things in life just as much as someone who's never known anything higher.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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His life in the finite world doesn't show any hint of fear or hesitation. And yet he enjoys it with the confidence of someone who's completely secure in it.

And still—he looks like a totally ordinary human being. He's a new kind of person, made possible only through *faith in the absurd*. He gave everything up, and then got everything back again—not through logic, but through faith in what seemed impossible.

He's constantly making the movement of infinity—giving things up—but he does it so precisely and surely that he keeps returning to the everyday world. And at no point would you suspect anything unusual about him.

It's said that the hardest thing for a dancer to do is to leap and land so perfectly that you never even see the transition—you don't see the dancer catch their balance; they just *land* in the position as if they had always been there. Maybe no dancer can do that—but this “knight of faith” can.

Most people live lost in the ups and downs of ordinary life. They're like spectators who sit on the benches and don't take part in the dance at all.

The “knights of infinite resignation”—the ones who give everything up—are dancers. They rise up in their leap, and then they fall again. This kind of movement is noble in its own right, and it's not unpleasant to watch. But when they land, they always waver a bit—they hesitate. That hesitation reveals that they're still outsiders to everyday life. Some of them handle this better than others, depending on how skillful they are. But even the most graceful among them can't hide that moment of uncertainty.

You don't need to watch their leap—you just need to see what happens when they hit the ground. That's when you know who they are.

But the knight of faith is different.

He lands so perfectly that it looks like he never left the ground at all. One second he's in the air—and the next, he's walking like everyone else. He turns the leap of faith into a natural stride. He brings the extraordinary into ordinary life. And that—that—is the true miracle.

But because this miracle can be so hard to recognize, I'll offer a specific example that shows how it works in real life. Everything depends on how this applies to the real world.

Imagine this: A young man falls in love with a princess. She becomes the meaning of his entire life. But their love can never be realized. It's impossible for that dream to ever become reality.

Now, the miserable voices from the “swamp of life”—people bogged down in bitterness—will say: “That kind of love is ridiculous! The rich widow of the brewer down the street is just as

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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good a match!" Let them croak like frogs. That's not the way the knight of infinite resignation thinks.

He doesn't give up his love—not for riches, not for security, not for anything. He's no fool. He first makes absolutely sure that this love truly is the center of his life. His soul is too strong and too noble to waste even a tiny piece of itself on some fleeting crush.

He's not weak, and he's not afraid to let the love reach deep into his soul. He allows it into his most private thoughts, lets it twist through every part of his being. If this love becomes impossible, he knows he'll never be able to remove it. Still, he lets it happen.

There's a kind of bittersweet joy in how deeply he feels this love. It pulses through his every nerve. But at the same time, his soul is calm and steady—like someone who has just drunk poison and can feel it flowing through every vein.

This moment—this love—is everything. It's life and death.

Once the young man has fully absorbed this love—once he's completely immersed himself in it—he doesn't hesitate to risk everything for it. He takes a long, honest look at his situation and calls on every clever thought he has. These thoughts respond to his call like trained birds; he signals to them, and they fly off in every direction, looking for possibilities.

But when they return, each one brings the same message: *It's impossible.*

At that moment, he becomes calm. He quietly thanks the thoughts, and once he's alone, he makes the *movement*—the inner decision to give it all up.

Now, if what I'm describing is going to mean anything, we have to be clear: the movement has to be made *properly*.

That means, first of all, the knight of infinite resignation—the one who gives everything up—has to be able to pour his entire life's meaning and purpose into *one single desire*. He has to want this one thing above all else. If someone lacks that kind of total focus—if they can't concentrate their whole soul on one goal—then from the start, their inner life is scattered. They'll never truly be able to make the movement. They'll just try to “manage” life, like those cautious investors who spread their money across many different assets to avoid risk—hoping to win in one place if they lose in another. That kind of person is *not* a knight.

Second, the knight has to be able to focus all the weight of his decision—all the emotion, thought, and finality of it—into one clear moment of consciousness. If he can't do that, then again, his soul is too divided, and he'll never actually make the movement.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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He'll stay busy with everyday tasks and distractions, always running around, never stepping fully into eternity. Even when he gets to the brink of doing it—of actually letting go—he'll suddenly remember something he forgot, and use that as an excuse to start over.

Then, in the next moment, he'll think maybe it's still possible after all. And maybe it *is* possible.

But by holding onto that kind of uncertainty—those rationalizations and distractions—he'll never actually make the movement. Instead, he just keeps sinking deeper into confusion and indecision, like someone getting stuck in the mud.

So, the knight makes the movement—but what kind of movement is it? Does he simply forget everything?

That might sound like a kind of resolve—just letting go by wiping the memory clean. But no, that's not it. The knight of infinite resignation doesn't contradict himself, and it *would* be a contradiction to erase the entire meaning of his life and still remain the same person. He doesn't want to become someone else, and he certainly doesn't think transforming into another person is something admirable.

Only shallow people do that. A butterfly, for example, might completely forget it was ever a caterpillar—and maybe one day it could forget it was ever a butterfly and turn into a fish! But people with real depth never forget who they are, and they never stop being the person they've always been.

So the knight remembers everything. But that memory is exactly what brings pain—even though, through infinite resignation, he has found a kind of peace in his relationship to life.

His love for the princess becomes something eternal—something spiritual. He no longer sees it as romantic desire but as a form of eternal love, a love that has taken on a religious meaning. Maybe the Eternal (God) has denied him the fulfillment of this love, but He has still given him peace by affirming that the love has meaning—just not in this world, but in eternity. And that's something no one can take from him.

Fools and young people love to say, “Everything is possible for a person!” But that's a huge mistake. Spiritually, yes—everything is possible. But in the physical world, the world of time and space, *a lot of things are simply not possible*.

The knight of infinite resignation makes this impossibility possible—not by changing reality, but by transforming the wish into a spiritual reality. He doesn't get the thing he wanted in the real world, but he gives it eternal significance by *giving it up*. His longing, which once reached outward toward the world, now turns inward. But it's not gone. It hasn't been forgotten or destroyed.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Sometimes it resurfaces on its own through hidden desires. Other times, he brings it back to mind deliberately—because he is too proud to let the most important thing in his life be dismissed as some passing emotion. He keeps his love alive. It grows with him, deepens with time, and becomes even more beautiful.

But he doesn't need anything external to keep it going. From the moment he gave it up, the princess was, for him, lost. He doesn't need to see her to feel something. He doesn't rely on the typical emotional ups and downs of romantic love—the nervous excitement of a final goodbye, for example. He knows full well that people who get overly emotional when saying goodbye are often the ones who forget the fastest.

He's discovered something deeper: that even in loving another person, one must be self-sufficient.

He no longer focuses on what the princess is doing in her life. And this shows that his resignation was *real*. This is how you can tell if someone has truly made the movement of infinite resignation or not.

Because sometimes people think they've made the movement—but then time passes, and the princess marries someone else. And suddenly, their soul breaks. They realize they hadn't really made the movement after all. Because the person who has truly made the resignation is entirely self-sufficient. They don't need anything from anyone else to sustain their love.

The knight doesn't take back his resignation. He keeps loving just as purely, just as fully, as in the first moment. He never lets go of it—*because* he's given it up infinitely. What the princess does with her life can't affect him. That's the mark of a deep soul.

Only those with shallow, reactive natures let someone else's actions determine their own. Only the lower spirits let their identity depend on others.

But suppose the princess feels the same way. Then something beautiful will happen.

She will choose to join that knightly order—the one you don't enter by being voted in, but by having the courage to commit yourself. In this order, you prove your immortality. It doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman; all that matters is the strength of your spirit.

She, too, will keep her love young and alive. She, too, will have moved beyond the pain of not being—like in the old song—"by her beloved's side every night." Both of them will have become perfectly suited to one another for all eternity. Their inner lives will be so deeply and harmoniously in sync that, if the time ever came—if life somehow allowed them to be together again—they could begin exactly where they would have started had they always been united.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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But that possibility doesn't dominate their thoughts. If they were obsessed with the idea of reunion in time, they would become old with waiting. Instead, their love exists outside of time—it's eternal.

Anyone who truly understands this, man or woman, will never feel cheated by life. Because only the shallowest souls believe they've been cheated when love isn't fulfilled in the usual way. No girl who lacks the pride of self-respect can truly understand love. But no amount of cleverness or manipulation can deceive the girl who *has* that pride.

There is peace and rest in *infinite resignation*. Anyone who chooses it—anyone who hasn't destroyed their spirit through something even worse than arrogance, namely, *self-belittlement*—can learn to make this movement. It's painful, but it brings a reconciliation with life.

Infinite resignation is like the shirt in the old legend: the thread was spun with tears, washed with tears, sewn with tears—but in the end, it protects better than iron or steel.

The flaw in that old legend, though, is that someone else made the shirt for the hero. The truth in life is this: *everyone must sew their own shirt*. And the beautiful thing is that a man can sew it just as well as a woman.

In infinite resignation, there's peace, rest, and a kind of comfort in the pain itself—because that pain is proof that the movement has been made sincerely.

I could easily write an entire book about all the misunderstandings, awkward attempts, and failed versions of this movement I've seen—even in my limited experience.

People tend to put very little trust in the human spirit, and yet this movement—the resignation of everything for something higher—is the work of the spirit. It can't just be a result of external pressure or fear (what the ancients called *dira necessitas*, or "terrible necessity"). The more fear-based it is, the less likely it is that the movement was done correctly.

People who assume you have to be in a dire situation to learn how to let go, in fact, are trapped in a kind of crude materialism. That's like saying no one can understand death unless they physically die—which, to me, is completely wrong.

Today, people generally don't spend much time worrying about whether they're making the movement of faith *correctly*. Imagine someone learning to dance who says, "People have been learning these moves for centuries—it's about time I just jump in and start with the most advanced steps." Most people would find that laughable. But in matters of the spirit, oddly enough, we take that kind of shortcut-thinking seriously.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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But what *is* education, really? I always thought it was the journey a person takes to catch up with their *true self*. And if someone refuses to take that journey, it doesn't matter how "enlightened" the age they live in is—it won't help them.

Infinite resignation is the final step *before* faith. So, anyone who hasn't made that step hasn't reached faith. Because it's in infinite resignation that I first prepare myself to exist as someone with eternal value. And *only then* can we talk about what it means to live by faith.

Let's go back to our earlier example—the young man in love with the princess.

The knight of faith does exactly what the knight of infinite resignation does. He gives up the love that meant everything to him. He accepts the pain. He finds peace in letting go.

But then comes the miracle.

He makes one more movement—something more incredible than everything else. He says, "*But I still believe that I will have her*"—not because it makes sense, but because with God, anything is possible. *I believe this by faith—in virtue of the absurd.*

Now, "the absurd" isn't just something unexpected or unlikely. It's not the same as "improbable" or "unpredictable." When the knight gave up his love, he concluded—rationally, with full understanding—that their union was impossible. That was his clear-headed judgment. And he had the strength to accept it.

In an *eternal* or *spiritual* sense, he could still "possess" the love by holding onto it inwardly, even after giving it up in reality. But this inward possession isn't absurd to the understanding—it's rational. The knight knows, like anyone else, that in the real world of brokenness and limits, their love simply *cannot happen*.

And yet, the knight of faith *still* believes that he will have her—not because of logic, but because of *faith in the absurd*.

He accepts the impossibility. He stares it in the face. And at the same moment, he *believes* the impossible.

But if someone skips over that resignation—if they never fully face the impossibility and still say they believe—it's not real faith. That person is just fooling themselves. They've never even reached the first step.

So faith isn't just a warm, uplifting feeling. It's something much deeper. Faith begins *after* resignation. It's not some spontaneous emotional reaction—it's a paradox at the very heart of existence.

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Take, for example, a young girl who, despite all the odds, insists that her dream will come true. That's *not* faith—even if she was raised in a Christian home and spent a whole year in religious instruction.

Her confidence is innocent and sweet. And yes, it gives her strength. She might even inspire others and move hearts, like someone who works miracles. But in her nervous energy and naivety, she might run to anyone—Herod or Pilate—pleading for her dream. Her assurance is charming, and there's something to admire about her spirit.

But what she *can't* teach us is how to make the actual movements of faith. Because her certainty doesn't come from having stared down the impossibility—it comes from not *yet* having the courage to do so.

So, I can understand that it takes strength, energy, and freedom of spirit to make the movement of infinite resignation—to completely let go of what you love. And I can see that it's possible to do. But what comes next is what truly stuns me—it makes my head spin.

Because after someone has made that painful movement of giving everything up, they then go further—and, by *faith*, they get everything back. They receive the exact thing they gave up, *whole and complete*, not because it makes any rational sense, but because of the *absurd*. That, to me, is beyond human power. That is a miracle.

But one thing I do see clearly: the kind of confidence the young girl had earlier—that light, innocent hope—is nothing compared to the unshakable strength of faith. Faith is unshakable *precisely because* it has faced the impossibility and still believes. Every time I try to imagine making that movement myself, my vision darkens, and even while I admire it completely, a deep anxiety grips me—because I start to wonder: *Isn't this just tempting God?*

And yet, that's what the movement of faith is. It remains faith, even if philosophy tries to redefine it with clever concepts or theology tries to sell it cheaply and make it easy to obtain.

Now here's the thing: resignation doesn't actually require faith. What I gain through resignation is my eternal self-awareness—my sense of eternal identity—and that's something philosophy can grasp. I find comfort in being able to do it when I need to. And I can train myself to make that movement. If something in the finite world begins to overwhelm me, I can discipline my soul, let go of the thing I love, and return to my eternal perspective. Because my eternal consciousness—my love for God—is higher than all else.

So, again: resignation doesn't need faith. But the moment I try to *receive* even the smallest thing *beyond* my eternal self—that's when faith is required. That's where the paradox begins.

People often confuse the two movements. Someone might say, “It takes faith to give everything up.” Or you'll hear someone say, “I've lost my faith,” and when you look closer, you

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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realize—they've only just gotten to the point where they need to begin the movement of resignation.

In resignation, I give everything up. And I do this on my own. If I fail to do it, it's not because I lack faith—it's because I'm being cowardly or emotionally weak. Maybe I lack the sense of dignity that comes with realizing that every person is their *own* judge, which is far nobler than being judge over the entire Roman Republic.

This movement—resignation—is mine alone. And by doing it, I gain myself in my eternal self-awareness. I live in peace with my love for the Eternal.

But faith—faith is different. Faith doesn't mean giving things up. Faith means *getting everything back*, and getting it back in the most astonishing way possible. As Jesus said, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can move mountains."

It takes great human courage to give up the entire world in order to gain eternity. And once I gain it, I can't give it up—not ever. That would be a contradiction.

But to *take the entire world back again*, not through strength or logic, but through faith in the *absurd*—that requires something more. That requires a paradox and a humble courage. That courage belongs to faith.

Think of Abraham. By resignation, he gave up Isaac. But by *faith*, he received Isaac back.

Think of the rich young man in the Gospel. By resignation, he would have given away everything. But once he did, the knight of faith could have said to him, "By virtue of the absurd, you'll get every cent back—can you believe that?"

And the young man wouldn't laugh. Because if he had given everything away just because he was tired of it or bored, then it didn't cost him anything. But if he truly gave it all away in infinite resignation, then the offer of getting it all back again—by faith—would be no joke. It would be the greatest miracle.

Time and finitude—this is what everything revolves around.

By my own strength, I can give everything up. I can resign myself to loss, and still find peace and rest in the pain. I can endure anything.

Even if the most terrifying force of all—not death, but *madness*—stood before me and held out the jester's costume and said, "This is yours—you must wear it," even then, I could still save my soul. As long as my highest concern is to remain faithful to my love for God, even at the cost of worldly happiness, I can hold on. In that final moment, I could gather the whole of my soul and

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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lift my eyes toward Heaven—toward the source of all good—and in that look, I would know, and God would know, that I had remained faithful.

Then I would quietly put on the costume.

But anyone who lacks that kind of spiritual depth—anyone who doesn't have this inner “romanticism”—has already sold their soul, whether it's for a kingdom or just a few coins.

Still, even if I have the strength to give everything up, I don't have the power to get *even the smallest part* of the finite world back again on my own. I pour out all my strength in the act of resignation. By my own effort, I can give up the princess. And I won't become bitter—I'll find peace and rest even in that pain. But I *cannot* get her back by my own power—because I've already spent everything in giving her up.

But the knight of faith says something incredible: “By *faith*, you shall have her again—in virtue of the absurd.”

That movement, I cannot make.

The moment I try to make it, everything spins. I panic and fall back into the pain of resignation. I can move through life, I can endure it. But this strange, miraculous floating above life—that's too much for me. I'm too heavy for it.

To live like that—to stand in constant contradiction with the world and yet to express that contradiction through a life that's joyful, beautiful, and completely in harmony with existence—that's beyond me.

And yet, it *must* be glorious to get the princess. I'll say that again and again. And any knight of resignation who *doesn't* say that—who pretends it doesn't matter—is a traitor. He never truly had a single, living wish. He didn't keep that wish alive through the pain. Maybe he found it convenient to let the wish die, so the pain would soften. But that's not a true knight.

A free soul—one who realizes he's slipped into this state—would hate himself for it. He would start over from the beginning, and never allow his soul to deceive itself for anything in the world.

Yes—it *must* be glorious to get the princess.

And yet, the knight of *faith* is the only one who's truly happy. He's the *heir* of the finite world, while the knight of resignation remains a stranger and outsider.

Imagine actually getting the princess—not just in eternity, but right here in time—and living with her joyfully, day after day. That could happen. But suppose the knight of resignation *did* get the

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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princess, and still couldn't be happy, because he had already made peace with the impossibility of their future joy. That's very possible too.

But to live like the knight of faith—happy in every single moment, even while seeing the sword of loss hovering constantly over your beloved's head—and *not* to retreat into the pain of resignation, but instead to find joy in the impossible, in the *absurd*—that's a miracle.

The person who lives like that is *great*. The greatest.

And the thought of such a person moves my soul more than anything. My soul never holds back in admiring true greatness.

So, let's say that everyone in our time who claims they won't stop at faith—who say they've gone beyond it—are actually people who have truly grasped how terrifying life can be. They've understood what Daub meant when he said that a soldier standing alone at his post beside a powder magazine on a stormy night with a loaded rifle gets *strange thoughts*. Let's assume they've all had that kind of encounter with existence.

Let's say they've had the strength of soul to fully realize that their deepest wish was impossible. Let's say they've been alone with that thought, really sat with it. And that, through the pain, they came to a kind of reconciliation—not in spite of the pain, but *through* it.

And *then*, and only then (because if they haven't done all that, they have no business talking about faith), they went further. They made the miracle happen. They grasped the whole of existence—not through logic or reason, but through *faith*, in virtue of the *absurd*.

If that's the case, then what I'm writing is the highest compliment I can give to my generation—coming from its humblest member, someone who can only make the movement of *resignation*.

But then I have to ask—why don't they want to stop at faith? Why do I hear people *ashamed* to say they have faith? I truly don't understand it.

If I ever reach the point where I can make that final movement—where I actually have *faith*—then you can be sure I'll be celebrating like a man riding a chariot pulled by four horses.

But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe all this boring, safe, middle-class "normal life" that I see around me—this bourgeois philistinism that I don't criticize with words, but with the way I live—isn't what it seems. Maybe it *is* the miracle. Maybe those people actually are the heroes of faith.

It's possible. After all, the knight of faith looks just like a regular person.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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And what's more, the knight of faith wasn't even an ironist or a humorist—but something even higher. Our time loves to talk about irony and humor—especially people who've never actually experienced them, but who are great at explaining everything.

I know a bit more about irony and humor than what's in the typical German or Danish philosophy textbooks. So I can tell you: irony and humor are *very* different from faith.

Irony and humor involve self-reflection. They belong to the world of *infinite resignation*, where a person is detached from the world, where they know that they don't quite fit into everyday reality. There's a kind of freedom in that—they're not bound by the world's rules.

But faith? Faith is something entirely different. That last movement—the leap of faith into the absurd—that I cannot make. Whether or not I *should* be able to is a different question, one that only I and the Eternal Being can answer. It's between me and God, the one who is the very object of faith.

But what *everyone* can do is make the movement of infinite resignation. And I wouldn't hesitate for one second to call someone a coward if they said they couldn't even do *that*.

Faith, though, is another story.

What people don't have the right to do is to treat faith like it's some small thing, or something easy to achieve. No—faith is the *greatest* thing, and also the *hardest*.

People misunderstand the story of Abraham. They focus on God's grace—that God gave Isaac back, and say, "Oh, it was just a test." But that word—*test*—can mean a lot or it can mean very little. In most people's mouths, it's over in a second. They skip straight to the ending.

It's like they imagine riding a flying horse. Suddenly, they're on Mount Moriah, they see the ram, and everything is fine.

But they forget that Abraham didn't ride a flying horse. He rode a donkey.

He took a *slow, three-day journey*. He had time to think. Time to feel. He had to cut the wood, tie up his son, sharpen the knife. He had to *live* every moment of that test. He *suffered* through it.

And yet, people go on praising Abraham.

A speaker gets up to talk about him, and honestly, he might as well be asleep. The audience might as well be sleeping too—because the whole thing goes down easy, with no effort from either side.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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But imagine there's someone listening who *isn't* asleep—someone suffering from sleeplessness, someone truly disturbed. He goes home, sits alone in a corner, and thinks, "*The whole thing was over in a moment. You just wait a minute, see the ram appear, and it's all done.*"

If the speaker who gave the sermon were to meet this man, I imagine he'd get very serious and say with great authority: "*You wretch! How could you let your soul fall into such foolishness? There's no miracle coming. Life itself is the trial.*"

And as he got more worked up, becoming more passionate and eloquent, he'd grow more and more impressed with himself. While he hadn't shown much emotion when he preached about Abraham earlier, now he'd feel his blood pressure rise, veins swelling in his forehead.

But what if the "sinner" just calmly and respectfully responded: "*But that's exactly what you preached about last Sunday.*"

So, we have a choice: either we stop talking about Abraham altogether, or we learn to be *shocked* by the gigantic paradox at the heart of his life—because that's what allows us to understand that, just like every other age, *our* age can still be blessed... if just one person has faith.

If Abraham isn't just a meaningless name, or a decorative myth we use to entertain ourselves, then the problem is *not* that someone might try to do what Abraham did. The real challenge is helping that person *understand* just how great Abraham's act truly was—so he can see for himself whether he has the calling and the courage to go through with such a test.

The comic absurdity of the preacher's behavior is that he turns Abraham into a hollow symbol—and then still tells others not to imitate him. That's laughable.

So, should we dare to speak about Abraham? Yes—I believe we can. But only if we do it *properly*.

If I were to speak about him, I'd begin by describing the *pain* of the trial. Like a leech, I would draw out every drop of fear, anguish, and despair from a father's heart, so I could describe what Abraham went through—and how, even through all of that, *he still believed*.

I'd make sure to point out that the journey to Mount Moriah took *three and a half days*. And those three and a half days may feel *infinitely longer* than the thousands of years that separate us from Abraham. That's how heavy the burden was.

Then I'd say this—and this is important: **Anyone may still turn back.** At any moment, a person can step away from this path, with honesty and humility. If you do that, then I have no fear—you won't come to harm, and I won't worry that people will suddenly start trying to copy Abraham's trial.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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But if you want to offer some bargain version of Abraham—one that makes him easy to admire but forbidden to emulate—that's *ridiculous*.

So now, my intention is this: I want to draw out the deep structure—the *dialectic*—hidden inside the story of Abraham. I'll do this by framing it as a series of **problems** (*Problemata*). Because that's the only way we'll truly understand what an overwhelming paradox faith really is:

- A paradox so powerful that it can transform what looks like *murder* into something *holy* and pleasing to God.
- A paradox that gives Abraham *Isaac* back.
- A paradox that *no thought* can ever fully grasp...

...because faith *begins* exactly where thinking hits its limit.

Problema I

Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?

The ethical, by definition, is universal. Because it's universal, it applies to *everyone*—and not just in general, but *at every moment*. The ethical doesn't look to anything beyond itself for meaning or justification; it's complete and self-contained. In fact, it serves as the *end* (the Greek word for “end” or “purpose” is *telos*) for everything outside of it. When something outside the ethical is taken up into it, the ethical doesn't go any further—it's the final standard.

From the moment a person exists as a physical and psychological being, they are a *particular individual*. But their ethical goal is to become *universal*—and that means they must constantly give up, or “cancel out,” their personal individuality in order to align themselves with the universal ethical law.

If someone tries to elevate their personal, individual self above the ethical universal, they commit a *sin*. And they can only be restored, or reconciled, by admitting this wrongdoing and surrendering their personal will back to the ethical.

Every time a person, after having accepted the ethical, feels the desire to assert themselves as an individual apart from it, they enter a kind of *spiritual crisis*—a deep inner struggle. And they can only find peace by giving up their individuality once again and submitting to the universal.

If this is the highest truth that can be said about human beings and their existence, then the ethical has the same nature as humanity's eternal happiness—our ultimate purpose (*telos*) for all time and in every moment. In that case, it would be a contradiction to say that the ethical could ever be “suspended” for a higher purpose—because to suspend it would mean losing it entirely. And the very idea of something being “teleologically suspended” means it's *not* destroyed, but instead *preserved* in something higher—its ultimate *telos*.

If all of that is correct, then Hegel is right when, in his essay “**The Good and Conscience**”, he says that the human being, as an individual, is always just a *particular*, and that this individuality is a kind of “moral form of evil” (see especially his *Philosophy of Right*). In Hegel's view, this particularity must be erased or transcended through a kind of spiritual teleology—by being absorbed into the ethical community. If someone remains in their particular individuality, they either become sinful or fall into spiritual agony.

But where Hegel *goes wrong* is when he talks about **faith**.

Hegel should have loudly and clearly *condemned* Abraham instead of celebrating him as the Father of Faith. According to Hegel's logic, Abraham should not be admired—he should be sent home and labeled a *murderer*.

FEAR AND TREMBLING
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Faith is exactly this: the paradox that *the single individual is higher than the universal*—and pay close attention—this happens in such a way that the movement *repeats itself*. That is, someone begins within the ethical (the universal), but then returns to stand alone as an individual *above* the universal.

If this *isn't* what faith is, then Abraham is lost. Then faith has never existed in the world—*not because it was never here, but because it has always been here, misunderstood*.

If the ethical—meaning the universal values of society and community—is the highest thing, and there's nothing in human beings that can't ultimately be explained or absorbed into that ethical framework (except evil), then all we need are the categories from ancient Greek philosophy. Or the ideas that logically follow from them.

And if that's the case, then Hegel should've just said so. He studied the Greeks—he knew what he was doing—and he shouldn't have hidden behind vague language.

Now, you'll often hear people say things like, “*A bright light shines over the Christian world, but the pagan world was shrouded in darkness.*” This kind of cliché has always struck me as odd—especially since every serious thinker and true artist constantly draws fresh energy from the “eternal youth” of the Greeks.

Comments like that usually come from people who don't know what they're talking about, but feel like they need to say *something*. What they're really trying to say is that the pagan world didn't have faith. But if you're going to say something like that, you'd better be clear about *what* you mean by “faith.” Otherwise, you're just repeating empty phrases.

Explaining all of existence—including faith—without actually having any idea what faith is? That's easy. And if someone manages to sound clever while doing it, they might even gain a following—because, as Boileau says: “*One fool always finds an even greater fool to admire him.*”

Let me say it again: **Faith is precisely this paradox**—that the single individual, as an individual, stands *higher than the universal*, is *justified* over and against the universal. Not by being less than it, but by being *greater* than it. But—and this is crucial—this happens only because the person first submitted to the universal. Only *after* doing that can they become the individual who stands in an *absolute* relationship to the *Absolute* (i.e., to God).

This relationship can't be “mediated” or explained by any shared system or logic—because all mediation happens through the universal. So this relationship remains, *forever*, a paradox—something that thought can never fully grasp.

And **this** is what faith is. If not, then:

- Faith has never actually existed (even though we talk about it constantly).
- Or Abraham is lost.
- Or we've misunderstood everything.

Now, yes—it's true that this paradox can be confused with a spiritual crisis or personal breakdown. That happens. But we shouldn't *hide* the paradox just because it's uncomfortable.

And yes—some people might find this whole idea repulsive or absurd. That's fine. But instead of *redefining* faith so that everyone can feel like they have it, we should be honest and admit: *I do not have that kind of faith.*

Meanwhile, those who *do* have faith should make every effort to clearly identify its true features—so that we can distinguish genuine faith from mere spiritual turmoil.

The story of Abraham contains exactly this: a **teleological suspension of the ethical**—a moment where the ethical law is set aside for the sake of a higher purpose.

Many clever thinkers and careful scholars have tried to find analogies to this story. But their “wisdom” usually boils down to the bland idea that *everything's basically the same*. Look closer, though, and I seriously doubt that you'll find a single real analogy anywhere in the world—aside from a *later* story, which proves nothing if it's true that Abraham is the very embodiment of faith, and that faith is truly expressed in him.

Because Abraham's life isn't just paradoxical—it's *so* paradoxical that it can't even be fully grasped. He acts by virtue of the **absurd**. That's the key: it's in the absurd that the individual becomes higher than the universal.

And this paradox can't be explained or “mediated” away. As soon as someone tries to explain it logically, they end up concluding that Abraham was simply suffering a spiritual crisis—and then the whole thing collapses. If Abraham *was* just in a spiritual crisis, then he never would have gone through with sacrificing Isaac—or if he did, he would've had to return to the ethical afterward, apologizing for it as a sin.

But Abraham, acting in **faith**, gets Isaac back—by virtue of the absurd. This means Abraham is *not* a tragic hero. He's something else entirely: either a **murderer**, or a **man of faith**. There's no middle ground to save him like there is with the tragic hero.

That's why I can understand the tragic hero—but not Abraham. And yet, in a strange, almost insane way, I admire Abraham more than anyone.

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According to ethical standards, Abraham's duty to Isaac is clear: the father should love the son more than he loves himself. That's the ethical expectation. Even within the ethical, there are higher and lower levels—we might ask whether Abraham's action could be explained as a *higher* ethical duty that somehow justifies overriding his obligation to Isaac, *without* leaving the ethical framework altogether.

Let's compare:

When a national crisis brings an entire people to a halt—when the gods strike with bad omens, and the high priest declares that only a young girl's sacrifice can satisfy the divine—then the **father** must nobly step forward and give her up. He must hide his pain, even if he wishes he could just be a regular man who cries instead of a king who must act like one.

Though his pain is deep and private, eventually the *entire nation* will learn about it and praise his sacrifice: that for the good of the people, he was willing to give up his beloved daughter. She'll cry; he'll look away. But the **hero** will raise the knife. When the news reaches home, all the young women of Greece will admire him, and if the daughter had a fiancé, even he will feel proud—not angry—because she belonged more fully to her father than to him.

Or take **Jephthah**, the courageous judge who saved Israel. He makes a promise to God and keeps it—he sacrifices his own daughter. She goes from joyful dancing to mourning, but all of Israel mourns with her. And yet, every freeborn man understands, every brave woman admires Jephthah, and every girl wants to be as strong and graceful as his daughter. Because what good would his vow be if he didn't keep it? Wouldn't that mean the victory was a lie?

Imagine this: a son forgets his duty, and the state gives the father the legal power to judge and punish him. The law demands that the father carry out the sentence. In that case, the father must rise above his personal feelings—he must **heroically set aside the fact** that the criminal is his own son, and **nobly conceal his pain**.

But even so, **no one**—not even the son himself—would fail to admire the father. And every time Roman law is explained, people will remember: *Yes, many have explained it better, but no one has done so more honorably than Brutus.*

But now imagine a very different scenario:

Suppose Agamemnon, while the fleet was sailing smoothly toward its destination, had sent for his daughter Iphigenia to sacrifice her—without any immediate necessity. Suppose Jephthah, without being bound by any vow that involved his nation's fate, had said to his daughter: "*Mourn for two months over your short youth, and then I will sacrifice you.*" Suppose Brutus had a son who had done nothing wrong, and yet he summoned the lictors to have him executed.

Who would understand any of them?

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And suppose these three men were asked: “*Why are you doing this?*”—and they answered: “*It's a test from God.*” Would that explanation help? Would anyone understand them better?

When Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus reached their decisive moment—when they overcame their deep emotional pain and let go of the ones they loved in order to complete the outward deed—there is no doubt: every noble heart will feel *compassion* for their suffering and *admiration* for their strength.

But suppose that at that same moment—just before the sacrifice—they had said: “*It won't actually happen.*”

Who would understand *that*?

Suppose they had added: “*We believe this in virtue of the absurd.*” Would anyone be any closer to understanding?

Everyone would agree it *sounds absurd*—but who could understand how someone could actually *believe* in it?

This is the key difference between **the tragic hero** and **Abraham**.

The tragic hero still operates within the bounds of the **ethical**. He gives up one form of ethical responsibility (like a father's love) for the sake of a **higher form of the ethical**—such as duty to the state, to the people, or to God's law understood universally.

He *lowers* the individual ethical relationship—between father and son or daughter—to a mere feeling, something emotional, so that it can be *subordinated* to the ethical community's higher demands.

So, for the tragic hero, **there is no suspension of the ethical itself**. He's still inside the ethical world—he's just choosing one duty over another.

But **Abraham is different**.

Abraham doesn't simply choose one ethical duty over another—he steps completely outside of the ethical by doing something that *cannot* be justified within it. His act—the willingness to kill his innocent son—can only be understood through **faith**, and **faith alone**.

But Abraham's case is different.

What he does goes completely **beyond the ethical**. His act doesn't fit into the ethical system—he **suspends** the ethical for the sake of something higher. I would honestly like to know how anyone could possibly relate Abraham's act to the ethical, or find any point of contact between what he does and the universal—*except* this: that he *breaks* with it.

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He doesn't do it to save his nation, or to preserve the idea of the state, or to satisfy angry gods. And if God *was* angry in this story, then it was only at **Abraham**, and Abraham's act has **nothing to do with society**. It's **completely personal**.

So while the **tragic hero** is great because of his public virtue—his devotion to the good of the community—**Abraham's greatness** lies in a **purely personal** virtue.

In Abraham's case, there's no higher ethical expression than this: *a father must love his son*. That's the ethical principle at stake. But when it comes to **the ethical in terms of society**, there's nothing more to say—there's no justification there.

And if the universal *is* present, it's not in Abraham—it's in **Isaac**. The universal is *hidden* in Isaac's body, so to speak, and would cry out through Isaac's mouth: "*Don't do it! You're destroying everything!*"

So why did Abraham do it?

For God's sake—and equally, for his own sake. He did it because **God** demanded it as a test of faith. And he did it for **himself**, because he wanted to meet that test. That unity—between doing something for God and for oneself—is captured in the word we always use for this kind of story: it was a **trial**, or a **temptation**.

But what does *temptation* even mean in this case?

In most cases, temptation is what *pulls someone away from their duty*. But here, the **ethical itself**—Abraham's moral duty to love and protect his son—is what would tempt him away from obeying **God's command**.

So what, then, is **duty**?

Well, isn't duty **precisely** supposed to be *God's will*?

That's why Abraham's story reveals a **new kind of category**, a whole new way of understanding the relationship between a person and God—something that **paganism** had no experience with.

The tragic hero, like Agamemnon or Brutus, never enters into a **private** relationship with the divine. For him, the **ethical itself is the divine**, and so any paradox—any moral dilemma—can be worked out *within* the ethical framework. It all stays within the universal.

But **Abraham's case cannot be worked out that way**. You can't "mediate" or explain his actions through the universal. And that's why **Abraham can't speak**.

The moment someone tries to explain themselves, they're using the **language of the universal**—they're appealing to values that everyone can understand. But if Abraham does

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that—if he tries to explain what he's doing—then the only possible explanation is that he's experiencing a **spiritual crisis**, a breakdown. Because he has **no higher ethical principle** he can point to that justifies what he's doing.

So, while I deeply admire Abraham, I'm also **disturbed** by him.

The person who denies himself for the sake of **duty**—like the tragic hero—gives up the finite (things of this world) in order to reach the infinite (the universal, the eternal). That, at least, feels secure. The tragic hero gives up what's *certain* for something even *more certain*. The observer can understand him and even take comfort in his choice.

But what about the person who gives up the **universal itself**—who walks away from duty, morality, ethics—in order to reach something even *higher*, something that's not part of the universal? What is that person doing?

Can that be anything other than a **spiritual crisis**?

And if he's mistaken—if he misheard or misunderstood God—then what possible **salvation** could there be for him? He gives up everything like the tragic hero, he suffers just as deeply, he denies all earthly joy—and **maybe**, in doing so, he also cuts himself off from the very joy he wanted most, the joy he would've given anything to keep. No one observing from the outside can understand him. No one can watch him calmly. Maybe what he's trying to do is just impossible—maybe faith itself is **inconceivable**. Or, if it *is* possible, but he's gotten it wrong—then he's lost everything.

The tragic hero draws tears from the world. He wants those tears, even needs them. Who, after all, could hold back tears for Agamemnon?

But who dares to **cry for Abraham**?

You can't weep for him. You only draw near in **awe and religious dread**, the way Israel approached Mount Sinai—**terrified and trembling**.

If that lonely man climbing Mount Moriah isn't just a sleepwalker, marching forward without knowing the abyss under his feet, then surely **he who watches from below** will be the one shaking with fear and reverence, barely able to whisper, afraid that even speaking will cause Abraham to misstep.

And to the one crushed by sorrow, to the man left exposed and broken by life, I say: thank you to the one who speaks to him, who reaches out with even the smallest word to cover his pain. And **thank you to you, great Shakespeare**, who could describe everything exactly as it is.

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And yet—**why did you never write about this agony?** Was it something too sacred to speak? Like the secret name of a beloved you never dared let the world hear? Because the poet buys the power to express everyone else's suffering *at the cost* of keeping one private sorrow locked inside forever.

But a poet is not an apostle.

The poet may cast out demons—but only *with* the help of another demon.

So, now that we've said the ethical can be **suspended** for something higher, the question is: *how does the individual live when that happens?*

He lives **as the single individual, in opposition to the universal.** But is that sin?

Well, that *is* the formal definition of sin—at least, in theory. Just as a child, even if they don't know right from wrong yet, is *still* seen as sinful when viewed from the perspective of the ethical, because ethics makes demands on everyone, at every moment.

So if we say this form of life **cannot** happen without sin—then we condemn Abraham.

But how did Abraham live?

He believed.

That's the paradox that places him so high—so high that **no one else can follow.** He can't explain it to anyone. He can't justify it by reference to the universal, because **his justification is the paradox itself:** that **he, as a single individual, stood in an absolute relationship with the Absolute (God).**

And if Abraham is justified, he is not justified by the universal—but by **being the single individual**, by the sheer mystery of faith.

So how can the individual—just a single person—know that he's actually justified in what he's doing?

Well, it's pretty easy to flatten all of life down to something like “the state” or “society.” Once you do that, everything becomes easier to explain and justify—because then you never have to deal with the **paradox** of a single person being *higher* than the universal (society, morality, ethics). That idea sounds absurd—like saying the **odd number is more perfect than the even**, which is just a way of saying it flips common logic on its head.

Now, every so often in our time, you hear someone give an answer that hints at this paradox. They say: **“We'll judge by the outcome.”**

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Think about a great person—someone whose life caused a scandal or confusion while they were alive. That person, misunderstood and surrounded by doubt, might shout: “Just wait—the result will prove I was right!”

But honestly, **you rarely hear anyone say that today**—because our age doesn’t produce heroes... or, at least, not very many **fake heroes** either.

And when people *do* say, “We’ll judge by the outcome,” it’s always clear what kind of person you’re talking to. It’s someone I would jokingly call an **Associate Professor**—someone who lives comfortably in their own head, safe within the secure order of a well-run society. They’ve got a steady paycheck, a predictable future, and **a thousand years of distance from real upheaval**. They don’t think those kinds of seismic events can happen again—and besides, if something crazy were to happen, well... the police and the news would surely handle it, right?

These people sit safely behind their desks and make it their job to **judge the great people of history**—and they always judge based on the outcome.

There’s something really strange about that attitude. On one hand, it’s arrogant—as if they’re qualified to pass judgment on greatness. On the other hand, it’s **incredibly small and petty**, because they see no connection between their own lives and the lives of those great individuals. If someone even *slightly* noble or spirited comes near greatness, they’ll recognize a crucial truth: **the outcome always comes last**. And if you want to learn anything from great people, it’s this: **pay attention to the beginning**.

Because if someone who actually has to act in the world judged themselves based on how it might all turn out, **they’d never even begin**. Even if the result turns out to be a huge success for everyone else, it still can’t help the hero—he **didn’t know the result when he started**. That’s not what made him great. What made him great is that **he began**, in the first place.

And let’s be honest—the “outcome” is a **finite answer** to an **infinite question**. It has nothing to do with the kind of existence the hero lives.

So what about Abraham? Are we really going to say that he was justified in doing what he did just because **a miracle** happened and he got Isaac back?

What if he had actually gone through with it—actually sacrificed Isaac? Would that have made him **less** justified?

No. Because the justification **wasn’t in the result**. It was in the **faith** that made him begin.

People are always curious about how things turn out—just like they’re curious about the ending of a novel. But the anxiety, the suffering, and the paradoxes behind a great deed? Nobody wants

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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to hear about that. They just want the outcome—preferably something neat, like a lottery win. Once they hear how it ends, they feel “uplifted,” and that’s enough.

But honestly, there’s no criminal in chains who is more disgraceful than someone who steals the sacred like that. Even **Judas**, who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, isn’t more contemptible than someone who **cheapens greatness** by reducing it to nothing more than a feel-good ending.

It goes against my soul to speak in an inhuman way about greatness—to turn it into a vague, distant ideal that’s so far removed from real life it no longer feels human. Because **true greatness isn’t about what happens to you—it’s about what you do**. Nobody thinks a person became great just because he won the lottery.

Even if someone is born poor or humble, I still expect him not to **think of greatness like a faraway fairy tale**. He shouldn’t see the king’s palace only in dreams, as some mystical thing that both elevates and crushes him at the same time. Instead, he should think of himself as **human enough to walk into that palace with dignity**.

Of course, he shouldn’t **barge in** from the street without regard for decorum—that’s not confidence, that’s arrogance. That kind of behavior **degrades him more than it offends the king**. What he should do instead is to move with grace, observing every formality with real joy—**because that’s what makes him truly free**.

All of this is just a metaphor, of course—a poor one at that—for the kind of **spiritual distance** we’re really talking about. But the main point still holds: I expect people not to think so little of themselves that they wouldn’t dare to enter the “palaces” where the great live—not just where their memory is honored, but where they themselves are present.

And no, they shouldn’t barge in demanding to be seen as equals—but they also shouldn’t act like they’re just some lowly servant. They should **stand before the great with reverence, but also with a quiet confidence and dignity**. Because if they won’t be more than a nurse’s aide, they’ll never truly belong there.

And what will help them **stand there** isn’t grand words or flowery praise—it’s the **suffering, the anxiety, the internal battles** those great individuals endured. If they ignore that, and if they have any self-respect at all, they’ll end up **envying** the great rather than learning from them.

Any kind of greatness that **only works from a distance**, and that people try to glorify with empty words—**that kind of greatness gets destroyed** by those very words.

Who in the world was as great as that blessed woman, the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God? And yet—how do we actually speak of her?

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People often say she was “favored among women,” but that alone doesn’t make her great. And if people didn’t speak so carelessly, if listeners weren’t just as thoughtless, then maybe every young girl would ask, “Why wasn’t I chosen too?” And if that were the question, I wouldn’t dismiss it as foolish—because when you’re talking about **a favor**, something given by grace, then every human being has just as much right to wonder.

But what always gets **left out** of the conversation is the anxiety, the distress, the paradox. My thoughts are no purer than anyone else’s, but if someone is pure enough to think about these things truly, then they should know something dreadful: once these images have appeared in your heart and imagination, **they never leave**—and if you violate their meaning, **they’ll punish you silently**, with a wrath more terrifying than that of ten angry critics.

Yes, Mary miraculously conceived the child. But she still went through pregnancy like every other woman—with fear and struggle and tension. The angel was a **messenger**, not someone who went around town telling all the other girls in Israel, “Hey, don’t judge Mary—something special’s happening with her.” No. The angel came only to Mary. No one else could understand her.

Really—has **any woman ever been as misunderstood or judged** as Mary? Isn’t it true that when **God blesses someone**, it can feel at the same time like He’s cursing them? That’s how the Spirit understands Mary.

And let me be very clear—because it deeply offends me, even more than that people say it so casually: **Mary was not some elegant lady in rich clothes, proudly showing off a divine baby.** That is a gross misunderstanding of who she was. When she said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord,” **that** was when she was great. And I think it’s no mystery **why she was chosen to be the Mother of God.**

She doesn’t need worldly praise, just as little as Abraham needs your tears. Neither of them were “heroes” in the usual sense—but they became something **far greater**, not by avoiding anguish and contradiction, but by enduring them completely.

It’s moving when a poet presents a tragic hero and tells the crowd, “Go ahead, cry—he deserves it.” That’s powerful: the poet controls the public’s emotion and demands that each person ask, “Am I worthy even to cry for this man?” Because cheap tears **dishonor** sacred suffering.

But even **greater than that** is the moment when the knight of faith turns to a noble person ready to weep for him and says instead: **“Don’t cry for me—cry for yourself.”**

People are moved by stories of Christ, longing to walk the roads of Galilee and see Him in the flesh. But they forget the fear, the anxiety, the paradox. Was it so simple not to make a mistake?

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Was it not **terrifying** to realize that the man walking beside you was **God**? Was it really so easy to sit and eat with Him, to believe in Him?

Was it easy to be an apostle?

But now, 1800 years later, the outcome comforts us. It dulls our sense of what that moment really meant. It becomes part of a pleasant story—a **self-deception** that lets us romanticize it all.

I'm not brave enough to say I wish I'd lived then. And because I'm honest about that, I won't harshly judge those who failed to see what was happening at the time—nor will I downplay the insight of those who actually did.

But now—back to Abraham.

Before the outcome, before the rescue, before the ram in the thicket—**Abraham stood every single moment as either a murderer, or as a man standing at the edge of a paradox higher than all human reasoning.**

Abraham's story, then, involves what we can call **a teleological suspension of the ethical**—meaning he suspended the moral law for the sake of a higher purpose. As a **single individual**, he placed himself **above the universal**—above the moral obligations that apply to all people. That is the **paradox** of faith. It's something that **cannot be explained or rationalized**. We don't know **how** he entered into that paradox, nor **how** he managed to stay in it without collapsing under the weight of it.

And if Abraham didn't truly stand in that paradox—if his story doesn't actually involve this suspension of the ethical—then he **wasn't** even a tragic hero.

He would be nothing more than a **murderer**.

So if that's the case, then calling him **the Father of Faith**, or talking about him in sermons as a model of obedience and devotion, becomes not just misguided—it becomes a complete **misunderstanding** of what faith actually is.

Problema II

Is there an absolute duty to God?

Ethics is what's universal—and as such, it's also divine. So, it's reasonable to say that every duty, at its root, is a duty to God. But if that's all we can say, then we're actually saying that, in a deeper sense, we have no direct duty to God at all.

Here's why: a duty becomes a duty because it's connected to God—but when I carry out that duty, I don't enter into a personal relationship with God. Instead, I engage with the other person involved. For example, it's a duty to love your neighbor. This is considered a divine duty because it's rooted in God—but in fulfilling that duty, I don't relate to God directly. I relate to **my neighbor**, whom I love.

So, if I say that I have a duty to love God, and I mean it in the same way I mean "love your neighbor," I'm actually just stating a tautology—a circular idea—because in that sense, "God" is just another name for "the universal," for "duty" itself. In this view, all of human life becomes a neatly enclosed moral system, a perfect self-contained sphere. God becomes just a disappearing point on the horizon—a powerless idea whose only real presence is in the ethical structure that fills out life.

In that case, if someone says they want to love God in any way **other** than through ethical duty, it sounds like they're full of hot air. They're in love with an illusion—a phantom who, if it could speak, would probably say, "*I don't need your love—just stay home and take care of your responsibilities.*" Trying to love God outside the ethical can come across as suspicious—like the kind of abstract, misplaced compassion Rousseau mocked, where someone claims to love faraway strangers (like the "Kaffirs") while ignoring their actual neighbor.

Now, **if** this line of reasoning is correct—if there's truly nothing in human life that is beyond the ethical—then Hegel is right. But **if** that's the case, he's wrong to speak about **faith** or to call Abraham the "Father of Faith." Because that very claim undermines both Abraham and the concept of faith itself.

In Hegel's philosophy, *the external* (or "the externalization") is higher than *the internal*. He often illustrates this with an example: a child represents inwardness, but the adult represents externalization. In this sense, the child is defined by what's **outside** of them (rules, authority, dependence), and the adult is defined by what's **inside** (self-determination, responsibility).

But faith flips this entirely. Faith is the paradox where **inwardness** is higher than **externality**. Or to put it another way—like I mentioned earlier—**faith is the belief that the odd number is greater than the even one**. It doesn't follow the logic of the world.

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From the **ethical perspective**, the individual's task is to take what's inside—his inner convictions, feelings, and thoughts—and express them outwardly, to make them visible through action. Every time a person avoids doing this—every time he retreats inward or hides in feelings, moods, or vague introspection—he sins. He falls into **spiritual anguish**.

But the paradox of **faith** is this: that there exists an inwardness—a personal, spiritual depth—that **cannot** be expressed outwardly. And it's important to note: this is not the same as the original, everyday kind of inwardness. It's something entirely new, something deeper.

Modern philosophy has blurred this distinction. It has casually replaced the idea of faith with something like emotional immediacy—moods, feelings, instincts, vague spiritual vibes. If that were all faith were, then yes, faith has existed forever, and yes, philosophy would be right to say we shouldn't stop there. Faith would just be lumped in with feelings and weird moods and emotional whims.

But that's **not** what faith is. Philosophy has no right to redefine it that way. **Before** one can even talk about faith, a person has to undergo a deep inner process—what Kierkegaard calls **the infinite movement**—where they let go of everything finite, all worldly attachments and goals. Only **after** that sacrifice, unexpectedly, comes faith, by a kind of miracle. Faith doesn't arrive as a natural next step—it arrives *in virtue of the absurd*, through a leap that defies human logic.

This I can understand—even though I don't claim to possess faith myself. But if faith were really what modern philosophy says it is, then Socrates would have already gone farther than faith ever could. In fact, **Socrates' ignorance**—his claim that he knows nothing—is a kind of infinite resignation. He gives up the hope of certain knowledge. That's already a heroic task, and one most modern people aren't even willing to try.

But it's only **after** someone has let go of everything—emptied themselves into the infinite—that **faith** can emerge.

So here's the **real paradox** of faith:

That the individual is **higher than the universal**.

That a person's relationship to God—the **absolute**—can be more fundamental than his relationship to universal ethical duties. Or in older theological language:

The individual defines his relation to the universal *through* his relation to God—not the other way around.

This paradox is also what it means to say:

There is an **absolute duty to God**.

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This duty is so ultimate that it can even **override** ethical duties. That doesn't mean ethics are worthless—but it means they can be *transformed*, seen in a new light. For example, a person's love for God could lead them to do something that **looks like the opposite** of loving their neighbor—even though, from the standpoint of faith, it's a deeper expression of that love.

But if this isn't true—if faith isn't this paradox—then faith doesn't belong in real life. Then it's just a kind of spiritual confusion. And in that case, Abraham's story falls apart. Then he didn't find faith—he just lost himself.

This paradox—where the individual stands above the universal—**cannot be explained or resolved** by logic or by common ethical reasoning. It depends entirely on the fact that the individual is acting as **an individual** before God—not as part of the collective, not as part of society or the ethical order.

The moment the individual **tries to express this duty**—his absolute duty to God—in **universal terms**, tries to make it understandable or publicly justifiable, something happens. He becomes aware that his actions are **in conflict** with the universal, and that awareness turns into **spiritual agony**.

But here's the kicker: if he lets that agony stop him—if he hesitates or backs down—then he **fails to carry out** the absolute duty. And even if what he was about to do *was* truly commanded by God, **if he doesn't do it**, then he **sins**.

So what could Abraham have done in that situation?

Suppose he had said to someone, "I love Isaac more than anything in the world, and that's why it's so painful to give him up."

Wouldn't the person he was talking to just shake their head and say: "Then why are you planning to sacrifice him?"

Or maybe the other person was clever enough to see through it all and call Abraham out: "You say you love him so much, but you're about to kill him. Your emotions and your actions are in total contradiction. Are you just putting on a show?"

In the story of Abraham, we see this kind of paradox in action. Ethically speaking, Abraham's relationship to Isaac is simple: a father should love his son. But in Abraham's case, that ethical obligation is **pushed aside**—it becomes **secondary**—compared to his absolute duty to God.

When asked *why* he's willing to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham has no answer except: "It's a trial—a test." But this trial isn't just for God's sake; it's also for **his own**. These two motivations—doing something for God and doing something for oneself—are usually seen as **opposites** in everyday

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life. When someone does something that goes against what's commonly accepted, people might say: "He certainly didn't do it for God—he must've done it for himself."

So here's the paradox of faith: it completely **bypasses the middle ground**—what we'd call the universal, or general morality. On one side, it looks like the **ultimate selfishness** (doing it "for yourself"), and on the other, it looks like **total devotion** (doing it "for God").

But faith can't be explained or justified by any universal principle. If it could be, it would stop being faith. Faith is this paradox: the individual **cannot explain himself** to anyone else.

You might think that someone who's going through the same thing could understand—but no, **not even another "knight of faith" can help you**. Either you take on the paradox yourself, or you never become a knight of faith. There is no such thing as teamwork in matters of faith. This kind of journey is entirely **personal and lonely**.

Even if you could perfectly define what "Isaac" symbolizes in general terms, it would be useless. Because the person of faith acts as a **single individual**, outside of universal categories—and **must define their "Isaac" for themselves**. Even if you were weak or cowardly enough to try and become a knight of faith by copying someone else's experience, you still wouldn't become one.

Only the individual—**as an individual**—can become that. And *that's* what greatness is. I can understand that intellectually, but I admit I don't have the courage to become it. And as much as I admire it, I also find it terrifying—which, honestly, I understand even better.

Luke 14:26 contains a striking teaching about the absolute duty we owe to God:

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple."

That's a hard saying—who can bear to hear it? That's probably why we don't hear it much at all. But staying silent about it doesn't help anyone—it's just a way of avoiding the issue.

A theology student, of course, will encounter this verse. And with the help of some scholarly tools, they'll quickly learn that the Greek word for "hate" (*misein*) here can be interpreted as: "love less," "place second," "not worship," "regard as unimportant." That sounds more palatable.

But if you actually read the context, it doesn't seem to support this soft explanation. The very next verse includes a parable about a person planning to build a tower: before starting, they must first assess whether they have the means to finish it, so that people won't laugh at them for starting what they couldn't complete. The connection between this parable and the "hate" verse suggests that Jesus meant it **as seriously and harshly as it sounds**—it's a warning for people to ask themselves honestly: *Are you truly ready to build this tower? Are you ready to pay the cost?*

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If that kind and accommodating biblical scholar—who tries to smuggle Christianity into the world by smoothing out its rough edges—manages to convince even one person that this verse merely means “love less,” then I hope he also convinces them, at the same time, that Christianity is **one of the weakest, most watered-down things in the world.**

Because this teaching—which is one of Christianity’s boldest and most passionate expressions, where its eternal truth shines through most powerfully—would then amount to nothing more than a polite suggestion: “Be a little less nice, a little less devoted to others, a little more aloof.” If that’s all it really means—if what sounds terrifying is actually just a mild platitude—then Christianity simply isn’t worth the effort.

Yes, Jesus’ words are terrifying. But I believe we **can** understand them—even if that doesn’t mean we have the courage to live them out. What matters is that we are honest: we must admit what the words **truly mean**, and acknowledge how great and demanding they are, even if we can’t live up to them.

If someone is honest about their lack of courage—if they admit, *“I couldn’t start building the tower”*—then that person can still find comfort in the story. There’s still hope and meaning for them.

But they must be **honest**. They must not disguise their lack of courage as “humility.” That’s not humility—it’s pride.

True faith, and the courage that comes with it, is the only real humility.

Now, it’s easy to see that if the passage from Luke is going to mean anything at all, it has to be understood literally.

God alone has the right to demand absolute love. Imagine a person—say, a husband—demanding such love from someone. If he expected proof of it by having his wife grow cold and indifferent toward the people she once deeply loved (her parents, siblings, etc.), he wouldn’t just be selfish—he’d be *a fool*. And in asking for that kind of love, he would actually destroy the very thing he was hoping to preserve.

Take a husband who expects his wife to “leave her father and mother” for him. That’s fine in itself. But if he believed that the more she neglects her parents and siblings, the more it shows her love for him—then he understands nothing about love. The husband who truly understands love would feel most secure if he saw that his wife loved him deeply *and* still remained a devoted daughter and sister. Because the one who loves well in one relationship probably loves well in others.

And yet—we allow biblical commentators (exegetes) to turn this *kind of foolish, selfish logic* into a legitimate picture of divine love. That’s absurd.

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So then, how are we to understand Jesus' words about "hating" one's family? I'm not going to fall back on the usual distinction between "love" and "hate," not because I think it's completely wrong—it has passion in it, after all—but because it's still self-centered and doesn't really fit here.

But if I accept this command as a **paradox**, then I begin to understand it—as much as one can understand a paradox. The paradox is this:

Absolute duty to God can lead a person to do something that the ethical (universal morality) would normally forbid—but it never leads the knight of faith to stop loving.

Abraham shows us this. When he sets out to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical view would say, "He hates Isaac." But if Abraham *really* hated Isaac, then there's no way God would demand that sacrifice—because **Cain and Abraham are not the same**.

In fact, Abraham must love Isaac with all his heart. If God truly asks for this sacrifice, then Abraham must love Isaac even more deeply. *Only then* can he make the sacrifice—because it's precisely the tension between his deep love for Isaac and his absolute devotion to God that makes the act a **sacrifice** at all. And this is the real torment and anxiety of the paradox: *Abraham cannot explain himself to anyone*.

Only at the exact moment when his action totally contradicts his feeling does he truly sacrifice Isaac. But because the action happens in the real world, people can only judge it by ethical standards—and by those standards, Abraham is and always will be a murderer.

Now, we must go further in understanding the passage from Luke. The knight of faith (like Abraham) does **not** receive any ethical justification to fall back on. He cannot find safety in a universal rule, or in an institution like the church.

If, for example, the church were to ask someone to make this kind of sacrifice, then we're no longer dealing with a knight of faith—we're dealing with a **tragic hero**. The church, like the state, is part of the universal. A person can join it through a known, clear pathway. But the **knight of faith exists outside that universal**, and does *not* come out of the paradox. He either finds his eternal salvation *within* the paradox—or he is lost.

A churchly hero, by contrast, expresses his morality clearly for all to see. Everyone in the church—his father, mother, and friends—can understand and approve his actions. But he is not a knight of faith. And he won't respond like Abraham. He won't say, "This is a trial" or "This is a temptation." Because that kind of spiritual trial belongs to the individual **alone**—not to institutions, not to society, not even to the church.

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People usually avoid bringing up Bible verses like the one in *Luke 14:26*—the one about hating your family in order to follow Christ. They're afraid that if individuals start thinking for themselves as individuals, things might go terribly wrong. They fear that people will act recklessly or selfishly once they see themselves as above the rules of the group. On top of that, there's this common belief that it's easy to live as an individual—that it's somehow effortless to break free from the universal (the rules, the norms, the shared ethics of society). So they try to push everyone back into that universal mold.

But I can't agree with either of those views—and for the same reason.

Because the person who has truly understood what it means to exist as a *single individual* knows that it is the most terrifying thing imaginable. That person is *not* afraid to say it's also the greatest thing—but he says it with such weight, such seriousness, that no one would mistake his words for a license to act selfishly. In fact, his words would be more likely to steer someone *back into* the universal, even if they leave very little room for talking about greatness.

Those who are afraid to mention hard teachings like this are also the ones who can't bear to talk about Abraham. And the idea that it's "easy" to be the single individual is a dangerously self-serving illusion. Anyone who truly respects himself and cares for his soul knows: a person who supervises his *own* life, without anyone else watching, lives with a kind of strict solitude and inward discipline deeper than that of the most secluded nun.

Sure, there are people who need to be restrained—who, if set free, would run wild, like some beast driven by selfish desires. But the person who *knows* that risk, who *speaks* with anxiety and trembling—he does not belong to that group. And he must speak. Out of respect for greatness, he must speak of the great—so that we do not forget them just because we're afraid to face the potential danger. That danger will not come, *if we speak rightly*—if we speak with reverence, if we admit how great and how dreadful it is. Without that, we can't even recognize its greatness.

Let us, then, take a closer look at the anguish—the fear and trembling—contained in the paradox of faith.

The **tragic hero** gives up his personal desires in order to serve the universal. But the **knight of faith** gives up the universal itself in order to become the *single individual*. Everything depends on where a person truly stands. Anyone who thinks that it's "easy" to be the single individual can rest assured—**he is not the knight of faith**. Faith is not found in lost souls and wandering misfits.

The real knight of faith *knows* the beauty of the universal. He knows how good it is to be part of it—to translate yourself, so to speak, into a clean, well-edited copy that everyone can understand and appreciate. He knows how reassuring it is to be someone whose life fits neatly into the shared ethics of humanity—where others can understand you, and through you, understand the

FEAR AND TREMBLING
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universal itself. He knows how good it feels to belong to that community, to be welcomed home by it.

But he also knows that higher up, there winds a **lonely, narrow, and steep road**. He knows how terrifying it is to be born outside the universal, to walk a path where you meet *no one*. He knows exactly where he stands, and how his life relates to others. From a human perspective, he appears mad—he cannot explain himself to anyone. And yet *calling him mad* is actually the *kindest* thing people can say about him.

Because if he's not mad—if he's not delusional—then he must be a hypocrite. And the higher up he climbs that terrifying path, the more horrifying his hypocrisy would be.

The **knight of faith** understands how inspiring it is to give oneself up for the greater good, for the **universal**. He knows it takes real courage—but also that there's a kind of safety in doing so, because when you serve the universal, you're doing something that makes sense to everyone. You'll be understood, maybe even admired. That's a beautiful thing, and he feels drawn to it—almost *bound* by it. He might wish that this was the path set before him.

In the same way, **Abraham**, at times, might have wished that his task was simply to love his son **Isaac** as any father should—a duty that everyone could understand and praise for generations to come. He might wish that his task were to sacrifice Isaac for the good of the nation, for some higher, visible cause—so that he could inspire others, be remembered as a hero, and find peace in doing something noble.

But **he knows**: that's *not* the task. That's not the story he's living. His is a lonely road, where he's not accomplishing anything for the world—he's being tested, and tested *as himself*, in his relationship to **God** alone.

Let's speak plainly, like people: what did Abraham *do* for the world? He spent **seventy years** waiting to have a child in his old age—what others get easily, he waited his whole life for. Why? Because he was being tested. It almost seems laughable. He believed, but **Sarah** doubted and convinced him to have a child with **Hagar**—and then that child had to be sent away. Finally, he receives **Isaac**—and *then* comes the command to sacrifice him.

Abraham knows it would be beautiful to live out his life with Isaac. He knows it would be noble to give up his beloved son for the universal good. That kind of sacrifice would have brought him rest—and everyone else would have praised him and found peace in his heroic deed, just as a vowel rests quietly beside a consonant in a word. But *that's not the task*. Abraham isn't saving the state. He's not building a legacy. He's being tested by God—*personally*.

Think about it: the Roman general **Fabius “Cunctator”** was called "the Delayer" because he slowed the enemy with strategic patience. But Abraham? His whole life is a delay. He waits a

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century to have a child—and when he finally does, he's asked to give him up. And he can't even explain *why*. All he can say is: "*It's a test.*"

And that's the horror. His story is like a sacred book that no one is allowed to read, not something open to public inspection.

If someone *can't* see the dread in that, they can be sure they are *not* a knight of faith. But if someone *can* see it—*truly* see it—and then also realizes that they don't have the strength to follow it to the end, then maybe, just maybe, they'll catch a glimpse of how glorious the knight of faith really is.

Because that knight becomes God's *friend*, God's confidant.

And—if we speak purely in human terms—he is the one who can look up and say "**You**" to the Lord of Heaven.

Even the tragic hero—who gives so much for others—only speaks of God in the third person.

The **tragic hero** quickly completes his task and finds peace—he makes the leap into the infinite and finds his place securely within the realm of the **universal** (what is understood and shared by everyone).

But the **knight of faith** is never finished—he remains awake, restless, and **sleepless**. He is constantly being tested, and at every moment he faces the possibility of falling back into the universal through **repentance**. And that possibility could be either a sign of spiritual failure (*an agon*) or the path of truth—it's impossible to tell.

And he can't ask anyone else for clarity or advice—because the moment he does, he steps **outside** of the **paradox** of faith, where the single individual stands alone in direct relationship with the Absolute (God), beyond the universal.

The **knight of faith**, first and foremost, must have the **passion** to focus all the ethical meaning of what he's doing into a **single moment**—he must be able to say with complete certainty, "Yes, I truly love Isaac with all my soul."

If he can't do that, then he's stuck in spiritual turmoil—**an inner struggle**.

Second, he must have the **passion to instantly regenerate** that same certainty again, over and over—so that each time it is just as true and powerful as it was the first time.

If he can't do that, then he's stuck, unable to move forward—because he would constantly have to start over, never advancing.

The **tragic hero** also condenses the ethical into a single decision that transcends everyday morality—but he has the **support of the universal**, the shared, recognizable moral code of his

society.

The **knight of faith**, on the other hand, has **nothing but himself**—and that's what makes his situation so terrifying.

Most people live their moral lives day-by-day, letting each day bring its own concerns. But in doing so, they **never reach** the kind of intense, focused self-awareness that the knight of faith needs.

The tragic hero can draw support from the universal, but the knight of faith stands **utterly alone**.

The tragic hero does his duty and finds **peace** in the universal. Take **Agamemnon**: he gives up his daughter Iphigenia for the sake of the people, and this act brings him a kind of tragic calm—he sacrifices her in line with a higher, shared cause.

But imagine if Agamemnon hadn't had that focused commitment—if instead, at the key moment, his soul got lost in everyday thoughts like, “Well, I still have other daughters,” or “Maybe something unexpected will happen...” Then he wouldn't be a hero at all—just a poor fool.

Abraham, too, has that heroic concentration—but his challenge is even harder, because he doesn't stand on the solid ground of the universal. He must make one step more: a **leap of faith**, returning his soul to the belief in a **miracle**.

If Abraham hadn't made this extra movement—if he didn't believe that, somehow, he'd still have Isaac—then he would just be another Agamemnon. Because then we'd be forced to explain his willingness to kill Isaac in terms other than faith—like political duty, symbolism, or madness—and none of those would justify him, since they don't serve the universal.

Whether someone is actually experiencing a **spiritual crisis** or is truly a **knight of faith**, only that individual can know for sure. But even so, we *can* draw out a kind of recognizable mark from the paradox—something others can understand, even if they're not experiencing it themselves.

Here's the mark:

The **true knight of faith** always stands in **absolute isolation**.

The **false knight**, by contrast, is **sectarian**.

The sectarian tries to sidestep the narrow, terrifying road of the paradox. Instead of standing alone before God and making the movement of faith, he tries to become a "**tragic hero**" **at a discount**. The tragic hero gives himself up for the sake of something universal—like his nation, his people, or some great cause. But the sectarian—let's call him *Master Jackel*—doesn't represent the universal in any real way. He just builds a **private stage**, gathers some buddies around him who pretend to be “the universal,” kind of like the fake court officials in *The Golden Snuffbox* pretended to represent justice.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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The knight of faith, on the other hand, **is the paradox**. He is the **single individual**, fully and completely alone—without any social support, without any collective justification. That's what makes it so terrifying. And that's the part the sectarian can't handle.

But instead of recognizing that he simply doesn't have what it takes to walk this lonely road—and admitting it, which is **perfectly okay** (it's exactly what I myself do!)—the false knight convinces himself that if he **joins forces with other bunglers**, he'll be able to do it. But the spiritual world doesn't work that way—there's **no cheating** allowed.

So what happens?

A bunch of sectarians link arms, sing songs, make noise together, and try to drown out their fear with empty chatter. They believe their noisy little crowd is **storming Heaven** itself, when really, they're nothing like the knight of faith.

Because the **true knight of faith** walks a path of complete solitude.

He hears **no human voice**, just the silence of the universe and the weight of his terrible responsibility.

The **knight of faith** is utterly alone. He carries the pain of not being able to explain himself to anyone—but he doesn't have any vain desire to try to teach others either. That pain is actually what gives him confidence that his experience is real. He doesn't care for applause or admiration—his soul is **too serious for that**.

The **false knight** gives himself away quickly. He shows off a kind of mastery or insight that he supposedly gained in an instant, as if it were something easy. But he doesn't understand what's actually at stake: that **if someone else is going to take the same path**, they have to **become a true individual themselves—alone**. No one can do it for them, and they certainly don't need someone else trying to lead them.

But here again, people take the easy way out. They can't bear the suffering that comes from not being understood, so they **trade that martyrdom for cheap admiration**—for being “worldly wise.” That's far easier. But the **true knight of faith** is not a teacher—he's a **witness**. And this is deeply human. It's not that shallow kind of sympathy that pretends to care but is really just a form of **vanity**.

To be a witness is to confess something humbling: that **no one**—not even the simplest person—**needs someone else to participate in their personal journey**, and they **shouldn't be lowered just so another person can feel important** for helping them.

And just as the true knight didn't **get** what he got for a bargain, he doesn't **sell it cheap** either. He's not petty enough to **accept people's praise** while secretly **despising them**. He knows that **what's truly great is open to all**—no exceptions.

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So in the end, it comes down to this:

Either there *is* an **absolute duty to God**—which is exactly the paradox we've been talking about: that the **individual, as an individual**, stands in an **absolute relationship to the Absolute**—

—**Or** faith has **never existed** (because people assume it has always existed),

—**Or** Abraham is lost,

—**Or** we have to go back and interpret difficult teachings (like Luke 14) with that same tame, watered-down “explanation” offered by that “refined” biblical scholar—and do the same with all similar passages.

Problema III

"Was it morally justifiable for Abraham to keep his plan secret from Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac?"

The ethical, by its very nature, is universal—and because it's universal, it's meant to be open and transparent. The individual, by contrast, when understood simply as a feeling and sensing being, is hidden. His ethical responsibility is to come out of hiding, to reveal himself by becoming part of the universal. So, whenever he chooses to stay hidden, he sins—and he experiences spiritual turmoil, which he can only escape by opening up.

Once again, we find ourselves at the same dilemma: if there is no hiddenness that is justified—if there is no higher truth in which the individual, as an individual, stands above the universal—then Abraham's actions cannot be defended. He ignored the normal ethical duties and responsibilities. But if there *is* such a justified hiddenness, then we're looking at a paradox—one that can't be resolved through reasoning—because the paradox is exactly that the individual, as a single person, is higher than the universal. But the universal is what normally makes things understandable and shared.

Hegel's philosophy assumes that no kind of hiddenness or inner contradiction can ever truly be justified. It's internally consistent when it demands everything be revealed. But it becomes unclear and inconsistent when it tries to claim Abraham as a hero of faith and speak of faith at all—because faith isn't something simple and immediate like basic emotional or aesthetic experience. That kind of simplicity comes first. Faith, however, comes later. And if faith were nothing more than that early, aesthetic simplicity, then faith has never truly existed—because it has supposedly always existed.

It's best now to look at the whole situation from an aesthetic point of view, and to enter into that kind of reflection. I invite you, the reader, to fully give yourself to this mode of thought for the moment, while I adjust how I present the subject to fit this aesthetic lens.

The category I want to explore here is “**the interesting**.” In our age, this concept has become very important, because we live in a time of historical transition—and “**the interesting**” is essentially the category of the turning point. Therefore, one shouldn't treat it carelessly, or dismiss it just because they've outgrown it. Nor should one be greedy in pursuing it. Becoming “interesting,” or living an “interesting life,” isn't something one can learn like a trade—it's a privilege, and like every true privilege in the spiritual world, it is bought at the cost of deep pain.

For example, Socrates was perhaps the most “interesting” man to ever live. His life was incredibly fascinating—but that life was given to him by the gods. And insofar as he had to earn it himself, he certainly knew what it meant to suffer. To want that kind of life casually, without

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deep thought, is not something fitting for anyone who takes life seriously. Yet, in our time, it's not uncommon to see people trying to live such a life as if it were a simple project.

The “interesting” lies on the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical. This means that any exploration of it will keep brushing up against ethical territory—but at the same time, for it to have any significance, the analysis must be approached with aesthetic sensibility and curiosity.

Today's ethicists don't often pursue this kind of inquiry. Probably because there's no room for it in “The System” (a reference to Hegel's philosophy). Sure, one could take it up in individual essays, and if one isn't too ambitious or overly detailed, a short piece might achieve just as much—if, that is, one has the right words. A single well-chosen word or two can reveal a whole inner world. So, is there really no room in the “System” for these little words?

Aristotle, in his classic *Poetics*, says that **plot has two key elements: reversal (peripeteia) and recognition (anagnorisis)**. I'm focusing here only on the second: **recognition**. Anywhere there is recognition, there must have been **hiddenness** before. If recognition is what releases or resolves, hiddenness is what first creates tension and suspense.

I won't go into Aristotle's full discussion of tragedy—his distinctions between different kinds of reversals and recognitions are rich, inward, and absorbing, and particularly tempting for those of us who are weary of the shallow all-knowingness of summary writers.

But here's a general point worth making: In Greek tragedy, the hiddenness (and therefore, the moment of recognition) comes from its **epic** roots—from a kind of fate that strips the characters of agency, giving the story a dark, mysterious background. As a result, Greek tragedy feels like a marble statue—impressive, but **blind**, without the expressive power of the eyes. Greek tragedy, you might say, is blind.

To be moved by it, one has to make a kind of abstraction or imaginative leap. A son kills his father, only realizing afterward who the man was. A sister is about to sacrifice her brother, only to discover his identity at the last second.

This kind of tragedy doesn't appeal to our reflective modern age. Modern drama has abandoned “fate.” It's more self-aware—it looks inward. It doesn't rely on fate as something external. Instead, it draws it into the psychology of the characters. Hiddenness and revelation, then, are no longer imposed by destiny—they are now **the hero's own free actions**, and for those, he is responsible.

Hiddenness and revelation are also essential elements in modern drama.

I won't go on and on giving examples—it would take too long, and I'm polite enough to assume that anyone living in our highly stimulated, aesthetically obsessed age can think of their own. We

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live in such a rich cultural moment that someone could come up with examples as easily as, according to Aristotle, a partridge is aroused just by hearing a male's call or seeing him fly overhead. In other words, anyone who hears the word "hiddenness" could instantly shake a dozen novels and comedies from their sleeve.

So I'll keep it short and offer a broader point:

If a character is playing hide-and-seek by hiding something trivial, just to stir up drama, we're in the world of comedy. But if he's hiding something serious—something related to a deep idea—then we might be entering the world of tragedy.

Here's an example of comic hiddenness:

A man wears makeup and a wig. He wants to impress women, and he's confident that with the help of these props, he's absolutely irresistible. He charms a girl and is on cloud nine. But now there's a problem: can he confess the truth? Won't he lose all his appeal if she finds out he's just a regular guy—bald, even? Won't he lose her completely?

This kind of hiddenness is his own free choice, and aesthetics holds him accountable for it. Aesthetics has no sympathy for balding hypocrites—it abandons them to ridicule. That should be enough to show what I mean, because comedy isn't our focus here.

My goal is to explore **hiddenness dialectically**—to trace it through both aesthetic and ethical realms—so that we can clearly see how **aesthetic hiddenness** differs completely from the **paradoxical hiddenness** found in faith.

Here are a few examples:

- A young woman secretly loves someone, but they've never confessed their love to each other. Her parents force her to marry someone else (and she's also defined by her sense of duty to her family). She obeys them and **hides her love**, "so that the man she really loves won't suffer, and so that no one will ever know what she's going through."
- A young man could, with a single word, be united with the woman he dreams about. But that word might cause harm, maybe even tear a family apart. So, **he chooses to stay silent**. "She must never know," he thinks, "so that maybe she can still find happiness with someone else."

In both cases, these two people **are hidden from their beloveds—and hidden from each other.** If only they knew what the other was doing, something beautiful could happen—a profound kind of unity.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Their hiddenness is voluntary, and they are responsible for it in aesthetic terms.

But **aesthetics** is a kind and graceful art—it knows more escape routes than a pawnshop owner with a drawer full of keys.

So what does aesthetics do?

It pulls all the strings to help the lovers. A lucky coincidence happens: each person finds out about the other's noble sacrifice. They explain everything, and they get to be together. On top of that, **they're treated like heroes**—even though they barely had time to fully commit to their choices, aesthetics rewards them **as if they had fought for years** to stay true to their decision.

Because in aesthetics, time doesn't matter.

Whether it's comedy or tragedy, things move at the same pace in the aesthetic world—because the emotional or symbolic weight is what counts, not the number of days.

But ethics doesn't recognize either coincidence or sentimentality, and it doesn't share aestheticism's relaxed sense of time. It takes a completely different view of the situation. And arguing with ethics is pointless—it **operates with pure principles**. It doesn't rely on experience (which, out of all ridiculous things, might be the most ridiculous), and far from making someone wiser, too much experience without higher meaning is more likely to drive them insane.

Ethics doesn't deal in lucky accidents, so it won't accept any neat or emotionally satisfying explanation. It doesn't soften anything with flattering praise. It **puts a massive weight on the hero's frail shoulders**, and it calls presumptuous any attempt to play God through one's actions. But at the same time, it **also condemns someone who tries to play God through their suffering.**

Ethics demands that we believe in reality and have the courage to face all the hard, messy, conflicting details of life. It says: don't try to escape into fake, self-invented suffering that you take on by your own decision. It warns against trusting clever rationalizations, which are more deceitful than the ancient oracles ever were.

When it's time to act with courage, ethics warns against premature nobility—"let real life test you first." But when that time truly arrives, ethics will support you in every way it can.

If, however, there's something deeper happening in these two lovers—if they really care about their mission, if they're truly serious about starting the work—then maybe something will come of them. **But ethics can't help them anymore.** It's offended. Why? Because **they've kept a secret from ethics**, and it's a secret **they took on themselves**—without guidance, without justification from the universal.

So, here's the difference:

- **Aesthetics** requires secrecy—and **rewards** it.
- **Ethics** requires openness—and **punishes** secrecy.

Still, there are times when even aesthetics calls for honesty.

If a character is living in a beautiful illusion, and he keeps silent to protect someone else from suffering, **aesthetics praises his silence and rewards him for it**. But if his silence actually causes harm—if he takes action that disrupts someone else's life—then aesthetics demands that **he speak the truth**.

Let me illustrate this with a brief example from tragedy:

In Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia. **Aesthetics calls for silence** from him, because it would be unheroic to go around asking others for comfort. And because of his concern for the women (his wife and daughter), **he should keep the truth from them as long as possible**.

But **to be a true hero**, Agamemnon must still go through the horror of facing Clytemnestra's and Iphigenia's tears. So, what does aesthetics do?

It provides a way out.

It introduces an **old servant**—a character who reveals the truth to Clytemnestra. And with that, everything is dramatically set up and in balance.

Ethics, however, does not work with coincidence, and it doesn't have a convenient old servant ready to move the plot forward. The aesthetic idea falls apart the moment you try to realize it in real life. That's why **ethics demands openness**—it insists on full disclosure.

The **tragic hero** proves his ethical courage **precisely** by not being trapped in an aesthetic illusion. He's the one who **tells Iphigenia her fate directly**. If he does this, then ethics embraces him as its beloved child—one who has done well. If he stays silent, he might tell himself it's to spare others—but it could just as easily be because it's easier for him.

Yet he must know, **deep inside**, whether he's doing it for others or for himself. And if he remains silent, he takes responsibility as **an individual**, choosing to ignore all outside reasoning. But a **tragic hero cannot do this**, because his whole purpose is to **express the universal**. That's why ethics loves him—because he never avoids what he must face.

Yes, it's true that **tears are a powerful emotional argument**—and someone unmoved by reason may still be moved by tears. In a play, **Iphigenia is allowed to cry**. In real life, she should be allowed to weep too, like **Jephthah's daughter**, who cried for two months—not alone, but at her

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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father's feet—using all her emotional power, her only tool being her tears, wrapping herself around him like an olive branch pleading for mercy.

So:

- **Aesthetics required openness—but solved the tension with a coincidence.**
- **Ethics also required openness—and found satisfaction in the tragic hero.**

But despite how strictly **ethics insists on disclosure**, we still can't deny that **silence and secrecy** can make someone great—precisely because they are signs of deep inwardness.

Remember in the myth: when **Eros leaves Psyche**, he tells her,

“You'll bear a divine child if you remain silent; a human child if you reveal the secret.”

So the **tragic hero**, who is the favorite of ethics, is fully human—we can understand him. His actions are out in the open.

But if I go any further, I immediately run into a paradox—the divine or the demonic.
Silence belongs to both.

- **Silence can be demonic**—a trap, where the more you hide, the more monstrous things become.
- **But silence can also be divine**—a sign of a sacred understanding between the individual and the divine.

Before turning to the story of **Abraham**, I will bring in some poetic characters for comparison. I'll raise them up with logic and reason, but I'll also wave the **discipline of despair** over them, keeping them from staying still—**so that in their anxiety they might reveal something deeper**.

In his *Politics*, Aristotle tells a story about political unrest in Delphi that stemmed from a marriage. The groom, after hearing from the prophets that his marriage would bring disaster, changed his mind in a divine moment. When he came to pick up his bride—he decided not to go through with the wedding. That's all I need from the story.

In Delphi, this must have caused quite a few tears. If a poet took up the story, I dare say he could count on evoking some serious sympathy. Isn't it heartbreaking that love—which is already so often rejected or exiled in life—now finds itself abandoned by Heaven too? Doesn't this go

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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against the old saying that marriages are made in Heaven? In most love stories, it's the hardships and limitations of everyday life—like evil forces—that try to separate the lovers. But love has Heaven on its side, so the holy bond prevails.

But in this story, **it's Heaven itself that separates what Heaven seemingly joined together.** Who would've seen that coming? Certainly not the young bride. Just a moment ago, she was sitting in her room, radiant in her beauty, surrounded by her maidens, who had lovingly adorned her so that everyone would envy her—and envy they surely did, because she was as beautiful as a woman could possibly be. They had used all the skills of feminine adornment to celebrate her worthiness.

But there was still one thing missing—something the maidens could never have imagined: a veil more delicate, more invisible than the one they had placed on her. A bridal garment unknown even to the bride herself. This unseen veil was placed on her not by any hand, but by a mysterious, friendly power who takes joy in dressing the bride—clothing her in something she did not know she wore.

She only saw the groom walk past her on his way into the temple. She saw the door close behind him, and she felt even more serene and joyful, because now, more than ever, she knew he belonged to her. The temple door opened again, and the groom stepped out—but she didn't see the pain in his expression, because she modestly lowered her eyes. He, however, saw that Heaven seemed jealous—jealous of her beauty, and of his happiness.

The maidens saw him exit the temple too, but they didn't notice his troubled face—they were too busy hurrying to fetch the bride. Then she stepped forward, full of humility, yet radiant like a queen, surrounded by her loyal friends. She stood at the center of this beautiful gathering and waited. Just for a moment—the temple was close. The groom approached—but walked past the door.

And here I'll stop. I'm no poet; I only follow the thread of reasoning.

First, notice this: the groom received his divine enlightenment **in the decisive moment**—meaning, he remained pure and blameless; he hadn't carelessly made a promise or bonded himself to her. Second, he's not acting out of selfish cleverness like a fickle lover—he's acting based on a divine warning. Third, the divine message doesn't make him any happier than the bride—in fact, it probably makes him **even more miserable**, because he's the cause. Yes, the prophecy said misfortune would fall on him—but the real question is, would that misfortune also destroy their marriage?

So, what should he do now?

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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(1) *Should he stay silent and go through with the marriage*, thinking to himself: “Maybe the misfortune won’t come right away. At least I’ve stayed true to love and wasn’t afraid to make myself unhappy. But I must remain silent—otherwise, even this short happiness will be lost.”

At first glance, this might seem reasonable—but it’s not. Because in this case, he has wronged the woman. By staying silent, he’s essentially made her complicit. If she had known what he knew—the prophecy—she certainly wouldn’t have agreed to marry him. When the misfortune does come, not only will he have to bear the consequences himself, but he’ll also have to carry the guilt of having hidden the truth and face her righteous anger for doing so.

(2) *Should he remain silent and choose not to marry her?* In that case, he would have to concoct some misleading excuse and essentially erase himself from her life. Aesthetics (the artistic sense of the story) might allow for this—especially if it’s treated as a romantic tragedy, where in the final moment, everything is explained. But the explanation comes *after* the damage is already done. And if it’s treated aesthetically, the story likely still ends in his death—unless somehow that grim prophecy could be undone. Even so, no matter how noble his silence might appear, it still wrongs the woman and disrespects the reality of her love.

(3) *Should he speak?* It’s important to remember that our hero is far too poetic and sensitive to treat giving up on love as casually as canceling a business deal. If he speaks, the whole thing becomes a classic tragic love story, like *Axel and Valborg*—a couple torn apart by divine will. But even this comparison doesn’t fully fit, because in their case, both lovers are equally affected. In this story, though, the misfortune is said to fall *only on him*.

This is what makes the situation so difficult. There’s no shared suffering between them, no mutual tragedy they can hold onto. And since Heaven doesn’t intervene directly with some obvious sign but leaves the decision to them, it would be possible (in theory) for them to *choose* to stay together and defy the prophecy together. That could be a conceivable resolution.

But **ethics** demands that he speak. His real heroism lies in giving up that aesthetic version of nobility—the dramatic, self-sacrificing silence—because in this case, that silence would still hurt the girl. And while it might not be driven by vanity (like a desire to seem noble or tragic), he would still be making her suffer unnecessarily.

The true greatness of this kind of ethical heroism is that he *had* the option to stay silent, he *understood* it, and then *consciously chose not to*. Without that, you could find heroes everywhere—especially in an age like ours, which is absurdly skilled at faking greatness and rushing to glory by skipping over all the difficult steps.

But what was the point of this story, since I still haven’t moved beyond the tragic hero? It’s because the story might still shed light on the paradox. Everything depends on how the hero

FEAR AND TREMBLING

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

relates to the prophecy of the augurs—because that prophecy will, one way or another, shape his life.

So the question is: **Is the prophecy a matter of public knowledge, or is it something completely private?**

The setting is ancient Greece. In that world, **a prophecy from an augur is public and universally understood**. I don't just mean that anyone could read and comprehend the words—it's also understood by all that an augur is the mouthpiece of divine will. So, the prophecy isn't just intelligible to the hero—it's intelligible to everyone. It doesn't create a private or personal relationship between the hero and the divine. He can respond however he wants; what's foretold will still come to pass, and it doesn't bring him any closer to God—either in favor or in punishment. In this kind of case, anyone could understand what happens just as clearly as the hero. There's **no divine message written in code that only he can read**.

So, if he chooses to speak about it, he's able to explain it clearly. If he chooses to stay silent, it's because he's trying—as an individual—to place himself *above* the universal. That is, he's indulging in fantasies about how things might turn out fine, how she'll forget about it eventually, and so on.

But if, instead, the divine message had not come from an augur—if it was something he learned entirely **in private**, and it placed him in a **completely personal** relationship with the divine—**then** we'd be in the territory of the paradox (if such a paradox exists; my discussion is still exploring both possibilities).

In that case, he wouldn't **be able** to speak, even if he desperately wanted to. His silence wouldn't be something noble he chose—it would be something painful he endured. And that pain would serve as the only assurance that he's doing the right thing.

His silence wouldn't come from trying to elevate himself above the universal. Instead, it would be because **he, as a single individual, has been placed into a direct and absolute relationship with the Absolute (God)**.

And *that* kind of person might actually find peace in his silence—though, even then, the constant voice of ethics would disturb that peace. For ethics always demands explanation, justification, disclosure.

If aesthetics wants to grow, it should stop ending its stories with illusions of magnanimous self-sacrifice and instead **begin** with that illusion and work through it. If it did that, it would find itself aligned with the religious—because **only religious faith** has the power to reconcile the conflict between the aesthetic and the ethical.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Queen Elizabeth sacrificed her love for Essex for the sake of the state when she signed his death warrant. This was a heroic act, even though she may have been motivated in part by personal resentment—specifically because Essex hadn't sent her the ring. As the story goes, he *had* sent the ring, but a jealous lady-in-waiting withheld it out of malice. When Elizabeth eventually learned the truth—if I'm not mistaken—she reportedly sat for ten days with one finger in her mouth, silently biting it, and then died.

That story would be perfect for a poet who knows how to wrench open the silence and give voice to such suffering. Otherwise, it would be better used by a ballet choreographer—whom poets these days often confuse themselves with anyway.

Now I'll turn toward a more *demonic* direction by retelling the legend of Agnes and the merman.

Traditionally, the merman is portrayed as a seducer—a dark figure who bursts out from the depths of the sea, seizes a delicate, innocent flower of a girl standing dreamily by the shore, and drags her into the abyss. That's how poets have told it.

Let's flip the story.

Yes, the merman *was* a seducer. He called out to Agnes and, through smooth words, awakened in her what had long been hidden. She found in the merman what she'd been seeking all along when she gazed into the deep. Agnes agrees to follow him.

The merman lifts her onto his arm. Agnes throws her arms around his neck. Completely trusting, completely surrendered, she gives herself to this powerful figure. He steps toward the sea, bends over the waves, ready to dive into the depths with his prize—when suddenly, Agnes looks at him again.

She isn't afraid. She doesn't despair. She doesn't even look proud to have found love. She isn't overwhelmed by desire. She simply looks at him with pure trust—completely like the innocent, humble flower she believes herself to be—and in that one glance, she places her entire fate in his hands.

And at that moment... the sea falls silent. The waves lose their fury. Nature's passion—which is the merman's strength—deserts him. The waters go still.

And still Agnes looks at him.

He collapses. He can't withstand the force of innocence. His very element, the sea, betrays him. He *can't* seduce her.

So, he brings her back to shore. He explains he only wanted to show her how beautiful the sea can be when it's calm—and Agnes believes him.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

Then he returns to the sea alone. And the sea rages with wild fury again—but not as wildly as the despair that now tears through the merman's heart. He could have seduced her. He *could* seduce a hundred girls like her. He could charm anyone.

But *Agnes* has triumphed—and he has lost her.

He can only possess her by making her his *prey*. He's not capable of true, faithful love; he is, after all, a merman.

I've taken the liberty of altering the merman's character a bit, and because of that, I've also changed Agnes. In the original legend, Agnes isn't completely innocent—contrary to those sentimental portrayals that make women into perfect victims. That kind of flattery is not only nonsense, it's insulting.

In truth, the Agnes of the legend is, to put it in more modern terms, a woman obsessed with being *interesting*—and that sort of woman will always attract a merman. Mermen can spot that type instantly and will go after them like sharks to blood.

So it's a foolish myth—or maybe one spread by mermen themselves—that "cultural sophistication" can protect a girl from being seduced. No, life is much fairer than that. There's only one real protection: innocence.

Let's now imagine that the merman gains a human conscience—and that being a "merman" symbolizes a kind of human pre-existence, a background or destiny that has trapped his life from the start. There's nothing stopping him from becoming a hero now; the next step he takes could be one of redemption. Agnes has saved him. The seducer in him is destroyed. He has bowed before the power of innocence. He'll never be able to seduce anyone again.

But in that very moment, two forces begin to battle within him: **remorse**, and **Agnes and remorse** together. If remorse alone takes hold, he'll remain hidden. If it's Agnes *with* remorse, then he'll step out of the shadows—he'll reveal himself.

Now, if remorse is the only one that grasps him, and he stays hidden, then he'll inevitably make Agnes unhappy. After all, she loved him with pure innocence. She believed him when he said that he only wanted to show her how beautiful and calm the sea could be. She believed in him, even if he had changed or tried to conceal it.

Meanwhile, the merman himself—driven by his own conflicting feelings—will become even more miserable. He loved Agnes with every fiber of his being, with layers of emotion, and now he carries a new burden of guilt. The *demonic* side of his remorse will whisper that this suffering is exactly what he deserves—and the more he suffers, the more it will tell him he's being justly punished.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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If he gives in to this demonic despair, he may try to “save” Agnes in the only way he knows how: by using evil means. He knows she still loves him. If he can somehow *destroy* that love, then maybe—just maybe—she’ll be free. In a twisted way, that would be his way of saving her.

But how could he do it?

He’s not foolish enough to think that simply confessing the truth will make her hate him. No, he knows Agnes too well for that. Instead, he might try to awaken darker emotions in her—humiliate her, mock her, make her love look ridiculous, maybe try to provoke her pride. He’ll stop at nothing to sever her love. And he’ll suffer terribly doing it, because this is the tragic contradiction of the demonic spirit: there can sometimes be more goodness in a demoniac than in people who simply float through life on the surface.

If Agnes is selfish, it will be easier to trick her—because contrary to popular belief, it’s not innocence that’s easiest to fool. It’s cleverness. The clever are best at deceiving—and most easily deceived.

But if Agnes *isn’t* selfish, then her reaction will be even more painful for the merman. She won’t hide her heartbreak. She’ll express her pain fully, and every word, every expression will tear into him—not to change his mind, but to torment him more deeply.

With the help of the demonic, the merman would also become a *single individual* who, as that single individual, places himself higher than the universal (moral law or shared human values). The demonic resembles the divine in this sense: the individual can form an *absolute* relationship to it. This is the counterpart, the deceptive mirror image, of the paradox we’ve been discussing—where the individual stands in an absolute relation to God.

This resemblance is dangerous, because it can easily deceive. In the same way, the merman *seems* to have proof that his silence is justified: after all, *he* is the one who suffers most because of it. But there’s no doubt that he *can* speak. If he chooses to do so, he can become a tragic hero—a very great one, in my opinion. Though few might understand what exactly makes his greatness so profound.

His greatness would lie in having the courage to *stop deceiving himself*—to stop pretending that by staying silent, he’s somehow making Agnes happy. He would face the brutal truth: that to do the right thing, he must speak, and that by doing so he might deeply hurt Agnes. He would have to summon the strength to knowingly cause her pain.

Let me make a quick psychological observation here. The more selfish Agnes is, the more obvious this self-deception becomes—because it’s easier to believe you’re “protecting” someone who’s wrapped up in themselves. In fact, it’s not even impossible that, in reality, a

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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merman—through his demonic cleverness—*could* save Agnes, at least from a worldly perspective. He might even draw out something truly exceptional in her.

Because a demonic person knows how to press someone's buttons. He knows how to get a reaction, to push people until even the most average or unremarkable among them show surprising depth or strength. And in his own twisted way, he might even mean well by it.

The merman now stands at a critical turning point. If he is to be rescued from the demonic power of remorse, there are two possible paths forward.

First, he could choose to remain hidden, living in concealment—but crucially, *not* relying on tricks or cunning to manipulate others. In this case, he wouldn't place himself, as the single individual, in an absolute relation to the demonic. Instead, he would find peace in a kind of “counter-paradox”—believing that God, not he, will save Agnes. (This is likely how someone in the Middle Ages would have viewed the situation: the merman would retreat into a monastery, renouncing worldly life.)

The second option is that *Agnes herself* rescues him. That might sound like a romantic idea—as though her love saves him from ever being a seducer again. But that would be an *aesthetic* kind of salvation, one that doesn't actually address the real issue: the moral *continuity* of the merman's life—what he has done, and who he has become.

In the deeper, truer sense, he is only saved if he becomes *disclosed*—if he reveals the truth about himself. So he marries Agnes, but only after embracing the *paradox*. Because once a person has sinned—has stepped outside the universal—he can return to it *only* by entering, as the single individual, into an absolute relationship with the Absolute (God).

Now I want to make an observation—one that goes further than anything I've said so far: **Sin is not the first immediacy; sin is a *later* immediacy.** In sin, the individual already stands—like in the demonic paradox—higher than the universal. Why? Because it's a contradiction to expect someone to fulfill universal obligations when they no longer even possess the basic conditions required to do so.

If philosophy seriously believed that a person could simply start living by its teachings at any moment, we would end up with a strange kind of comedy. Ethics that ignores the reality of sin is a useless exercise; but if it takes sin seriously, it immediately moves beyond itself—it reaches into the realm of religion.

Philosophy teaches that we must overcome the “immediate”—our unreflective, instinctual nature. That's true. But what is *not* true is that sin is just another form of immediacy—just as it's not true that *faith* is immediate either.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

As long as we stay within these frameworks—of guilt, remorse, concealment—everything can still be explained. But *none* of this explains Abraham. Because Abraham didn't become the single individual *because of sin*. On the contrary, he was righteous—he was chosen by God.

So the true analogy to Abraham only appears after a person has already returned to the point where they can again fulfill the universal—and *then* the paradox begins *again*.

I can understand the merman's actions—but I can't understand Abraham's. The merman, through his paradoxical struggle, wants to return to and realize the universal (that is, to rejoin ordinary human moral life). If he chooses to stay hidden and plunges into all the torment of remorse, he'll become demonic—and as such, he'll eventually be destroyed.

If he stays hidden but doesn't trick himself into thinking that his suffering will somehow free Agnes, then maybe he'll find peace—but he'll be lost to the world.

If, on the other hand, he comes forward, reveals the truth, and lets Agnes save him, then he becomes the greatest human being I can imagine. Aesthetics (the love of beauty and story) often mistakenly praises love's power by saying that an innocent girl can save the lost through love. But that misunderstands the situation. It's the merman—not the girl—who is the true hero.

He cannot truly be with Agnes unless he has first made the infinite movement of repentance—and then, made a second movement: the leap of faith, “in virtue of the absurd.”

By his own power, the merman can carry out the movement of repentance. But that takes everything he has—he exhausts himself completely. That's why it is humanly impossible for him, by his own power, to return to actual life again and reclaim love.

If someone doesn't have the passion or strength for either movement—if they just drift through life repenting a bit here and there and hoping the rest will work itself out—they've already given up on living with purpose. They've settled for mediocrity. And in doing so, they can easily convince themselves (and help others do the same) that spiritual life is like a game of cards—random, casual, and rule-based.

They may even amuse themselves by thinking it's strange that in an age where supposedly everyone can do the highest and best things, so many still doubt the immortality of the soul. But the truth is: **anyone who has actually made the movement of infinite passion never doubts.** Only **the conclusions born from passion** are truly reliable and convincing.

Fortunately, existence is more gentle and faithful than the wise claim. It doesn't exclude anyone—not even the lowest person. And it doesn't deceive anyone. In the spiritual world, the only one who gets deceived is the one who **deceives themselves**.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Most people agree—and I tend to agree too—that entering a monastery is not the highest form of human greatness. But just because we believe that doesn't mean we should fool ourselves into thinking that people today, who don't enter monasteries at all, are somehow greater than those deep, serious souls of the past who found peace in one.

How many people today even have the *passion* to think about this seriously and honestly judge themselves? The idea of taking your own soul so seriously that you examine every solitary thought in sleepless self-reflection—so seriously that unless you're constantly striving to act in light of the noblest and holiest within you, you might, with horror and anxiety, uncover the dark and painful truths buried in every human life... That kind of thinking has vanished.

Instead, people today just float along in crowds. It's easy to forget. Easy to be distracted. Easy to get a fresh start. But just reflecting on this idea with real reverence should humble many people who think they've already reached the highest level of life.

And yet, this barely touches our era. Today's generation thinks it has achieved the highest—and ironically, no era has ever been more suited to comedy. It's amazing that we haven't yet given birth, by spontaneous generation, to a "hero"—a demonic one—who puts on a horrifying performance that makes the whole generation laugh, without even realizing it's laughing at *itself*.

Because really, what more does our existence deserve than ridicule, when someone at age twenty already believes they've "arrived"? But what truly higher movement has our time discovered since abandoning the monastery? Is it not just a pathetic kind of worldly wisdom, a cowardly cleverness that tricks people into believing they've reached the peak—while secretly keeping them from even trying the *lower* steps?

A person who has made the "monastic movement" (renounced the world) has only one step left—the leap of faith, the *movement in virtue of the absurd*. But how many people today even understand what that means? How many live in such a way that they've truly *given up everything*—or *received everything back*? How many people are simply honest enough to admit what they *can* and *cannot* do?

And if we do find such people, are they not more likely to be found among the less educated—or even among women, who have a kind of intuitive, spiritual clarity? Just as a possessed person can reveal himself without understanding what he's doing, so too our generation unwittingly exposes its defeat. Why? Because it keeps demanding to laugh.

But if laughter is really what we need, maybe the theater should stage a play making fun of someone who dies from love—wouldn't that be *so modern*? But wouldn't it be far more healing if our generation witnessed someone *actually* dying from love—so it could, for once, rediscover belief in the power of the spirit? Wouldn't it be better for us to stop cowardly suffocating the best parts of ourselves—and snuffing it out in others with scornful laughter?

FEAR AND TREMBLING

ABBÉ'S LIBRARY

Does this generation really need just one more sarcastic play from a clever person to mock the serious and the sacred? Or does it need a person of *genuine passion*, someone who can awaken what we've forgotten?

If someone wanted a plot in a similar style to the earlier ones I've described—but one that is even more moving—then the story of Tobias and Sarah from the Book of Tobit would be a perfect choice. In this story, the emotion of repentance hasn't been awakened yet, which gives it a more innocent, raw pathos.

Tobias wants to marry Sarah, the daughter of Raguel and Edna. But her story is marked by terrible tragedy: she has already been married seven times, and each of her husbands has died on their wedding night. From the perspective of my plot, that detail introduces a bit of a problem—it's hard not to find something unintentionally comical in the idea of a girl having seven failed weddings, one after the other. It's like the image of a student who has failed the same exam seven times—always getting close, but never quite succeeding.

In the Book of Tobit, however, the focus lies elsewhere, and the high number (seven) actually adds to the tragic weight. It makes Tobias's willingness to marry her all the more heroic—especially because he is the only son of his parents, and because the warning signs are so severe.

But in the version I would imagine, we should omit this comical angle entirely. Sarah becomes, instead, a young woman who has never been in love—still holding on to all the radiant, innocent hope of a girl's first love. She possesses what you might call a “full promissory note for happiness,” the ability to love a man completely and with all her heart.

And yet, she is more unfortunate than anyone. She knows that a dark, jealous demon who loves her is determined to kill any man who marries her on their wedding night. I've read many stories of sorrow, but I doubt there's any grief quite like the one hanging over Sarah's life. When suffering comes from the outside, there's at least some comfort in knowing it wasn't your fault, or that things might've gone differently. But the deepest sorrow is to realize that no matter how perfect the world might be—it *wouldn't make a difference*. That is a sorrow no amount of time can heal.

There's a Greek writer who captures something very deep in his innocent simplicity when he says: “No one has ever escaped love, nor will anyone, so long as beauty and eyes still exist.” Many girls have been unlucky in love—but they *became* unlucky through love. Sarah's misfortune came *before* she ever had the chance to love. It is sad not to find someone to give your heart to, but it is unspeakably sad not to be *able* to give it. When a girl gives herself, people say, “She is no longer free.” But Sarah was never free, though she had never given herself.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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So what a storm of emotion and sorrow follows when Tobias finally decides to marry her! What wedding rituals, what preparations! No bride has ever been more wronged than Sarah—robbed not of love itself, but of the very joy of surrendering herself freely and fully to another. Even this, she cannot experience naturally; it must be preceded by the burning of fish entrails to ward off evil spirits.

And then, imagine the grief of her mother, Edna. Just as Sarah has been robbed of her greatest joy, so now Sarah must also take something from her mother—must leave her behind at the very moment when she is most vulnerable. But read the story. Edna prepares the wedding chamber, she takes Sarah into it, and she weeps. And she shares in her daughter's sorrow. She says to her:

“My child, be brave! May the Lord of Heaven and Earth give you joy in place of this sadness. Be of good cheer, daughter. Be of good cheer.”

And then comes the wedding night. And you can hardly read it without tears in your eyes:

“But when the two of them were shut in together, Tobias stood up from the bed and said, ‘Get up, sister! Let us pray, and ask the Lord to have mercy on us.’” (Tobit 8:4)

If a poet were to read the story of Tobias and Sarah and decide to use it, I'd wager a hundred to one that he'd focus entirely on Tobias. The obvious drama lies in his visible danger—how brave it is to risk your life, knowing full well the fate of Sarah's previous husbands. The story even reminds us of this explicitly: the morning after the wedding, Raguel says to Edna, “*Send one of the maids in and see whether he's alive; but if he isn't, I can bury him, and no one will know.*” (Tobit 8:13)

The poet would certainly focus on Tobias's heroic courage. And yes—it *is* brave, determined, and knightly of him. But I want to offer a different view. That kind of bravery is worthy of admiration, but any man who lacks the courage to do what Tobias did—who wouldn't risk himself in the face of such danger—is just a vain, puffed-up peacock. He knows nothing of real love, nothing of what it means to be a man, nothing of what makes life truly worth living. He hasn't even grasped the small truth that it is better to give than to receive—and certainly not the deeper truth, the profound one: that it is *far harder to receive than to give*. That is, it's harder *if* one has had the courage to do without, and *if*, in the hour of need, one doesn't turn into a coward.

No—*Sarah* is the true heroine.

She is the one I want to approach in reverence, in a way I've never approached any woman in thought or reading before. Imagine what kind of love of God it takes to *let oneself be healed*, when your entire life has been warped from the beginning—when, through no fault of your own, you've carried the shame of being broken from the start. Imagine the ethical courage it takes to

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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let the man you love take such a terrible risk—to let him walk into the bridal chamber where seven others have died.

What humility before another human being!

What faith in God—that she would not, in the very next moment, turn and hate the man she owed everything to.

If Sarah were a man, the line between her suffering and the demonic would be thin. A proud, noble soul can endure anything—but there is one thing it absolutely cannot endure: *pity*. To be pitied is a kind of insult that can only come from a higher power, because a truly proud person will never bring pity upon himself. If he has sinned, he can bear the consequences without losing hope—but to be marked from birth, through no fault of his own, as an object of pity, like some incense offered up for the gods to breathe in—that is unbearable.

Pity has a strange logic. At one moment it demands guilt, and in the next it refuses it. That's why being *destined* to be pitied is so horrifying—especially for someone whose misfortune is spiritual, not just material.

And Sarah has done nothing wrong. She's thrown helpless into the jaws of suffering, and, on top of that, she must endure the pity of others. Even I—who admire her more than Tobias could ever have loved her—even I can't mention her name without adding: "The poor girl."

Now imagine that a man were in Sarah's place. Suppose he knew that if he fell in love, some demon would come and murder the woman he loves on their wedding night. There's a good chance he would choose the demonic path. He would turn inward and say—like a true demon might, in secret—"No thanks. I don't care for ceremonies and romantic nonsense. I never asked for love anyway. I can become a sort of Bluebeard, delighting in seeing women die on their wedding night."

We usually know very little about the demonic, though it deserves to be studied—especially in our modern age. In fact, anyone with a sense of what the demonic is can see it flicker even in ordinary people, at least briefly.

Shakespeare was a master of portraying this. Take Gloucester (who becomes Richard III)—the most horrifying demon Shakespeare ever wrote, and also the most perfectly rendered. What made him that way? It seems he simply couldn't bear being pitied, which he had been since he was a child. Just read his monologue in Act 1 of *Richard III*—it's worth more than entire moral philosophies that are blind to the real horrors of existence:

"I, that am rudely stamped and lack love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion,

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them—"

Souls like Gloucester's cannot be saved by trying to fold them back into some idealized version of society. Ethics only mocks them. It would be just as cruel to say to Sarah, "Why don't you try fulfilling your ethical duty—just get married!" People like this live within the paradox. They aren't lesser or broken. They are *different*. And they will either be lost in a demonic paradox—or saved in a divine one.

It's no accident that in folklore, witches, trolls, and other creatures are portrayed as deformed. Even today, people tend to see a physical deformity and instantly associate it with moral corruption. But this is a terrible injustice. It should be the other way around. These people were injured by life itself—as if existence were a cruel stepmother. Sometimes this comes from nature, sometimes from history, from being placed outside the world's accepted norms. That's where the demonic begins—but not through any fault of their own.

That's why characters like Cumberland's *Jew* can be demonic even when they *do good things*. The demonic can also show itself as deep contempt for humanity—not a contempt that makes the demoniac behave badly, but one that gives him the strength to know he's better than those who judge him.

When it comes to things like this, the poets should be the first to raise the alarm. But God only knows what kind of books today's young poets are even reading. Their idea of study probably just involves memorizing rhymes—and who knows what real meaning those have in the grand scheme of life! Honestly, I can't think of any value these poets provide, except maybe this: they offer comforting proof that the soul is immortal. Because if someone like them becomes immortal, then surely we all will—as Baggesen once said about the local poet Kildevalle: "*If he becomes immortal, then so shall we all.*"

What I've said here about Sarah—especially from the point of view of poetic storytelling and using a fictional example—becomes much more significant when we consider it psychologically. It ties into the old saying: "*There has never existed a great genius without a touch of madness.*" That madness is the genius's suffering in the world—it's the sign, if I may say so, of divine jealousy, while the genius's talent is the sign of divine favor.

From the very beginning, the genius is out of sync with the universal. He's born into the paradox. And from there, one of two things happens: either he despairs over the limits of human existence—which to him turns what should be omnipotence into helplessness—and so he turns toward something dark, something demonic, seeking comfort in pride and refusing to answer to

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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God or anyone else; **or**, he finds peace and healing by turning instead to God in love and religious devotion.

Here lies a deep psychological challenge—one that, in my view, could easily justify dedicating an entire lifetime to, and yet we rarely hear a word about it: What is the relationship between genius and madness? Can one be defined in terms of the other? To what extent does a genius have control over their madness? Because clearly, a genius must have some control—otherwise they wouldn't be a genius at all, just mad.

To make these kinds of observations takes both insight and love—because it's incredibly hard to truly understand a superior person. But if someone were to really pay attention and carefully read through the writings of some of the greatest minds in history, then maybe, just maybe, they might—once, with great effort—uncover something meaningful.

Let me imagine one final example: a person who, through remaining hidden and silent, tries to *save* the universal. For this, I'll use the story of Faust.

Faust is typically portrayed as a skeptic, a doubter, someone who turns away from the spiritual and gives himself over to earthly pleasures. That's how the poets tell it—and though people love to say that “every age has its Faust,” most poets continue telling the same old version of the story. Let's change that a little.

Imagine Faust as the *doubter par excellence*—but also as someone with a sympathetic, caring soul. Even in Goethe's *Faust*, I miss a deeper psychological portrayal of what doubt *really* sounds like when it talks to itself. Even though everyone today claims to have “wrestled with doubt,” I'd bet you could give all the poets blank checks and they still wouldn't fill more than the top margin of a page with real insights about it.

Only when you really turn Faust inward, only then does his doubt take on true poetic weight. Only then do we see how deeply he suffers. He knows it's the spirit that sustains existence—but he also sees that the comfort and happiness most people live with doesn't come from spiritual insight, but from unthinking, unexamined contentment. As a doubter—the doubter—he is beyond all that. And if someone tries to claim they've experienced the same kind of doubt, he can see right through them. Anyone who has truly journeyed through the world of the spirit, who has made that kind of infinite inner movement, can immediately tell whether they're hearing from a person of real experience—or a fraud.

Faust knows that the kind of existential chaos and terror he could unleash—by merely expressing what he really believes—would shake people to the core. He knows he could make the world tremble. But he's not a destroyer. He doesn't crave attention or want to be known for his power to tear things down. His soul is generous. He loves life. He knows he can't stop the destructive storm once it starts. So he stays silent.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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He hides the doubt that burns within him more carefully than a girl hiding a forbidden pregnancy. He tries his best to live like everyone else, to walk in step with the crowd. But what happens inside him—he keeps to himself. In doing so, he sacrifices himself for the good of everyone else.

Sometimes, when a deep thinker or a strange mind throws the world into a storm of doubt, people say, “If only he had kept quiet!” Well—Faust *does* keep quiet.

Anyone who understands what it means to “live by spirit” also knows what it means to feel the hunger of doubt. A doubter craves not only spiritual nourishment but also the basic joys of life, the daily bread of happiness. And even though Faust suffers terribly from this hunger—his pain itself a sign that pride is not what drives him—I’ll still admit I take a little cruel pleasure in tormenting heroes, just like how Gregory of Rimini was called the “tormentor of infants” for claiming unbaptized babies were damned. I suppose I could be called the *tormentor of heroes*.

In my version of Faust, he doesn’t fall into lust. He doesn’t see Margaret through Mephistopheles’s magic mirror, but instead sees her in real life, in all her innocence. Because Faust’s heart still loves humanity, he can genuinely fall in love with her. But he is a *true* doubter—his doubt has made reality feel hollow, empty. He’s not one of those academic skeptics who doubt on Tuesdays at the lectern and go on living a normal life. No—his doubt consumes him. And so, even as he longs for love and joy, he keeps his vow of silence. He says nothing to anyone about his doubt, and he doesn’t tell Margaret he loves her.

Of course, Faust is far too noble to listen to any of the banal advice the world might offer: “Just talk about it. Maybe it won’t cause a big stir. Maybe it’ll all turn out fine.” Hidden in that suggestion is a kind of comedy—any decent comic writer would spot it immediately. It’s the absurd idea that Faust might resemble the kind of people today who rush around pretending to have “wrestled with doubt”—flashing their credentials, saying things like, “I’ve doubted everything, see, I’ve got a diploma to prove it!” or “I once met a doubter while traveling!”—as if spiritual struggle were something you could collect like postcards.

Faust is too pure and too serious for all that. He doesn’t shuffle around in slippers. A person without an *infinite* passion is no ideal at all. But if someone *has* infinite passion, that alone has already saved them from becoming a joke. Faust stays silent to offer himself as a sacrifice—or he speaks, knowing it might upend everything.

But if he stays silent, ethics will condemn him. Ethics demands that we acknowledge the universal, and to acknowledge it is to *speak*. Ethics says: “Don’t protect the universal with silence. Do not shield it from truth out of pity.”

This is something we ought to remember before judging a doubter too harshly when he *does* speak. I don’t excuse it lightly, but what *matters* is how the struggle plays out inside the person.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Even if everything falls apart, a true doubter—one who, in good faith, speaks his truth and accidentally causes harm—is still infinitely better than those shallow dilettantes who nibble at ideas without ever understanding them. Ironically, *they* are usually the reason that doubt breaks out wildly in the first place.

If Faust *does* speak, then yes—he might disturb the world. But even if he doesn't, he will only find that out *afterward*—and the outcome never justifies the action when it comes to personal responsibility.

If the doubter remains silent on *his own responsibility*, then maybe he can act nobly—but along with all his other suffering, he'll now add a new spiritual burden. The universal (the ethical) will keep tormenting him, asking: “*Shouldn't you have spoken up? How can you be sure that it wasn't just secret pride that made you stay silent?*”

However, if the doubter becomes *the single individual*—who, as an individual, stands in an *absolute* relationship to the *absolute* (God)—then he can be *justified* in his silence. But to do that, he must acknowledge his doubt as a kind of *guilt*. In doing so, he enters the *paradox*—and when that happens, his doubt is *healed* (even if another kind of doubt may still arise).

Even the New Testament seems to recognize the legitimacy of such silence. There are even passages that suggest irony—if that irony is used to *hide the better part* of someone's soul. This kind of movement (keeping something sacred hidden) is a kind of irony. It's based on the idea that subjectivity (inwardness, individual relation to God) is higher than public reality or outward expression.

In our time, people want nothing to do with this. In general, we don't want to know anything about irony—at least not more than Hegel had to say about it. But ironically, Hegel didn't understand it very well, and he had a grudge against it. Our modern age has inherited that same bias, and maybe rightly so—it should be *cautious* with irony.

But listen to the *Sermon on the Mount*. It says: “*When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that people don't see that you're fasting.*” That's direct confirmation that *subjectivity is beyond outward appearance*, and even has the *right to conceal itself*. If only the people today who talk endlessly about “the idea of the congregation” would actually read the New Testament, maybe they'd encounter some *very different* ideas.

But now let's return to Abraham—how did he act? I haven't forgotten, and I hope you, the reader, will recall that the entire reason I went through the previous discussion was to crash headlong into this exact stumbling block. Not to make Abraham more understandable, but to

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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make it even clearer how *incomprehensible* he really is. As I said before, I can't understand Abraham—I can only *admire* him.

It was also noted earlier that none of the scenarios I described can be analogies for Abraham. I only explored them so they could, in their own realms, mark out the *border* of an unknown land. If there's any real analogy at all, it might be with *sin*—but that lies in a different category entirely. And sin is, in fact, *easier* to understand than Abraham.

So, what did Abraham do? He did not speak. He said nothing to Sarah, nothing to Eliezer, and nothing to Isaac. He walked right past all three “courts” of ethics—because for Abraham, the highest form of ethics was family life.

Aesthetics might allow—might even *require*—a person to remain silent if they knew that their silence would *save* someone else. But that already proves that Abraham doesn't belong in the aesthetic realm. His silence doesn't *save* Isaac. In fact, his entire task is to *sacrifice* Isaac for his own and for *God's* sake. This, from an aesthetic view, is deeply offensive. Aesthetics can understand sacrificing *yourself*, but not sacrificing *someone else* for *your own* purpose.

The aesthetic hero is silent—but he stays silent because *he wants to*. Ethics, on the other hand, condemns that silence—because it comes from a personal, accidental motive. If it's a human prediction or emotional calculation that makes someone keep silent, ethics sees that as wrong. Ethics demands a total commitment, a complete, open act—it demands disclosure.

The true *tragic* hero sacrifices himself and everything he has *for the sake of the universal*. His actions and his emotions belong to the universal, he's open and transparent, and for that, ethics claims him as its beloved son.

But Abraham doesn't fit that either. He does *nothing* for the universal—and he remains *hidden*.

And here is where we reach the *paradox*:

Either the individual—as an individual—*can* stand in an absolute relationship with the absolute (with God), and therefore the ethical is not the highest principle,

OR Abraham is lost. He is neither a tragic hero, nor an aesthetic one.

It might even seem that the paradox is the simplest thing of all—but I must emphasize: anyone who truly believes that clearly shows that he is not a *knight of faith*. Because the *pain* and the *anxiety*—that spiritual trial—is the only possible "justification" (even though, in a general sense, it's still not explainable). If you eliminate the paradox, you eliminate the whole ordeal—and the whole meaning.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Abraham stays silent—but not because he *won't* speak. It's because he *can't*. That's the source of his deep pain and anxiety. If I try to speak, but no one understands me, then I haven't really spoken—no matter how many words I use. That's Abraham's situation.

He can say everything—he could pour out his love for Isaac in the most beautiful language imaginable. But that's not what really weighs on him. What truly matters, what he *can't* say, is this: that he's going to sacrifice Isaac *because God is testing him*. And if he can't say *that* in a way others can understand, then he can't speak at all.

Normally, when we speak, it brings relief—it brings us back into shared human understanding, into the “universal.” But Abraham is locked out of that relief. No one could possibly understand what he's about to do. So even if they hear his words, they'll misunderstand his intentions.

This is a kind of suffering the *tragic hero* doesn't know. A tragic hero, like Agamemnon, at least has the consolation of being able to explain himself. He can make sure that every objection, every concern—from his wife, his daughter, the people around him—has been heard and answered. He gets to face the whole world head-on. And that struggle, with all its pain, still has some comfort in it.

But struggling with *yourself*? That's terrifying.

The tragic hero also gets to cry with others—he can mourn with those he hurts, and those tears bring some peace. But Abraham has no such comfort. His grief is silent and inexpressible. If he tried to explain himself—to give a final embrace, or say goodbye to the ones he loves—then what might happen? They would stop him. Sarah, Eliezer, Isaac—each would say, “Then why are you going through with this? Just don't do it.” And they might even end up thinking he's a fraud, a hypocrite, playing a cruel game with their emotions.

So Abraham doesn't speak. He *can't* speak any language that other people can understand. Even if he knew every human language, and everyone else did too, it wouldn't help. Because what he speaks is a *divine* language—a language that only God can understand. He speaks in *tongues*.

This kind of anguish—I can understand it. I can admire Abraham. And I'm not worried that people will read his story and then go out and try to be “the single individual” in some careless, reckless way. No—because I myself don't have the courage to do what Abraham did. If someone told me I could go further in life *only* by doing what Abraham did, I'd rather give it all up.

At any moment, Abraham could have stopped. He could have said, “This is just a spiritual trial; I misunderstood.” Then he could have spoken, and everyone would have understood him.

But the moment he did that—he would no longer *be* Abraham.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Abraham can't speak—because he can't say the one thing that would explain everything (in a way that others would actually understand): that what's happening is a test, and more than that, that *the ethical itself* is the temptation. A person in this situation has stepped outside the realm of the ethical entirely.

But even more, there's something else he can't say.

Earlier, I explained that Abraham makes *two* movements. First, he makes the infinite movement of resignation—he gives up Isaac completely. No one else can understand this, because it's a purely personal act. But second, Abraham also makes the movement of *faith*—and he does it *every moment*. That's his only comfort. He says to himself, "Still, this won't really happen. Or if it does, God will give me a new Isaac." That's faith *in virtue of the absurd*—believing in what's humanly impossible.

Now, the tragic hero's story ends after resignation. For example, Iphigenia accepts her father Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice her. She makes the infinite resignation, and now there is mutual understanding. She can comprehend Agamemnon, because what he's doing reflects the universal moral order.

But if Agamemnon had said something like: "Even though the gods demand your sacrifice, maybe they really don't—or maybe they'll return you to me," then Iphigenia wouldn't have understood him at all. If he had said this based on some human logic, she could have grasped it—but then it would prove he hadn't actually made the full leap of resignation. He wouldn't be a hero anymore. He would just be clinging to some superstition, and the whole story would collapse into absurdity.

So Abraham didn't speak. The only recorded words we have from him in this story are his answer to Isaac's question about where the lamb for the sacrifice is. Abraham replies: "*God himself will provide the lamb, my son.*"

Let's take a closer look at those words. If they didn't exist, something essential would be missing from the whole story. And if Abraham had said anything else, the story might have fallen apart.

I've often wondered whether a tragic hero should speak at the climactic moment—should he have "last words"? It depends on which sphere of life the hero belongs to—whether his life has spiritual significance or whether his suffering or actions are tied to something deeper.

Sure, a tragic hero might be able to say something in the final moment, just as any person might. But the real question is: *should* he? If his heroism is tied only to an external deed, then anything he says is just chatter—it weakens the moment. In those cases, it's better if he completes his act in silence.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Take Agamemnon, for instance. If he—not Calchas—had personally raised the knife to kill Iphigenia, and then tried to speak some final words, he would have diminished the power of the moment. The meaning of the act would already be perfectly clear to everyone. His story has no deeper connection to spirit—he's not trying to *teach* anything through it.

But if a hero's life is centered around the spiritual—if it's about the inner life and bearing witness—then he *must* say something at the end. Not just some formal words, but something essential that captures the meaning of his life. He doesn't just “go out” with words—he *completes* himself in them. If such a hero's story ends in suffering or death, he becomes immortal *in* that final word—whereas the ordinary tragic hero only becomes immortal *after* death.

Socrates can serve as an example. He was a *spiritual* or *intellectual* tragic hero. When his death sentence was announced, in that moment, *he had already died*. Anyone who doesn't realize that it takes the full power of the spirit to die—that a hero always dies *before* he physically dies—won't get very far in understanding life.

As a *hero*, Socrates had to remain calm and composed. But as a *spiritual hero*, something more was demanded of him: he had to *complete himself*, spiritually, in that final moment. He couldn't merely focus on showing stoic control in the face of death, as other tragic heroes might. Instead, he had to make that transition immediately—his spirit had to transcend the moment of death so that he could speak from a place beyond it. If, in that critical moment, Socrates had just gone silent, it would have weakened the meaning of his entire life. People would have begun to doubt whether his irony and inner strength were truly cosmic forces—or just cleverness, a trick that couldn't sustain him when it really mattered.

These observations, of course, don't apply directly to Abraham—as if we might imagine a perfectly fitting final quote from him to sum up everything. Still, something similar does apply: Abraham, as the father of faith, must also *consummate* himself in that last moment—not by quietly drawing the knife, but with some kind of *final word* that expresses the full depth of his spiritual stance. Because he is the father of faith, his life carries an absolute spiritual significance, and that needs to be expressed.

I honestly can't imagine what Abraham would have to say *before* he says it. Maybe after hearing it, I could grasp it—maybe I could even understand *Abraham himself* a bit more through it. But that wouldn't bring me any closer to *being* like him than I was before.

If Socrates had not left us a final word, I might have been able to imagine what he would've said. Or, if not me, then a poet could have created something worthy of it. But with Abraham? No poet, no matter how inspired, can bridge that gap. Abraham stands entirely apart.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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Before I take a closer look at Abraham's final words, I need to point out how difficult it is for Abraham to say anything at all. The deep distress and anxiety of his situation, as I've explained earlier, lies precisely in his *silence*—Abraham *can't* speak.

So, asking him to say something now is almost a contradiction. If he were to speak now, at the critical moment, it would only mean that he had abandoned the paradox—that he had backed out of it. But if Abraham does that, then he's no longer Abraham, and everything that came before would be meaningless.

Imagine if, at the decisive moment, Abraham turned to Isaac and said, "It's you who must be sacrificed." That would be a failure. Because if Abraham had been able to speak that clearly, then he should have done so much earlier. His failure would lie in not having had the strength and presence of mind to fully process and accept his pain ahead of time—instead pushing it away, and now being overwhelmed by it. At that point, his action would no longer reflect faith or greatness—it would be a kind of tragic psychological collapse, but not even heroic.

But we *do* have a last word from Abraham, and as far as I can understand the paradox, I think this brief statement reflects everything about Abraham's spiritual position.

Most importantly: he doesn't *say* anything. And *in not saying anything*, he says everything. His answer to Isaac is a kind of *irony*—because irony is when you say something, but don't really say what you mean.

Isaac's question assumes Abraham *knows* the answer. If Abraham had said, "I don't know," that would've been a lie—because he *did* know that God had commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, and he *was* ready and willing to carry it out.

But he couldn't say that either—because even though he knows it, he can't explain it. So instead, Abraham replies, "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." In that one sentence, we see the two spiritual movements described earlier: first, Abraham has given Isaac up in *infinite resignation*, accepting that he must lose him. But then, at the same time, Abraham believes *by faith*—in the absurd possibility—that God *will* somehow give Isaac back.

So he doesn't lie. But he also doesn't tell the full truth. He speaks, but in a language no one else can understand.

This becomes even more intense when you remember: Abraham isn't just a witness to the sacrifice—he's *the one who must carry it out*. If God had simply told Abraham to bring Isaac to the mountain and then said, "I will strike him down with lightning myself," Abraham could honestly say, "I don't know what will happen." But that's *not* what happens. God tells Abraham *to sacrifice Isaac himself*. So Abraham *must* know what he's about to do.

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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If he *doesn't* know that, then he hasn't made the movement of resignation. And if that's the case, then he isn't really Abraham. He'd just be someone dithering in indecision, speaking in vague riddles because he hasn't made up his mind. But that kind of uncertainty is just a parody of true faith—not the real thing.

Once again it becomes clear: you *can* understand Abraham—but only in the same way you can understand a paradox. For me personally, maybe I can understand Abraham in this limited sense—but I also fully realize that I don't have the courage to speak like him, just as I don't have the courage to act like him. But that doesn't mean what Abraham did is somehow lowly or insignificant—on the contrary, it's the only true miracle.

And now, how does the modern world judge the tragic hero? It says he was great, and it admires him. And every generation, like a kind of noble jury, sits in judgment of the generations before and agrees: "He was great." But when it comes to Abraham—*no one* can really understand him.

And yet—what did Abraham do, exactly? He stayed faithful to his love. But someone who truly loves God doesn't need tears, doesn't need admiration. He forgets the suffering in the love itself—so completely forgets it that you wouldn't even suspect it was ever there... unless God himself remembered it. For God sees in secret, he knows our anguish, he counts every tear, and he forgets nothing.

So, either this is true: that there *is* a paradox, that the single individual—as a single individual—can stand in an absolute relationship with the Absolute...

Or else Abraham is lost.

Epilogue

Once, when the price of spices dropped, some merchants threw a few loads of cargo overboard at sea to drive the price back up. It was a deception—maybe even a necessary or forgivable one. But is that the kind of trick we now need in the world of the spirit? Are we so sure that we've already reached the highest point possible that all that's left is to pretend we haven't, just so we have something to do in the meantime?

Is *that* the kind of self-deception our generation needs—to train itself into a kind of spiritual performance? Or aren't we already experts in the art of self-deception? What we need instead is a sincere and honest seriousness, one that bravely and truthfully points to what really matters. A seriousness that protects and honors the great human tasks—not to make people rush to “achieve” the highest, but to keep these tasks fresh, beautiful, inviting to everyone, and still difficult and worthy of awe. Because noble souls are only inspired by things that are difficult.

Whatever else one generation can teach the next, the *truly human* things can never be inherited. Each generation has to start from scratch. It doesn't get new or easier tasks than those that came before—unless the previous generation gave up, lost its way, and tricked itself. What's truly human is passion, and that's how each generation fully understands itself and others.

No generation has ever learned to love by studying the previous one. Everyone starts from the beginning. No later generation has a shorter path than the ones before it. And if a generation tries to go further instead of remaining with the true task—say, with love—then it's just fooling itself with empty nonsense.

But the greatest human passion is *faith*. And in that, too, no generation starts ahead of the one before. Every generation begins again from the beginning. And none go further—if the previous generation stayed true to its task and didn't abandon it. If someone finds that exhausting, they don't really have the right to complain; the task is theirs now. They don't get to judge that the task was already done just because others worked on it before them—unless they arrogantly pretend to sit in the place that belongs only to the Spirit that governs the world, and which alone has the patience not to grow tired.

If a generation starts thinking like that, it becomes twisted—and then it's no surprise that the whole world seems twisted to them too. After all, no one ever thought the world was more messed up than the tailor from the old fairy tale, who, still alive, climbed up to Heaven and looked down at the world from there.

Once a generation focuses only on its task—which is the highest task—it can't get tired, because the task alone is enough to fill a human life. Think of children on a holiday. If they blow through

FEAR AND TREMBLING

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all their games before noon and then get bored, asking, “Can’t someone think of a new game?”—does that mean they’re more advanced than other children who could stretch those same games out all day? Or doesn’t it show that they’re missing something I’d call “a lovable seriousness about playing”?

Faith is the highest passion a human being can have. Maybe there are many in every generation who never even reach that point—but no one ever goes beyond it. Whether many in our own time never find it, I don’t claim to know. I can only speak for myself: I don’t hide the fact that it might take me a long time to get there. But I also won’t pretend that faith is a trivial thing—something like a childhood illness you just grow out of. No, I know better than to cheapen it like that.

Still, even someone who doesn’t reach faith will find that life gives him enough to do—and if he takes those other tasks seriously and honestly, then his life won’t be wasted, even if he doesn’t rise to the very highest.

But for the one who *does* come to faith (whether he’s a genius or a simple soul makes no difference), he doesn’t stop there. He doesn’t feel like he’s finished. In fact, he’d be offended if someone said to him, “Well, now you’ve arrived.” That’s like telling someone who’s deeply in love, “You’ve arrived at love”—as if it were a destination. He’d answer, “What are you talking about? I haven’t arrived at anything. My *whole life* is inside this love.” He doesn’t “move on” to something else. When he finds this love of God—this faith—it becomes *everything*.

But still, the urge to “go further” is as old as the world. Heraclitus the Obscure, who wrote in riddles and stored his work in the Temple of Artemis—because he considered his ideas his armor in life—famously said, “*You can’t step into the same river twice.*”

But then came one of his students, who wanted to “go further.” And he added: “*You can’t even step into it once.*”

Poor Heraclitus—having such a student! That “improvement” wasn’t progress, it was a step backward. The student turned Heraclitus’s insight about change into the Eleatic idea that *nothing ever moves*. And yet he thought he was being a faithful disciple—just someone who went further. Not back.