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TEACHING WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING:  
THE TRIAL OF ABRAHAM, THE READER, AND THE PROFESSOR

*What, then, is education? I believed it is the course the individual goes through in order to catch up with himself, and the person who will not go through this course is not much helped by being born in the most enlightened age.*  
-Johannes de Silentio<sup>1</sup>

*Is it not as if an author wrote 166 folio volumes and the reader read and read...but does not discover that the meaning of this enormous work lies in the reader himself...?*  
-Johannes Climacus<sup>2</sup>

Søren Kierkegaard's classic book, *Fear and Trembling* (1843), begins with a reflection on the present condition of what one might call the marketplace of ideas. The preface opens with the declaration, "Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas our age stages a veritable clearance sale."<sup>3</sup> The way of thinking that emerges out of the marketplace is one in which answers are mass-produced. Philosophical positions are presented as products that can be had on the cheap and the processes out of which these positions are forged are obscured. The preface concludes by making a direct connection

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*, in Vol. 6 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, eds., Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: A Mimical-Pathetical-Dialectical Compilation: An Existential Contribution*, by Johannes Climacus, Vol. 12 of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 1:247.

<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 5. Translation slightly altered.

between the systematic form of thinking that was fashionable during that time and a recent breakthrough in transportation technology, the horse-drawn omnibus.<sup>4</sup> The connection drawn here seems to be more significant than a rhetorical trivialization of a certain brand of philosophy by aligning it with the instrumental domain of the economy. To draw such a stark divide between the theoretical and the practical is to institute the very form of thinking that is being called into question here. Rather, what seems to be at stake are competing forms of life that are formed through specific practices, technologies, and relationships.

The marketplace, then, is not just a metaphor, but a communal domain in which practices, desires, and identities are mutually formed. In the context of *Fear and Trembling*, the marketplace is a space that transforms how people think of themselves and the practices that they are willing to pursue. The task of thinking is re-directed away from an existential and inter-relational space toward a mechanistic one that has the aim of producing more knowledge, so as to add to its systematicity, efficiency, and reach. Like the shift from a handmade craft to a mass-produced product, *what* a product is carries primary importance, as processes of formation (or *how* something is pursued) become standardized, minimized, and virtually irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> For example, the form of writing is made subservient to the information that it communicates, as the expectation is that a work of philosophy or theology “can be conveniently skimmed during the after-dinner nap.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, “every assistant professor, tutor, and student” moves beyond the difficulties of doubt, faith, or trust and the tasks that accompany them, crossing “out passion in order to serve science.”<sup>7</sup>

I confess that sometimes when I enter the classroom, I share the sentiment that opens *Fear and Trembling*. I feel as though I am there to sell the wares of philosophy and theology. While I am often unsure if my students are willing to pay even the cheapest of prices for these products, I do not think that the fault lies in them. The consumerist mindset is not simply invading the university from without, in the form of a new generation of pupils. Rather, I feel compelled to acknowledge that this problem often emerges by means of a certain framing of the classroom, the practices that come to shape it, and in the quality of the wares that are being offered. I often find myself presenting the mass-produced answers of philosophical and doctrinal systems, without much regard to the practices and forms of living out of which they emerged. Furthermore, I sometimes do so in a way that is focused on their easy and cheap communication and distribution. While such abstract accounts of philosophy and theology might fail to directly engage the daily concerns of my students’ lives, these abstract products too often conform to the parameters of the marketplace that vies for their hearts and minds.

My own fear and trembling in the face of such prospects does not, however, lead to the conclusion that the practices of philosophy and theology are futile or worthless. Insofar as they

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5, 7.

conform to a calculative, corporate, and businesslike set of expectations and activities, then these pedagogical exercises do seem to be worth very little. If they are, alternatively, shaped with a different set of hopes and practices, then they may begin to cultivate an alternative set of values. Just as the ubiquity of unhealthy food does not foreclose the possibility of nourishing sustenance, the widespread practice of certain pedagogies should not eliminate the possibility of alternative exercises. Our food is unhealthy because it is cultivated in broken environments, it is twisted in misdirected processes, and it is consumed in thoughtless ways.<sup>8</sup> While the crisis of education does not seem to be as extreme as that facing our economies of food, it is a problem that demands a similarly complex response. We should not stop short in just questioning the relationships and practices that constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge. Our inquiry should be widened to consider and transform the apparatuses and forms of life that have placed thinking on this assembly line.

The humanities, especially philosophy and theology, would likely object to Kierkegaard's accusation that their mode of thinking has been caught up in the inclinations and instrumentality of the marketplace. One might note that it was precisely with these forms of coercion in mind that Kant argued for academic freedom. In his profoundly influential *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), Kant carved out an autonomous space for academic pursuits in the university by distinguishing its theoretical discourse from discourses that had practical force. In the most general terms he did so by distinguishing between the higher faculties (medicine, law, and theology)—which are centered upon utility, and which are responsible to the state—and the lower faculties (philosophy, understood as all the sciences)—which are responsible only to truth and reason.<sup>9</sup> In drawing this stark line, Kant seems to have imagined that the discourse of the scholar takes place outside a situated, engaged, and active space.

In this vision, the division between thought and action encompasses the pedagogical activities of the professor. In Kant's account of teaching ethics and formative practice (ascetics) in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), he limits this pedagogy to the task of taking away the inclinations and teleological thinking that impedes the free exercise of reason. In an imagined exchange between a teacher and a pupil, Kant models a form of teaching that grants the classroom a largely negative moment. The teacher conveys to the student: "Your own reason teaches you what you have to do and directly commands you to do it."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a complex and insightful theological treatment of these issues see Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties in Religion and Rational Theology*, eds. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 248, 249. As Jacques Derrida has noted, the architecture that this text outlines hinges on a distinction between language that deals with "truth" and language that deals with "action," between "theoretical statements" and "performatives." Jacques Derrida "Mochlos, or the Conflict of the Faculties" in *The Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 98.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals in Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 594.

While these divisions produce a certain kind of academic freedom, I wonder if too much was lost in the process. Has the limitation of the philosophical and theological to the theoretical taken away the degree to which these *disciplines* are not just fields of knowledge, but are *disciplines* that can bring about religious, social, and moral transformation? Even if one grants the claim that these disciplines are free from the coercion of the market, it seems possible that this freedom was bought at the price of limiting the capacity for philosophical and theological pedagogy to transform the domain of the everyday. I find it telling that along with the rhetoric of freedom that accompanies this division between the theoretical and the instrumental in Kant, there is the repeated connection made between the divisions of the disciplines of knowledge and the division of labor.<sup>11</sup>

*Fear and Trembling* does not just open with a criticism of the simultaneous quotidian uselessness and hidden instrumentality of modern thinking. There are alternative forms of thought and action that are appealed to from the beginning and throughout this text. In contrast to the contemporary consumer of the cheap goods of philosophical doubt and certainty, Kierkegaard appeals to the ancient Greeks. Doubt was not something that was overcome in an afternoon, but for the ancients it was “assumed to be a task for a whole lifetime.”<sup>12</sup> He does not stop with the Greeks and doubt, but goes on to speak of those who had faith, a similarly lifelong pursuit. Faith for “the tried and tested oldster” was not a set of hardened conclusions and unjustified certainties, but faith was a matter of ongoing struggle in which one is disciplined by “anxiety and trembling.”<sup>13</sup> Faith and doubt, philosophy and theology, were not products that could be bought and sold with a disregard for the manner in which they were forged. They were forms of life, practices and passions, that could only be opened in relationship. In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard seeks to reawaken the difficulty of these practices by frustrating the contemporary commodification of thinking, and by transforming ancient philosophical and theological practice.

This essay examines the transformative pedagogy that Kierkegaard pursues in response to these dilemmas in *Fear and Trembling*. I couple this examination with reflections on and proposals for how one might teach this text in the contemporary classroom. In the first three sections I propose an alternative interpretation of *Fear and Trembling*, by focusing on forms, figures, and the manner in which it deploys and transforms ancient philosophical exercises. In the fourth section, I reflect on the ways in which this radical pedagogy might be extended to a treatment of this book in the contemporary classroom, paying special attention to the exercise of putting Abraham on Trial. I propose that the text and the classroom are mutually illuminating

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<sup>11</sup> Kant begins *The Conflict of the Faculties* saying that it is *not* a bad idea to “handle the entire content of learning (really, the thinkers devoted to it) *like a factory*, so to speak—by a division of labor.” Kant, *Conflict*, 241. In the *Groundwork* he refers to any philosophy that does not observe a “division of labor” as “the greatest barbarism.” Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 7.

as they highlight an alternative radical pedagogy whereby philosophy and theology do not simply formulate concepts, but cultivate capabilities.<sup>14</sup>

### THE PROBLEM WITH PROBLEMATA

*Fear and Trembling* is a suitable title for a book that is ostensibly about Genesis 22—the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac. The feeling and reaction of fear and trembling quite likely describe both the state of a father who faces such a horrible test, and the professor who assigns the text and tries to cope with the religious sanction of terrifying violence. This story and its legacy confront interpreters and teachers with distinct and difficult problems. For this reason, it should not be much of a surprise that anthologies, professors, and interpreters have focused on the sections of the book that Kierkegaard labeled “Problemata.”<sup>15</sup> In these sections, Kierkegaard (or more accurately his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio) seems to address the disease that one likely feels with this particular situation through the formulation of a different set of concepts—like “faith,” “the paradox,” or “the absolute relation with the absolute.” Leaving out the other varied and episodic parts of *Fear and Trembling* that precede these sections, the contemporary teacher is likely tempted to outline arguments that solve or address the problems that the story presents. Perhaps after placing the text within its historical trajectory, explaining Kant and Hegel’s respective theories of morality and ethics, the professor might seek to outline what Kierkegaard means by “faith.”

The first *problema*, for example, seeks to respond to the question: “Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?” The ethical, here, is defined in terms of the social order that applies to everyone, the universal. The integrity of the ethical order is built upon the demand that the individual understand herself as a member of the social. If one were to step outside of this order, one would need to rectify this transgression by repently “surrendering as the single individual in the universal.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore one could render this question as: Is there an end that is greater than our social and ethical demands that would justify their suspension? Or more specifically: Was there a higher purpose behind Abraham’s activity that would justify an action that we would ethically label as attempted murder?

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<sup>14</sup> I have made a similar argument about *Repetition*, the companion piece to *Fear and Trembling* that was published on the same day, focusing on the resources that it provides for a certain kind of ethical instruction. T. Wilson Dickinson, “Repeating, Not Simply Recollecting, *Repetition*: On Kierkegaard’s Ethical Exercises,” *Sophia* (2011) 50:657–675

<sup>15</sup> See for example *Philosophy: the Classic Readings*, ed. David Edward Cooper and Peter S. Fosl (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, ed. Gordon Marino; *Philosophic Classics: From Plato to Derrida* ed. Forest E. Baird and Walter Kaufman (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2010). Amy Laura Hall further corroborates this point noting that the graduate students that she has taught were introduced to the text in this manner “Self-Deception, Confusion, and Salvation in *Fear and Trembling* with *Works of Love*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28.1, no. 8 (2000), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard *Fear and Trembling*, 54.

Silentio answers this question by proposing that: "Faith is namely this paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal." Faith is the category that justifies the suspension of the ethical. He goes on to declare that this must be the case, or else the *result* would be the condemnation of Abraham: "If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost."<sup>17</sup> It is the category of faith that stands outside of the demands of the social that justifies Abraham's act and calms those of us who are limited to ethics and trembling with fear. In these formulations, Silentio seems to have offered us a solution to one of our problems.

Silentio goes on to write that the position of faith, of the single individual, "cannot be mediated, for all mediation takes place only by virtue of the universal; it is and remains for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought."<sup>18</sup> The author with the name John the Silent repeats this point a few pages later: "As soon as I speak, I express the universal, and if I do not do so, no one can understand me."<sup>19</sup> Abraham cannot speak. Faith cannot be thought. And yet the Silent author has spoken of the concept and category of faith. This category allows us to take a singular case and justify it in universal or general terms.<sup>20</sup>

This is the opposite of what the category is supposed to do. It is supposed to preserve the singular against the universal. Instead, it seems to replace the singular with an alternative general category. Silentio has already described this dynamic, in the "Preliminary Expectoration" to the *Problemata*, in terms of substitution. Someone might try to understand the story by substituting Isaac (a singular individual) for "the best" (a general concept). This would translate this specific situation into a universal rule or an easily digested cliché: "The great thing was that he [Abraham] loved God in such a way that he was willing to offer him the best [Isaac]." Silentio warns that such a rendering of the story effaces the singularity of Isaac, omits the anxiety of Abraham, and likely leads its hearer to passive good conscience. He writes, "Mentally and orally we homologize Isaac and the best, and the contemplator can very well smoke his pipe while cogitating, and the listener may very well stretch out his legs comfortably."<sup>21</sup> A similar substitution seems to be at work in the proposed answer to the first problem. The problem, then, does not seem to be solved, but it is compounded. These alternative concepts ("faith," "the paradox," etc.) do not reconcile the problem, but they contest the very parameters through which it is being pursued.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>20</sup> David Wills notes that the English translation of "*de Almene*" as "universal" is a bit misleading, as the Danish term is probably closer to the English "the general." Translators note in Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 28

<sup>22</sup> For the reader who is familiar with *Fear and Trembling* and objects that I have homologized two different orders—the universal order of human relationships and the absolute order of the God relationship—I would respond that while the *what* of "faith" or the "paradox" may claim this difference, that the *how* of these terms and the way that Silentio is using them in these sections returns them to the universal.

I propose that this compounding of the problem does not show some sort of unthought error on the part of Kierkegaard, but highlights that this book is not centered upon conceptual formulation. It seems possible that the reason that so many interpreters and teachers have focused on these sections is due to *the way* that they ask questions and frame problems and not because they are the theoretical heart of the book. They attract attention because they parallel the practices of reasoning and argumentation that dominate scholarship. These sections do not so much articulate Kierkegaard's *theory*, as they highlight the *practices* of a certain kind of inquiry. It is ironic that these sections have been focused upon, as the self-contesting character of these formulations highlights a deeper criticism of, and not a conforming to, these pedagogical and intellectual practices.

It does not seem to be an accident that these sections were framed with the heading "*Problemata*." While this term might appear as a sign of pedantry to contemporary readers, for Kierkegaard's contemporaries who were classically trained, such references might have had deep associations.<sup>23</sup> In this term, one can hear the echo of a simultaneously pedagogical and theoretical practice of the ancient Greeks. In *Topics*, Aristotle characterizes *problemata* as a particular mode of dialectic that involves an investigation about a subject on which there is significant disagreement, especially between the majority and the wise.<sup>24</sup> The setting of this kind of inquiry is largely pedagogical, as its purpose is more a matter of the training that is received from the process rather than the result that is rendered from a solution.<sup>25</sup> The body of literature that bears the title *Problemata*, which was written in the name of Aristotle, follows a method that is not unlike that pursued in the *problemata* of *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>26</sup> In these classroom exercises, particular situations are explained by universals. As Ann Blair describes, "*Problemata* are one of the ways of attaching particulars to the universals of *scientia* developed in systematic treatises, through commonsensical but often sophisticated reasoning."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> On the curriculum of Kierkegaard's primary education at the Borgerdyd School see Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Topica* 104a.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Topica*, 159a, 101a. This genre, perhaps not incidentally, exercised a great influence on pedagogical and intellectual practices of scholastic theologians (particularly in the practices of *quaestio disputata*) and early modern natural philosophy. Brian Lawn, *The Rise and Decline of the Scholastic 'Quaestio Disputata' With Special Emphasis on its Use in the Teaching of Medicine and Science* (Salem: Brill Academic Publishers, 1993) and Ann Blair, "The Problemata as a Natural Philosophical Genre," in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Nancy G. Siraisi (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> There is a very indirect citation of Aristotle's *Problemata* in the text. Silentio cites a sentence from Seneca ("No great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness." Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 106. Seneca attributes this to Aristotle. The citation actually comes from Book XXX (953a10) of the *Problemata*. Aristotle, *Problems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 155.

<sup>27</sup> Blair, "The Problemata," 175.

Kierkegaard's posthumously published "Notebook 13," written in 1842-43, contains a section entitled *Problematum* in which he wrestles with what might be termed traditional philosophical problems. He does not reach tidy resolutions in these exercises, but he unravels the very basis for answering them. To the question: "What is a category?" Kierkegaard does not appeal to the traditional definitions given by philosophers, but he notes that, insofar as he knows, neither Hegel nor Aristotle have provided a definition for such. Though so much hinges on this term, it is left "to the virtuosity of the reader to make the most difficult [move], to gather multiplicity into the energy of one thought."<sup>28</sup> The problem, "What is the universally human and is there anything universally human?" does not receive an answer but more questions. He asks, "Is each human being an individuum, and in that sense, each unlike the next, like Leibnitz's leaves?"<sup>29</sup> In asking this question Kierkegaard articulates the tension between the proposed *what* of singularity and the *how* that is necessarily general: humans are "unlike" one another, and we understand this by saying they are "like" Leibnitz's leaves. This tension is kept open as the problem is not closed off, but it is re-opened in the form of the interrogative.

Interestingly, Book XXVII of pseudo-Aristotle's *Problematum*, on "Problems Connected with Fear and Courage," asks a number of questions that seem to haunt *Fear and Trembling*. Though Kierkegaard's chosen title is quite likely a citation of the Apostle Paul's charge to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phi 2.12), the opening question of the aforementioned section from pseudo-Aristotle also seems to be a viable secondary reference, as he asks: "Why do the frightened tremble?"<sup>30</sup> While the answers that pseudo-Aristotle gives to this and other questions in this particular *problema* are largely naturalistic accounts of the effects of heat and moisture in the body, some of pseudo-Aristotle's observations seem to be relevant to Silentio's reflections. He observes that in war some men tremble not because of fear but because of courage, that the city does not praise the virtues that are the best but those that suit its needs, and that while pain causes people to cry out, fear brings the voice to silence.<sup>31</sup>

What is most striking about the parallel between these *problematum* is the degree to which this method seems to be at odds with the chosen problems of *Fear and Trembling*. The deployment of the ancient method of the *problema* is not one that is entirely successful in this text. While faith and the story of Abraham is a matter in which there is disagreement between the majority, those who say they are wise, and those who are wise, it is not a matter that can be resolved with universal categories. On this account faith is, at best, a category that negates categorization. This way of approaching the problem does not seem to have rendered a solution, but it seems to have revealed the inadequacy of this kind of an approach.

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<sup>28</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Journals and Notebooks: Volume 3 Notebooks 1-15*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay et. al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 404.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Problematum* 947b12/Aristotle, *Problems*, 2: 117.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Problematum* 948a, b.

What is at stake is less the systematic formulation of alternative categories, than the existential situation of those who are facing this problem. These problems seem to be less about what they are saying than how they are said, and who is framing inquiry in this way. This is difficult for readers to see because the practices and forms of living that surround this kind of approach are invisible due to their proximity. We do not see the frames, apparatuses, and activities that surround this way of pursuing questions and resolving problems because they are all too familiar.

### **EXERCISING THE READER**

While the case of Abraham seems to be the object of concern, when one pays attention to the form of the text and the self-contesting character of its concepts another figure comes into focus: the reader. In the case of the first problem, Silentio has a specific kind of reader in mind—the assistant professor. Toward the end of the section he notes that certain people are unable to deal with the anxiety that comes with the life of faith. Consequently, they distance themselves from it on the grounds that they are seeking sound judgment. Assistant professors, figures who are much maligned in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, try to resolve the offense (*skandalon*) that might come from a difficult situation by attempting to gain a longer view on an issue so as to look at the results. These academics separate themselves from "the earthquakes of existence" with gaps of centuries and millennia, evaluating heroes and the past from their armchair. Looking at the results puts one in the position of being a passive spectator. Silentio laments that "[i]f one who is to act wants to judge himself by the result, he will never begin."<sup>32</sup> In this way, our curiosity about results serves to insulate us from the anxiety and the distress of faith.

In this *problema*, "faith" is turned into a result. It is a category that resolves a problem. The reader and teacher can judge Abraham from a distance and avoid the fear and trembling with which they began. This largely conceptual account of faith is less of a solution to the problem and more the problem itself. This is the faith of the "assistant professor" who craves distance and resolution, and in so doing, suspends passion and action.

Coupling the conceptual with the existential and the active (the "what" with the "who" and the "how") does not render the former meaningless. It, instead, highlights the manner in which this text, like Aristotle's exercises, is equally if not more focused on the cultivation of capabilities as the communication of information. In the case of this problem, it can be read as an exercise that frustrates the reader's expectations that philosophical texts can provide simple answers that suspend the activity of the reader. This frustration leads the reader to question the practices and protocols of these ways of thinking and to cultivate the passion and patience that are required in the face of difficult decisions.

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<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 63.

This pedagogy is consistent with how Kierkegaard imagined himself lecturing in the classroom, when he considered applying for a teaching position at Denmark's pastoral seminary in 1847.<sup>33</sup> In a series of notes and drafts for possible lectures, Kierkegaard explicitly challenges the practices that accompany the scientific and scholarly reduction of ethical and religious instruction, looking at the ways in which the frames of journals and the conventions of lectures limit intellectual and religious practice.<sup>34</sup> He declares that because everyone is so focused on the objective communication of knowledge (or *what* they have to say), philosophers, dogmaticians, and pastors all disregard a pervasive "enormous apparatus" that "practically overwhelms them."<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Kierkegaard imagines himself as "a kind of teacher in the ancient style" who would sometimes convert "the lecture to conversation."<sup>36</sup> This difference between pedagogical styles parallels a contrast between "the communication of knowledge [and] the communication of capability."<sup>37</sup>

In this draft of introductory lectures, Kierkegaard does not eschew the conceptual but he seeks to harness its energy through self-contesting concepts that stretch the listener across time rather than communicating a self-present content. The listener, then, is placed within the temporality of an active conversation in her minds, rather than staying in the position of passive recipient. Kierkegaard says that he will deploy ideas in such a way that they force the listener to hold them simultaneously with previous ideas. He proposes that "the lecture will constantly, if I dare say so, be haunted by the memory of what was said on other points; the reflections will constantly traverse the points at issue in order to call to mind the past and the future."<sup>38</sup> This keeps "the listener aware," but will probably make her wary. In so doing, the lecture will cultivate attention, demand that the listener remain active, and frustrate the expectation of easy answers.

The *problemata* demand a similar kind of critical dialogue within the reader, as they offer her ongoing temptations. Concepts and categories that allay the need for fear and trembling are dangled in front of the reader. As soon as one is lulled into this comforting position, a number of questions seem to arise. If the paradox of faith cannot be mediated, then what is the status of Silentio's description? If Abraham had to keep silent, what should we do with all of the chatter spewing forth from Silentio? Are we supposed to be delivered from uncertainty, or is this a necessary part of the life of faith? All of this is brought to a head in the repetition of a number of statements that warn us that if faith is not the paradox that the singular individual is higher than the universal; or if the individual does not stand in an absolute relation to the absolute,

<sup>33</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Vol. 1, Eds. Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, and Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 267-308. In these lectures Kierkegaard draws repeated connections between this pedagogical style and his pseudonymous works.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 294-95, 302.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 302

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 300.

then faith never existed and Abraham is lost. The demand to decide whether Abraham is lost or faith exists (or is understood and mediated) builds to its crescendo as these statements conclude both the second and the third *problema*.<sup>39</sup>

It seems as though Silentio has called the reader into his court proceedings and asked her to make a decision: "Is there a paradox? Is the paradox something that makes sense, and that can be understood? If this is so, then is Abraham made acceptable to everyone? Can we understand Abraham on the grounds of the paradox?" These questions seem to build as we await a verdict. In our heads we might think, "Abraham is the hero, certainly he is right. Isn't this what the book is about, Abraham's statuesque and heroic stance on the top of Mount Moriah, clutching a knife?" Or is it? Does Abraham make faith understandable? Does he make the journey for us? Does he make the movement of passion something that we can enter into with certainty? The reader, who is ostensibly putting Abraham on trial in the *problemata*, finds herself with the tables turned, as she is on trial. The reader is given three opportunities to bring Abraham into conformity with an ethical dilemma, to take on the position of the assistant professor, and to deny the path of faith in fear and trembling. These self contesting elements of the text place the reader in the midst of decision rather than abstracting her from it.

Attending to the forms and exercises that confront the reader of *Fear and Trembling* allows us to see the manner in which it challenges and transforms practices of inquiry rather than simply providing an alternative theoretical account. This is not to say that I am rejecting the validity or accuracy of more formal or conceptual readings of this text. Rather I am concerned about the practices that they pursue and the pedagogy that follows. For example, in Hent de Vries' nuanced account of *Fear and Trembling*, he locates the work in Kierkegaard's larger project of "a fundamental rethinking of our common understanding of the *premises* and *concept* of sociality and individual consciousness, intersubjectivity and subjectivity, externality and inwardness, immanence and transcendence." So as to follow this line of thought, he proposes that the reader "pay homage, once more, to the basic *tenets*" of Kierkegaard's writings.<sup>40</sup> Characterizing Kierkegaard's work in these terms, as undergirded by premises and formulating tenets seems to place it within the very frame that the *problemata* are contesting. It presumes that this text is concerned with giving a general, universal, or formal account of how things are, so that we can come to understand particular and singular situations. Even more, it enacts an interpretative operation that peels away the artifice of form, figure, image, and practice so as to reveal an underlying position or claim. This claim, then, can be *applied* to practice, to relationships, but it is abstracted from any such dynamism itself.

By contrast, I want to propose that the frames, forms, and figures of *Fear and Trembling* are part of a larger pedagogy. Kierkegaard does not rethink these concepts merely by means of a novel formulation of content, but also through a diverse deployment of intellectual practice.

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<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 81, 120.

<sup>40</sup> Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 160. Emphasis added.

Therefore, these texts do not simply articulate theories that might later be applied to practical situations, but they carry out a diverse set of exercises that are engaged in a transformative praxis. *Fear and Trembling* is less an account of the structures that determine the conditions of possibility. It is more of an interactive scaffolding that conditions the possibilities and the potentialities of the reader.<sup>41</sup>

The role of the professor who dares to teach or write on *Fear and Trembling*, then, is less that of the expert and more of the facilitator. While the expert brings *clarity* to the text by making its figures and artifice *transparent*, the facilitator focuses on the relational space of helping students encounter the text and the passions that it evokes. This later role will undoubtedly still involve providing background, schematizations, diagrams, and commentary, but the end of these practices will not be proper representation. They will, instead, be directed toward preparation for existential engagement and personal evaluation. Furthermore, the insights of the classroom are not merely matters that might then be applied to a practical world, but the facilitator must acknowledge that the classroom has a formative and practical valence itself. This alternative approach is, admittedly, much less controlled and its outcomes are uncertain. These are prospects that leave teachers, especially myself, at least a little frightened.

### **EXHORTING THE READER**

In the section entitled “Exordium,” Silentio provides four different sketches of the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac. All of this dramatic activity may tempt the reader to take the position of a spectator in relation to this classic tale, but Abraham is not the main focus of the section. The first sentence of this “Exordium” reads: “Once upon a time there was a man who as a child had

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<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that ostensibly formal or abstract accounts are not carrying out performances that parallel Kierkegaard's. While John D. Caputo characterizes Silentio's contribution as being a “structural” account with alternative “jewgreek concepts,” he also engages in his own radical pedagogy by rewriting and parodying sections of *Fear and Trembling*. John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 107, 133, 139-46. Similarly in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida generalizes the case of Abraham and Kierkegaard's account of such to the aporetic structure of responsibility. Through our response to the singular other, like Abraham, we are all forced to sacrifice our innumerable responsibilities to others and any universal structure that might dictate a response. In a memorable example, Derrida proposes that every time he feeds his singular cat, he is making a choice not to feed the other starving cats in the world, not to mention other humans. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 71. He writes that “[t]ranslated into this extraordinary story, the truth is shown to possess the very structure of what occurs every day. Through its paradox it speaks of the responsibility required at every moment for every man and every woman” (78). In this very formulation, however, Derrida has performed the central tension of this problem, rather than simply describing it. By moving from the singular (the extraordinary story) to the structure of everyday occurrence, Derrida has effaced its singularity. He has taken the reader into the middle of the aporia, rather than giving her a safe distance from which to observe it. In this way he repeats the pedagogy of *Fear and Trembling*, that “we must always start over” (80). Perhaps not coincidentally, Derrida begins this chapter with a physiological consideration of trembling that brings pseudo-Aristotle's reflections to mind (53-55).

heard that beautiful story of how God tempted Abraham.<sup>42</sup> Though the stories that follow are about Abraham, they are mediated through a nameless man who finds this story both compelling and troubling. The sketches that he provides are not about the events that are narrated in Genesis 22 but they serve to fill in the psychological and interior elements that are absent from the text.

As the reader moves through these accounts for the first time she quite likely identifies with these possible sketches. They bring a depth to the story that reflects the reader's own wary relationship to the near murder of Isaac by his father. Yet, if the reader were to return to these sketches after having read the rest of the text, she would notice that there is a profound dissonance between the interior life ascribed to Abraham in these tales, and the manner in which Abraham, as the father of faith, is characterized in the rest of *Fear and Trembling*.<sup>43</sup> These sketches are all attempts to understand Abraham, to illustrate that he is either ethically guilty or admirable. The disconnect between these imagined accounts of the story and Silentio's sketch of Abraham highlight that the focus of the "Exordium" is not Abraham, but the anonymous man who is both drawn to and repelled by Abraham. From the beginning of the text, the reader is not called into the passive position of admiring or understanding Abraham, but she comes to see that this story offers itself as an ordeal and a temptation for its *readers*.

The decisive role of this opening may, once again, be discerned from the heading that Kierkegaard gave to this section: Exordium. In the penultimate draft, the rhetorical valence of this term was clearer, as it was accompanied by the Greek term *prooimia*.<sup>44</sup> In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle describes the *prooimia* as "the beginning of a speech, as the prologue in poetry and the prelude in flute playing."<sup>45</sup> Aristotle goes on to specify that the exordium of a forensic speech parallels dramatic prologues (underlined here with the beginning "once upon a time"). The purpose of these introductions is to "provide a sample of the subject, in order that the hearers may know beforehand what [the speech] is about."<sup>46</sup>

The keynote sounded in the Exordium centers on the difficulty that a man has with understanding the story and the ways that he changes and transforms it to try and come to terms with the anxieties it produces.<sup>47</sup> The pivot or hinge of the book that is provided for the

<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 9. my emphasis.

<sup>43</sup> In the first sketch Abraham does not keep silent but tries to justify himself to Isaac. In the second, on his return home Abraham becomes the knight of infinite resignation. In the third, Abraham appeals to ethical duty, and in the fourth, in the moment of his act he falls into despair. *Ibid.*, 10-14.

<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 245.

<sup>45</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetorica* 1414b/ Aristotle *The 'Art' of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 427.

<sup>46</sup> Arist. Rhet. 1415a/ Aristotle *Rhetoric*, 431

<sup>47</sup> This is not the only introduction. This "Exordium" is preceded by a preface, and followed by a "Eulogy" and a "Preliminary Expectoration." These repeated attempts at getting started seem to highlight the difficulty of applying a forensic logic to the case of Abraham. As Aristotle observes,

reader is not one that sticks close to the details of the biblical narrative. It is not one that prepares the reader for the conceptual solution of faith that follows. Nor is it even one that attempts to convince the reader of Abraham's heroism.

Keeping the centrality of the hearer, reader, and interpreter of the story in mind brings a number of different figures to the fore. Whereas it is undeniable that Abraham and other fantastical figures—such as the knight of infinite resignation, the knight of faith, and the tragic hero—seem to remain at the forefront of *Fear and Trembling*, these characters are contained within the narratives written by contemporary types. For example, in the “Preliminary Expectoration,” the heroic figures are narrated by an imagined passionless preacher and the everyday Christian hearer of the story. There is a play within a play within a play at work here, as knights are narrated by preachers narrated by Silentio. Following this reading, the first and third *problemata* focus on the manner in which the assistant professor or the esthete might try to make sense of Abraham.

The second *problema* focuses on the “appealing exegete,” who takes away the difficulty of the story by massaging the terms or historicizing the text. This figure is not simply the objective biblical scholar, rather the problem is framed in Kantian terms as it asks “Is there an absolute duty to God?” This question reverses a certain account of Kant’s ethics, and concurrently Kant’s reduction of religion to morality. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant famously declares that “[e]ven the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is cognized as such.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, God does not dictate duty, but duty dictates God. In this *problema*, the interpreter that seems to be in the crosshairs is the one that effaces the particularities and difficulties of religious tradition and the life of faith by smoothing their rough edges with the fixed response of reason. Accordingly, one can hear a faint reply to the Kantian hand waving regarding this story and religious enthusiasm. In the second section of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) Kant treats the Pauline injunction to “work out one’s salvation with *fear and trembling*” with caution, noting that this is “a hard saying, which if misunderstood, can drive one to the darkest enthusiasm.”<sup>49</sup> In the “General Remark” added to this section, Kant specifically challenges the ethical viability of Genesis 22, saying that we can have a negative criterion for knowing if something is “commanded by god” if it goes against the dictates of reason, for example “if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally innocent.”<sup>50</sup>

Silentio is himself a figure that exemplifies and warns against a certain kind of comportment. In the “Preliminary Expectoration” Silentio contrasts himself with Abraham. Though he praises

those who engage in lengthy introductions usually have a bad case, “for it is better to lay stress upon anything rather than the case itself.” Arist. Rhet.1415b/ Aristotle *Rhetoric*, 435

<sup>48</sup> Kant, *Groundwork*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 85.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 100.

the struggle that Abraham was willing to go through, he declares that he would not be capable of doing such. This declaration is explained several ways. He describes the risks that would come from admiration. If Abraham or Silentio are built up too much, then listeners might think to themselves: "He has faith to such a degree that all we have to do is hang onto his coattails."<sup>51</sup> Admiration places an object on a pedestal and places the admirer in a position of distance and passivity. This distance allows them to excuse themselves from having to undertake any such trial on their own. Silentio, however, declares that he is not stuck in the position of admiration, but that he thinks that he would only be capable of resignation.<sup>52</sup> He thinks that he could resolve to carry out the act and give up Isaac in the name of the infinite, but that in so doing, he would not be able to return to the finite with joy. Paralleling a monastic renunciation of the active life, Silentio believes that he would only be capable of living the contemplative life.<sup>53</sup>

The different sections of *Fear and Trembling*, then, should not simply be disregarded in the name of theoretical systematicity, as they are not simply communicating an abstract or formal account of the world, but they are challenging *specific* practices of reading, responding, and living. The problems that seem to be at the fore of this book are those of different intellectual practices that are grounded in particular forms of living and existential comportments. Specifically, Silentio has challenged certain forms of literalizing, conceptualizing, allegorizing, poeticizing, renouncing, or admiring this story by way of the figures of the thoughtless preacher, the assistant professor, the attractive exegete, the romantic storyteller, and the monastic ascetic.

By presenting the reader with these cautionary tales and misguided practices, Kierkegaard creates a pedagogical situation that is rife with questions. While each of these figures seems to have his faults, their multiplicity and existential complexity help to weave a tapestry that is multi-colored instead of black and white. These figures are not simply stand-ins for false *ideas*, but are complex figures whose *desires* are often misdirected or twisted. Therefore, the instruction that they provide is not one that is dualistic or prepackaged, but it is one that requires personal examination.

One of Kierkegaard's journal entries, written in 1837, is helpful here. In this journal entry Kierkegaard highlights the significance of the connection between narrative and pedagogy as he examines the art of telling stories to children.<sup>54</sup> On his account, the good teller of children's

<sup>51</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 32.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 34-5.

<sup>53</sup> The initial pseudonym Kierkegaard planned to use was Simon Stylita, after the great Syrian anchorite who spent decades standing upon a column, and who he described as a "Solo Dancer and Private Individual." Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 243

<sup>54</sup> Marcia Robinson argues that this account of storytelling, drawn from Ludwig Tieck, played a decisive role in Kierkegaard's vision of the pseudonymous authorship. I would add that while these romantic elements are central, one should not look past the role of figure and story in ancient philosophy and scripture. Marcia C. Robinson, "Tieck: Kierkegaard's 'Guadalquivir' of Open Critique and Hidden Appreciation" in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries: Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. Jon Stewart (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.)

stories will provide a Socratic opening that awakens “an appetite in [his hearers] to ask questions.”<sup>55</sup> These questions, however, are not simply directed toward the testing of information for the display of brilliance.<sup>56</sup> He laments the kind of encyclopedic or “atomistic knowledge” that is often foisted on children as it lacks “any deeper relation to children and their existence.”<sup>57</sup> He proposes that the schoolroom practices of “rigor and clear boundaries [or definitions]” actually hinder the wonder, attentiveness, and creativity that should be opened in childhood. Kierkegaard goes so far as to frame these practices, in Pauline terms, as the fetters of the law.<sup>58</sup> The freedom of the gospel is, by contrast, opened with questions that have a personal valance, that relate the material to what the listeners are already “otherwise engaged.”<sup>59</sup> If their childish responses require correction, it can be done through the gentleness of providing a fictional character who enacts the same error. That way, one learns the lesson by correcting others, without “letting this degenerate into self-importance.”<sup>60</sup> Telling stories in this manner nurtures “a constant mental mobility” and “a permanent attentiveness to what they hear and see.”<sup>61</sup>

While the self-contesting concepts of *Fear and Trembling* put the reader on trial, the farcical interpreters and figures that it introduces engage the reader from a place where she already stands. Types and roles that we might be familiar with, or with which we might identify, are encountered throughout these pages. As the reader examines her motives and questions her practices, she might find herself gently corrected. Doing so might assist her mental mobility and her attentiveness to what she hears and sees.

However, the presence and importance of these everyday figures does not undermine the significance of the fantastical characters that dominate the narrative of *Fear and Trembling*. As Marcia Robinson argues, the pedagogy of Kierkegaard’s texts often capitalize on the manner in which fairy tales and fantastical figures can imbue the quotidian aspects of our lives, which they parallel, with a deeper meaning. She writes, “As the extraordinary things tend to symbolize or point to the sacred and mysterious aspects of life, the equalization of these things with ordinary things creates an intriguing interchange or fundamental relation between the two.”<sup>62</sup> In this way, the exceptional case of Abraham and the knights that parade across the pages of this work do not distract from the centrality of everyday decisions and practices, but they heighten their importance. Similarly, the connections that are made to familiar forms of life serve to enliven ancient religious traditions. This is a pedagogy of storytelling that does not distance the reader from her situation and the demands of decision by means of admiration,

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<sup>55</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks: Volume 1 Journals AA-DD* Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Alastair Hannay et. al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 118.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>62</sup> Robinson, “Tieck,” 291.

abstraction, or allegorization, but it intensifies the import of the ordinary through the questions that it raises.

### THE TRIAL OF ABRAHAM

In my efforts to present this book in the classroom, I try to match the diversity of exercises that are deployed in *Fear and Trembling*. I proceed by following the conventions of lecture and exposition, of small group discussion, and reflective writing. I provide context for Kierkegaard, his critique of culture and religion, and schematizations for some of the central concepts of the book. In small groups, students connect passages about “faith” and specific texts about figures who are supposed to enflesh or illuminate the “knight of faith.” We move slowly through specific passages together, as I ask them to make connections and provide interpretive insight.

Along the way, however, I highlight the connection between certain classroom exercises and the mode of conceptualization that *Fear and Trembling* seems to contest. The direct and abstract communication of ideas is complemented by the subtle and indirect challenging and shaping of desires. For example, at the beginning of the last class session in which we directly deal with the text, I conduct a fake quiz (they have had many graded quizzes by this point in the semester, so it is a familiar drill). The first couple of questions for the quiz ask for a kind of direct explanation for issues like: “What does Silentio mean by the ethical?” The final question shifts from quiz to ordeal as it asks: “What is the meaning of life? What do you trust at the most fundamental level? What is worth your effort, your sweat, your passion, your tears?” Typically this last question is answered with quiet laughter, as most of the students realize that this is a sham. This exercise highlights that different questions have different answers: some may be graded on the grounds of their correctness, while other answers must be found, forged, and enacted.

The struggle with this text and the difficulties that it highlights do not end here. I try to integrate the intentional frustration of the *problemata* with the gentle instruction of the stories and figures by putting Abraham on trial. I divide the class into prosecution and defense teams, and ask the students to perform the paradoxical task of justifying Abraham’s actions to “the court of philosophy and theology.” Giving students time to prepare their cases and divide up their respective roles, I ask them to address three charges brought to Abraham: 1) A charge of religious fanaticism. 2) A charge of attempted murder. 3) A charge of irrationalism. In addition to opening and closing arguments, I allow each side to call two witnesses to cross examine. This exercise combines the frustration of a desire for simple answers, the necessity of personal action and decision, and the proximity of the fantastic to the everyday.

While the exercise is directly in tension with what the class has been talking about during the previous treatment of *Fear and Trembling*, the students typically jump headfirst into the project. There is, however, almost always an exception. During the very first part of the activity, when each team is brainstorming as a whole to come up with their overall argument, a particularly insightful student or two from the defense team will say: “Isn’t this the opposite of what

Kierkegaard was trying to say? Abraham is not subject to this court, this court is on the level of ethics?" Yet, this uneasiness is soon silenced as they join in with their group going down the well worn pedagogical paths of deliberation, argumentation, competition, and evaluation.

While there has been quite a bit of continuity between how different classes have approached the trial, they never fail to surprise me. Often a team will choose a philosophical or theological champion for their cause, appealing to Kant, Augustine, Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche. One class caught me off guard by calling Marx to the stand. This was surprising because we had not read him in class and it became apparent that the students had not read him on any other occasion either. These intellectual authorities are, however, typically over-shadowed by the presence of one of the great Hebrew Patriarchs, an angel, or God herself (I have been pleased that my students typically have the good sense to choose a female to play the divine).

This trial of Abraham plays out in the messy space between different ethical and religious outlooks. In the tangle of competing authorities, students often come to realize the significance of an intellectual position, or to see its inner tensions when it is pushed by a differing perspective. Most of all, they seem to focus on the clash between different ways of dealing with religious traditions. While a prosecution team might appeal to Nietzsche's characterization of the death of God—revealing Abraham to be caught up in a subterfuge of either power or madness—the defense will stand behind the word of God to protect father Abraham's piety. One class anticipated these difficulties before we even began. Each team elected representatives to conference so as to further narrow the parameters. While they agreed not to contest the existence of God, this did not lead to a clear-cut debate—the prosecution appealed to the Kantian demand that another person should never be treated as a means but only as an end, and the defense argued for the priority of a divine command that circumvents reason and morality.

The real trouble, however, emerges at the level of interpretation. Sometimes students will try to proof-text a point with scripture (I have noticed a strange recent preoccupation with Micah 3.6). Other times students will take liberties with the biblical narrative, either out of ignorance or declaring that it is a misrepresentation or an incomplete account. These conflicts are not limited to the debates that take place between teams, but often the same people who are arguing an atheistic point will elsewhere make an absolutist appeal to revelation.

Because of these competing authorities the exercise frequently teeters on the brink of chaos. The students often look to me, playing the role of judge, to provide a resolution. For my part, I try to intervene only when it seems necessary for the maintenance of the exercise. Despite these inherent difficulties and frustrations, the exercise of the trial time and again goes smoothly, as the students get lost in their task and in the space of deliberation and debate.

It is at the conclusion of the exercise, when the students expect to find some resolution in the ruling of the court, however, that the trial of the *professor* begins. Habituated to scholastic environments of winning and losing, of achievement and failure, students seem to be excited by

the prospect of resolution and possible victory. It is at this moment when the underlying dissonance between the exercise and Kierkegaard's apparent point often crescendos into cacophony. The professor is left to explain that the point of the exercise was this dissonance; that their efforts and performances paralleled the tensions of the text, and that despite our deliberations we are still faced with the difficult exercises of uncertainty, trust, and decision.

I dramatize this moment by asking them to write their own verdicts on a ballot on the pretext that I will collect them to reach a democratic decision. Upon their completion I tell them to fold them in half, and to keep them. Following Kierkegaard, I warn them that the crowd is not always right, but that this does not mean the decisions are arbitrary or impossible. To the contrary, not to decide is a decision, and not all decisions are equal. But the task of thinking and the life of faith demand the impassioned and ongoing pursuit of wisdom, virtue, justice, and love. I try to explain that while these intellectual exercises do not lead to resolution they might cultivate the relational virtue of patience in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty; the exercise illustrates the limits of the intellect to bring about resolution, but also recognizes that intellectual exercises can be used to foster trust and a certain kind of *resolve*.

Not being able to tie up the loose ends of the exercise for my students might mean that the bewilderment that they feel will be foisted back upon me, and in so doing this might undermine my role as the professor. Teaching *Fear and Trembling* demands the abdication of my position as the figure who possesses expertise in the classroom. At the conclusion of this activity, I am faced with the distinct possibility that this exercise has placed the classroom and the professor on trial as much as it has Abraham.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the trial—and, as I have argued, *Fear and Trembling*—is not to end with a moment of frustration. Its goal is not to make a mockery of the classroom; instead it is directed toward transforming the dynamics of intellectual and pedagogical practices. What this exercise helps to highlight is not that the typical practices of the classroom need to be replaced with a series of theatrical or experiential activities, but that all of the exercises of the classroom have always already been such. In writing, reading, and dialogue we can compress and expand time and space, we can bend and test the laws of common sense or ordinary experience, and we can move from the general to the singular. Whether it is acknowledged or conscious, these activities have a formative impact. They both shape and are informed by certain dreams, desires, projections, and self-understandings. In enacting them, we play roles, enflesh narratives, and shape communities. In them we can transfigure the everyday by drawing connections between the fantastical, the religious, the ideal, and the quotidian. If we attend to these forms, then the cultivation of capabilities, the fostering of connections, and the shaping of desires becomes central.

I am wary of the cumulative effect of reducing the activities of the classroom, and intellectual inquiry more broadly, to the accumulation and communication of information. As Kierkegaard

proposed, the exercises of definition and rigor centered on encyclopedic knowledge can stifle wonder and attention. While the traditional activities of lecture and testing might build up one's capacity to memorize, collate, and organize information, it might also go hand in hand with a standardization and generalization that lead to an uneasiness with difference and an inability to deal with uncertainty in a joyful or trusting manner. Furthermore, the repetition and centrality of these practices tends to obscure the contingent character of the formation of such knowledge and the manner in which it is structurally produced. One might, polemically, propose that these practices are the subtle preparation for the reading and writing of budgets that reduce peoples' lives to economic calculations and mountainside ecosystems to coal deposits. While traditional tests and research papers might empower future technicians and, if we are lucky, "assistant professors," one is left to wonder the degree to which students use these intellectual disciplines to *struggle* with the issues that they face in their future lives. Perhaps in directing the practices of reading, writing, and dialogue toward professional competency, and in the less likely case, leisurely enjoyment, the personal and impassioned valance of these disciplines has been lost.

As Silentio proposed, the practices of a certain kind of assistant professor can serve to stunt one's capacity for making decisions as they create a distance between the precision of thought and the uncertainty of action. They institute a gap between theory and practice—with the former dwelling in a world of clean distinctions and the latter in a chaotic mess in need of order. On Kierkegaard's account, these figures face a world of competing authorities and demand the precision of calculation. Whereas the ancients thought doubt was a task for a lifetime, and faith the highest of passions, today one wants to overcome both in the course of an afternoon.

Students and professors face these same challenges. We are asked by many institutions to make these calculations. There is little room for faith in the kingdom of accounting and human capital, or for doubt in the land of metrics and measurable outcomes. So long as one is not accustomed to dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, then the absence of such calculability seems to demand either acquiescence to the established order or the resignation to the fact that nothing is meaningful or trustworthy. This false dichotomy of thoughtless compromise or hopeless cynicism seems rooted in a comportment that has been trained to expect that a calculative form of reasoning is the only means available.

Perhaps the classroom can be a space where alternative capabilities are cultivated and where different forms of relationship are possible. This could start with directing our traditional exercises to a different end, one which is not so much the development of a professional skill or the comprehension of information, but the cultivation of character. Struggling with a difficult text can foster patience. The capacity to express oneself in writing can often produce both a sense of confidence and humility, just as meaningful though unresolved debate can often engender tolerance if not kindness. Such character need not conform to the exemplars of tradition or to the desires of the institution, but it might open up in a space of ambiguity and bewilderment.

In the Epilogue, Silentio returns to the opening scene of the marketplace, saying that once when the price of spices had become too low due to an excess of supply, the merchants dumped a few loads into the sea to increase the price. The *Problemata of Fear and Trembling* seem to do just this as they frustrate the expectations of a form of thinking that seeks cheap readymade answers. In so doing, the tasks, the practices, and the exercises of doubt and faith are heightened and redirected. This disrupts their reduction to products and keeps the tasks of faith and doubt “young and beautiful and lovely” and also “difficult and inspiring.”<sup>63</sup>

To highlight the significance of the tasks of philosophy and theology we might, as professors, be called upon to abdicate our positions of expertise and authority, from time to time. We might be called to embrace the difficulties of bewilderment and wonder. While such a possibility is certainly not new to anyone who teaches in the humanities, the structures of our schools and the shape of our practices often lead us in different directions. It is for this reason that philosophers and theologians should embrace their difficult and traditional texts and exercises, not so as to possess them but so as to be challenged and transformed by them. Teaching philosophy and theology, then, might not involve certainty and clarity, but the performance of *Fear and Trembling*.

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<sup>63</sup> Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 121.