

# Fear and Trembling



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard was the youngest of seven children born to Ane Sørensdatter Lund and Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard. Michael was a wealthy merchant, and Ane had been the family maid before Michael impregnated and then married her. Kierkegaard developed an early love of philosophy and took particular pleasure in reading Plato's Socratic dialogues. Kierkegaard attended the University of Copenhagen, initially studying theology but later turning his attention to literature and philosophy. During this period, Kierkegaard struggled to find a truth or idea that he could live his life by, which led to his disillusionment with Christianity and a separation from his father. However, Kierkegaard reconciled himself to both and eventually graduated from the University of Copenhagen in 1841. Kierkegaard devoted the next few years to writing and publishing different essays under different synonyms, some of which include Johannes de silentio, Anti-Climacus, Judge William, and Hilarius Bookbinder. Occasionally, Kierkegaard would publish one essay with one pseudonym and then write a contradicting essay under another pseudonym, thereby presenting two different opinions of the same topic. Kierkegaard became a somewhat controversial figure after challenging a popular satirical paper, *The Corsair*, to mock him (it did, and Kierkegaard never quite recovered from the public humiliation) and railing against the Danish national church (which was Lutheran) for being too lenient. In October 1855, Kierkegaard collapsed in the street and then died a few weeks later in November. There is some debate over whether he died of tuberculosis or a spinal disease. Although Kierkegaard was relatively well-known in Denmark during his lifetime, it wasn't until the early- to mid-20th century that his works really began receiving international attention. Today, Kierkegaard is known as the "father of existentialism."

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Søren Kierkegaard wrote during the height of what is now known as the Danish Golden Age, which dominated the first half of the 19th century. During this time, Denmark experienced immense artistic growth thanks to writers like Hans Christian Andersen, painters like Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, and composers like Hans Christian Lumbye. During his lifetime, Kierkegaard also witnessed the rise of British Imperialism and the spread of Christianity to nearly every corner of the globe, largely thanks to British missionaries. This inspired numerous conversations about the nature of Christianity and its role in the modern world, which in turn

helped Kierkegaard develop his own opinions on what it means to be a Christian. Politically, the early 19th century was particularly tumultuous as the country transitioned from a traditional monarchy into a constitutional monarchy as liberal movements rapidly gained in popularity in the 1830s. As the Danish government became more representative, many Danish men and women turned their attention to the question of what it meant to be Danish in an increasingly interconnected world, which in turn led to the abolition of slavery in the Danish West Indies and the sale of another distant Danish colony (Tranquebar) to the British. This allowed the new government to focus more on domestic matters and conflicts closer to home, namely the conflict with the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, both of which wanted independence from Denmark and eventually won it in 1864.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Most of Kierkegaard's works focus on Christianity and experience of being a Christian in the modern world. For more on Kierkegaard's personal beliefs about faith, temporal life, and Christianity, read Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* (which he published under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus). Kierkegaard developed a love of Plato when he was still a child, particularly his Socratic dialogues. An excellent example of a Socratic dialogue is Plato's *Symposium*, in which Socrates and several other men discuss love and relationships. Kierkegaard was strongly influenced by, and critical of, G. W. F. Hegel, a famous German philosopher who wrote extensively on idealism and the human spirit. Hegel summarizes his beliefs about the core of philosophy in *Science of Logic*, most of which was written when Kierkegaard was a young boy. Friedrich Nietzsche bluntly proclaims that "God is dead" in his notable work, *The Gay Science*. His sentiment—that the Enlightenment effectually killed true Christianity (thus killing God)—echoes Kierkegaard's belief that 19th-century Europe was at a turning point because so many people preferred doubt over religious faith. In his popular play [Waiting for Godot](#), Samuel Beckett explores popular existentialist themes such as questioning the existence of God (or Godot), angst, and the meaning of life. In terms of fiction by existentialist authors, Albert Camus's [The Plague](#) explores the absurd (a concept closely related to faith in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*) and how human beings react to it.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Fear and Trembling*
- **When Written:** 1843
- **Where Written:** Copenhagen, Denmark

- **When Published:** 1843 (Danish), 1919 (English Translation)
- **Literary Period:** Danish Golden Age
- **Genre:** Christian Philosophical Essay
- **Point of View:** First Person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Bad Omens.** Michael Kierkegaard was riddled with fear and anxiety that God would punish him for impregnating his wife before marriage and because he had once cursed God as a child. As a result, Michael believed that he would have to bury all his children. In fact, only two of his seven children survived him: Peter and Søren Kierkegaard.

**Danish vs. Latin.** Kierkegaard loved the Danish language and strongly resented the fact that Latin and German were considered the official languages of academia throughout most of Europe. In fact, he took the unusual step of petitioning the Danish king to let him write his college dissertation in Danish instead of Latin. His request was granted, but with the caveat that he had to defend it in Latin.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Søren Kierkegaard writes this book under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio, which translates into “John of the silence.” The book opens with a discussion about the state of modern society (for Kierkegaard, this would mean 19th-century Europe) and how so many people want to go beyond faith. However, as he points out, this implies that people must have had faith at some point, or else how could they go further than it? Faith in the modern age isn’t something a person devotes their whole life to, but something that people either go beyond or mistakenly believe they can achieve in a few weeks or months. The same goes for doubt—what used to take a lifetime to perfect, people now want to accomplish almost immediately. Kierkegaard explains that he is writing this book because writing is enjoyable, although he believes that the book will be either ignored or criticized.

In the “Attunement,” Kierkegaard shares the story of a man who first learned the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac when he was a child and has always loved it, but as he grew older, he understood Abraham less and less. The man considers four possible scenarios: one in which Abraham tells Isaac what is going to happen and then tries to scare Isaac by pretending to be a homicidal atheist so that Isaac will be mad at him, not God; one in which Abraham loses his faith after sacrificing the ram God sends before he can kill Isaac; one in which Abraham doesn’t bring Isaac up the mountain, but goes up alone to beg forgiveness for violating his sacred duty as a father to Isaac by being willing to kill him; and one in which Isaac loses his faith after Abraham unknowingly reveals his own anguish before

raising the knife. Even considering all of these possibilities, the man is unable to understand Abraham.

Kierkegaard believes that Abraham was truly great and frequently refers to him as the “father of faith.” Abraham’s story begins when God asked him to leave his life behind and go out into the desert, which Abraham does because he has faith and believes God would never ask him to do anything without a reason. God also promises Abraham that he will have a son with his wife Sarah, and his descendants will spread all over the world. Abraham had faith in this promise even though both he and Sarah were very old, and his faith was justified when Sarah had Isaac. However, God tests Abraham one more time by asking him to sacrifice Isaac; fortunately, before Abraham takes the irrevocable step of killing Isaac, God intervenes.

Kierkegaard believes that if Abraham had wavered in his faith then everything might have been different, but Abraham followed God’s instructions, spending three and a half grueling days traveling to Mount Moriah with Isaac even though it must have been distressing. Unfortunately, when people discuss Abraham’s story, they typically put too much emphasis on the fact that God intervened at the last minute instead of how much Abraham had to overcome before the moment of sacrifice. In Kierkegaard’s opinion, it’s the journey to Mount Moriah and the fact that Abraham had to violate universal ethics to do God’s will that proves Abraham’s greatness, not just the moment he raised the knife.

Kierkegaard discusses two important spiritual movements a person must make to have faith. The first includes infinite resignation during which a person must make an enormous sacrifice, and the second includes taking back what they sacrifice on the strength of the absurd. The absurd is something that seems impossible and flies in the face of all human understanding. In other words, people with faith believe that the impossible is possible through God. Kierkegaard illustrates these two concepts by telling a story about a young man who harbors an impossible love for a princess. His love for her is the entire substance of his life, it will never die out, but they can’t be married. After realizing that it’s impossible for them to be together, a **knight of infinite resignation** would renounce their love, experience the pain of that renunciation, and then reconcile themselves to the pain. Although his love would live on, he would have given up hope that they could be together in this life. A **knight of faith**, on the other hand, would follow the same steps, but at the moment of renunciation they would simultaneously say that they will still get to be with the princess in this life. In this way, they get back all that they sacrifice, and this is what makes faith so great and yet so difficult to understand by anyone who doesn’t have it themselves.

Kierkegaard frequently states that while he admires people who have faith, he doesn’t have the courage to take the final step into faith. In fact, he struggles to understand how anyone

can, although he knows people do. He's never met a knight of faith, but if he did then he would travel far and wide to meet them and learn to mimic their spiritual movements. Furthermore, Kierkegaard doesn't understand how people can talk of going further than faith because surely anyone who has truly had faith would never give it up to go further. Returning to Abraham, Kierkegaard again points out that people focus too much on the end of the story, and not enough on what came before. For this reason, Kierkegaard believes the modern age ought to either forget Abraham entirely or try to understand the whole story. Kierkegaard proposes to examine the story through three *problemata* to illustrate the power and place of faith in the temporal world.

The first *problema* asks if there is a teleological suspense of the ethical. The ethical is the universal, and all individuals as the particular are expected to conform to the universal by abiding by the ethical. Faith, however, is a paradox by which the particular (the individual) rises above the universal, but they can only achieve this by being part of the universal and simultaneously setting themselves apart. Either Abraham's actions are justified by faith—which can't be expressed in universal terms because people won't be able to understand it—or he's a murderer. Kierkegaard analyzes the story through an ethical lens and brings up other cases of fathers killing their children, including the story of Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia to appease an angry goddess. Because Agamemnon and other tragic heroes act for the universal good, there is a suspension of ethics and they are praised as great. Abraham, however, seems to violate the universal for God's sake and his own (so he could prove his faith). Because Abraham was reaching above the universal, people don't sympathize with his pain.

Kierkegaard believes Abraham's actions are justified through the paradox of faith, which states that the individual can transcend the universal through it. Others, however, look to the outcome of his story (or any hero's story) to decide whether his actions were justified. However, this means they ignore the fact that all actions have a beginning, and it's important to consider *why* people do things instead of only focusing on the end result. More importantly, people ignore the trauma and distress that great people experience during their trials. An example is the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. People praise her for giving birth to Jesus, but they forget that before she gave birth, she had to deal with a pregnancy that she couldn't properly explain to others because she was the only one the angel visited. Returning to Abraham, Kierkegaard concludes that there is either a teleological suspension of the ethical in Abraham's story because of his faith, or else he was a murderer.

The second *problema* Kierkegaard addresses is whether there's an absolute duty to God. Kierkegaard reiterates that the ethical is the universal, but this is associated with the divine. For this reason, all duty is duty to God even when it doesn't directly

involve God. Despite Hegelian philosophy's assertion that the external is higher than the internal, faith is a paradox that says the individual (interior) is higher than the universal (exterior). Only the individual is able to create an absolute relationship with the absolute (God), which means there is an absolute duty to God that makes the ethical (or universal) relative. Duty is usually expressed externally, but duty to God is expressed internally. For this reason, it's difficult for anyone to understand it in universal terms. This is also why Abraham couldn't convey the meaning of his actions to anyone else—if he had tried to express them in the universal, he would have realized he was in a state of temptation. A knight of faith's path is, therefore, isolating and scary. The knight of faith is in a constant state of tension, knowing they can jump back into the universal at every moment but knowing that the path of faith is higher. This is what makes the knight of faith's journey so prolonged and painful, whereas a tragic hero becomes a tragic hero all in a moment, as soon as they make their sacrifice, and then they are able to rest in the universal and be praised by all. Through faith there is an absolute duty to God higher than duty to the ethical or universal, or else Abraham should be condemned.

In the final *problema*, Kierkegaard asks if it was right of Abraham not to tell Isaac, Sarah, or Eleazar about God's command. Ethics demands disclosure, although aesthetics frequently demands concealment because it's more interesting. For this reason, in drama concealment is used to create tension and disclosure is used to resolve it. Kierkegaard states that silence can be either demonic or divine, a concept he explores in several anecdotes. In one, a bridegroom resorts to silence after he cancels his wedding when an augur reveals that some misfortune will befall him if he marries. The man chooses silence because he thinks it will be better for his would-be bride. This is an example of a divine silence. In another story, the Merman tries to seduce Agnete and drag her into the ocean, but he falls in love with her and changes his mind when he realizes how innocent she is. In this case, the Merman can make Agnete hate him so she'll fall out of love with him so that he can keep his secret and silently endure his punishment (being separated from Agnete). This is a demonic silence because the Merman is tempted into suffering. However, there are some cases in which silence is best: Abraham couldn't speak intelligibly because faith is unintelligible. He stayed quiet as to not be misunderstood. This must be justifiable and there must be a paradox that sets the individual above the universal, or else Abraham should be condemned.

Kierkegaard asks if society has come so far that it must pretend it hasn't come far enough just to have something to do. Every generation must start over when it comes to navigating passion. This is especially true of faith because it's the highest of human passions. Not everyone will get as far as faith, but Kierkegaard leaves it to the reader to decide how many people in the modern age do get that far. What's important to know is

that even a life without faith offers plenty of tasks and trials to overcome, and arriving at faith doesn't necessarily mean coming to a standstill. One can live their whole life in faith, just as they can in love.



## CHARACTERS

**Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard** – The narrator and author of *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard's pseudonym roughly translates into "John of the silence," which could refer to the silence between Abraham and Isaac as they traveled to Mount Moriah, or the fact that Kierkegaard can't adequately communicate the experience of faith because he himself doesn't truly have it. Through Johannes, Kierkegaard explores the story of Abraham and Isaac and illustrates how Abraham's faith is what made him great. To do this, he asks three primary questions: is there a "teleological suspension of the ethical" that justifies Abraham's actions? Do we have a duty to God? Was it justifiable of Abraham not to tell Sarah, Isaac, or Eleazar why he was bringing Isaac to Mount Moriah? Kierkegaard reaches the conclusion that the answer to all of these questions must be yes or else Abraham is entirely corrupt or even mad, not the great man of faith Western Christian civilization recognizes him as. Kierkegaard expresses more than once that he himself is not courageous enough to take the necessary leap into the absurd that one must take before they can have faith. Because of this, he struggles to really understand Abraham even though he can feel that Abraham was a great and admirable man. Even though Kierkegaard doesn't have faith, he has a deep love of God and mourns the fact that so many people in the modern world try to go beyond faith, choosing philosophy, doubt, and science instead.

**Abraham** – Isaac's father and the man Johannes de silentio considers greater than all other men because of his faith. Kierkegaard (through his pseudonym Johannes) calls Abraham the "father of faith" and believes that his actions are justified because of his faith even though temporal ethics would condemn him. God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son with his beloved wife Sarah, and because Abraham truly had faith in God, he followed orders. However, at the last second God intervened by providing Abraham with a ram to sacrifice instead of Isaac. In this way, Abraham proved his faith and God rewarded him for it. Kierkegaard examines this story through several different lenses to illustrate why Abraham's story is so intriguing and why Abraham himself is so great. His ultimate conclusion is that even though Abraham violated universal ethics by being willing to sacrifice his own son, he was justified in doing it through his faith and his absolute duty to God above all else.

**Isaac** – Abraham and Sarah's son. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have Isaac together even though they were both well past their childbearing years. God also

promised that Isaac would be the beginning of a long line of descendants who would be particularly favored by God and would spread throughout the world. However, when Isaac was still a child, God also asked Abraham to bring him to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him, which Abraham was willing to do. Fortunately, God intervened at the last moment and Abraham did not have to kill Isaac for a sacrifice.

**Sarah** – Abraham's wife and Isaac's mother. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son even though Sarah was seemingly too old to have any kids. However, after a lot of waiting, Sarah did in fact have a son. Like Abraham, Sarah was able to keep her faith in God's promise, although Kierkegaard believes that if Abraham ever wavered in his faith, then Sarah would have lost hers, as well. When Abraham received God's command to sacrifice Isaac, he didn't tell Sarah about it. This seems unethical, but Kierkegaard later proves that it was for the best because Abraham wasn't able to speak about what he was supposed to do in a way that anyone else could understand, thus highlighting the fact that sometimes faith is unintelligible.

**Agamemnon** – Johannes de Silentio (Kierkegaard) selects Agamemnon as the ideal example of a **tragic hero**. Like Abraham, Agamemnon had to sacrifice a beloved child—his daughter, Iphigenia. However, Agamemnon doesn't have to do this as a sign of faith, but to appease an angry goddess. It's also for the greater good because other people will benefit from the sacrifice and will praise Agamemnon for being strong enough to make it. This is also what differentiates a tragic hero from a **knight of faith**: the tragic hero is universally understood and praised, but a knight of faith is nearly always misunderstood, and their actions seem questionable.

**Iphigenia** – Agamemnon's daughter. Like Isaac, Iphigenia was supposed to be sacrificed by her father. However, Agamemnon was supposed to sacrifice Iphigenia to appease an angry goddess and for the greater good whereas Isaac was supposed to be sacrificed just because God asked Abraham to do it (presumably as the ultimate test of faith). Furthermore, Kierkegaard indicates that Agamemnon was able to explain to Iphigenia why she had to be sacrificed, which is something Abraham doesn't do with Isaac.

**Merman** – A mythical figure that wants to seduce Agnete and lure her into the ocean. Kierkegaard engages in a lengthy examination of the story of the Merman and Agnete, considering various endings to the story—whether the Merman could save himself by marrying Agnete, have faith that the divine might save Agnete, or hide from Agnete forever to save her—to explore demonic and divine approaches to repentance and whether silence is best.

**Agnete** – A beautiful and innocent young woman that the Merman tries to seduce and lure into the ocean. The Merman succeeds in getting Agnete close to the ocean, but when he

sees so much trust and humility in her eyes, he decides he can't go through with the seduction. After that, the Merman could make several different choices to repent of his actions, including to hide from Agnete or save himself by marrying her. Agnete is ignorant of the Merman's true motives and character, which is why she's able to trust and love him.

**Eleazar** – Abraham and Sarah's faithful servant. Because Eleazar was so close to Abraham, Kierkegaard questions how ethical it was for Abraham to prepare to sacrifice Isaac without telling Eleazar or Sarah. Kierkegaard arrives at the conclusion that because Abraham couldn't explain the situation in a way others could understand, it was okay for him not to tell anyone—faith is often unintelligible and difficult to explain.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### BELIEF VS. DOUBT

Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is a philosophical treatise on the nature of faith and what it means to truly have it. Kierkegaard feared that his world of mid-19th century Europe was becoming too eager to find something beyond faith and simple belief in God in the name of intellectualism. What exists beyond faith, though, is doubt—doubt of God's existence, of an eternal life, and of the Bible. In Kierkegaard's opinion, it's far better to stop at faith—as inferior as it may seem to those who have lofty ideas of themselves and want to leave a mark on the world—than to continually search for something beyond it, especially because that something is empty and ultimately meaningless. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard (through his pseudonym, Johannes de silentio) makes a compelling argument that nothing is greater than faith and urges his audience to go no further than simple belief to find true fulfillment.

Kierkegaard believes that people want to go beyond faith and belief in God to find something greater. By doing this, however, these people lose far more than they gain. Kierkegaard writes, "Today, nobody will stop with faith; they all go further." By this he means that nobody is content with what they have and insist on trying to find something better. In particular, Kierkegaard believes that modern philosophers are "cheating people out of something by making them think it is nothing." In other words, philosophers are taking something meaningful (belief) and convincing people that it's nothing, thus robbing them of the chance to have a positive connection with God. Kierkegaard

mourns that "our age does not stop with faith, with its miracle of turning water into wine; it goes further, it turns wine into water." This highlights how losing a rich, meaningful connection with God through belief robs life of its beauty and depth, making it seem more like plain water than invigorating wine.

However, according to Kierkegaard, there is nothing more comforting or greater than belief because it's through belief that human beings achieve greatness. The fact that people feel like they must get beyond belief indicates that they are trying to find something greater, but in doing so they are forcing themselves forward and leaving their better nature behind. As Kierkegaard explains, "Only lower natures forget themselves and become something new." In other words, a person who tries to push themselves forward beyond belief and into something new isn't greatness—they're just revealing their own "lower nature[]." In Kierkegaard's opinion, true greatness is achieved through nurturing belief and love in God: "he who loved himself became great in himself, and he who loved others became great through his devotion, but he who loved God became greater than all."

Not only can anyone find greatness by embracing a healthy love of and belief in God, but belief leads to happiness and contentment, neither of which can really be attained through doubt. Kierkegaard writes, "The mass of humans live disheartened lives of earthly sorry and joy." What he means is that most people limit their belief and understanding to temporal matters ("earthly sorry and joy"), and because of this they lack the will to try to do something meaningful with their lives. This is because "Everything is possible spiritually speaking, but in the finite world there is much that is not possible." This means that when a person chooses doubt over belief, they also limit what's possible because there is only so much a human being can achieve in one lifetime—and if there's no eternal life, then what's the point of trying to achieve more? Many believe that embracing belief in God means having to sacrifice all earthly pleasures, but Kierkegaard argues that "Through faith I don't renounce anything, on the contrary in faith I receive everything." Through belief in God and the promise of eternal life, Kierkegaard "receive[s]" infinite possibilities and comfort without having to "renounce" or give up any of the things that are truly meaningful to him.

During his lifetime, Kierkegaard was alarmed to see how unpopular faith in God was becoming and wanted to remind his audience that God is the key to happiness—but only if they truly believe in him. To those who persist in wanting to get beyond belief to enter doubt, Kierkegaard asks one question: "if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what would life be but despair?"



## FAITH AND THE ABSURD

Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* explains how one can achieve true faith in God in order to find meaning, happiness, and greatness. To

Kierkegaard, real, deep, meaningful faith is not a passive action or a feeling that a person just accepts. Instead, a person must make a leap of faith and be willing to embrace the absurd. To Kierkegaard (and to many later European existentialists), embracing the absurd means accepting something (either a course of action or a belief) even when reason points out an alternative that is easier or makes more sense. Through his pseudonym Johannes de silentio, Kierkegaard uses the story of Abraham and Isaac as an example: God to Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, but then intervened just as Abraham raised the knife to kill Isaac. Abraham's reason must have told him that he could do something else—either ignore God's dictate or even sacrifice himself instead so that Isaac could live—but Abraham's faith in God was so strong that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac anyway, which God then rewarded. Kierkegaard believes that faith in God is the key to human happiness, but in *Fear and Trembling* he also explains that real faith is hard to attain because it also means embracing the absurd.

One point that Kierkegaard is adamant about is that just loving or believing in God is not the same thing as truly having faith in God. To have faith, a person must have the courage to put their entire trust in God, even when it seems to go against reason. There are a lot of people who believe that simply accepting whatever happens in life as God's will is the same thing as having faith, and so they accept life's trials without complaint or questioning. However, Kierkegaard says that if he did this, then "[his] immense resignation would be a substitute for faith," highlighting the fact that faith goes beyond passively accepting whatever happens in life. Furthermore, simply loving God is not the same as faith either because, as Kierkegaard writes, "he who loves God without faith reflects on himself." This means that someone can love God, but that doesn't mean they have faith; perhaps more importantly, they only think of what God can do for them instead of what they can do for God.

Developing real faith is so difficult that Kierkegaard admits, "I do not have faith; this courage I lack." From Kierkegaard's perspective, taking the initial leap into faith is intimidating and full of uncertainty, and not everyone is brave enough to do it.

Kierkegaard believes that a key part of faith is embracing and accepting the absurd. The absurd is not a simple concept: it "is not the same as the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen." Even these things are believable, but the absurd is almost unbelievable, as it flies in the face of reason and logic. Speaking about the story of Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard writes, "it was indeed absurd that God who demanded this of [Abraham] should in the next instant withdraw the demand." By this Kierkegaard means that it defied reason for God to ask

Abraham to sacrifice Isaac—to watch Abraham bind his beloved son up, place him on a sacrificial alter, and raise the knife over Isaac—and only *then* tell Abraham he didn't have to go through with it. Abraham's own acceptance of the absurd is shown in how willing and unquestioning he was when God retracted his demand at the very last minute. Instead of reacting with anger or confusion, Abraham accepted what happened and was simply happy to go back home with Isaac.

To Kierkegaard, faith is not simply believing and trusting in God, but believing and trusting in the absurd as well. Kierkegaard explains that "the movement of faith must be made continually on the strength of the absurd." This means that faith only grows in proportion with how much of the absurd we are willing to believe in and accept. This is part of the reason Kierkegaard struggles with his own faith: "I cannot close my eyes and hurl myself trustingly into the absurd." Although Kierkegaard understands how others can accept the absurd, he himself struggles to do the same and, unfortunately, it prevents him from enjoying the security of faith. When it comes to the relationship between the absurd and faith, Kierkegaard writes that "the **knight of faith** is [...] clear; all that can save him is the absurd; and this he grasps by faith." In other words, belief in the absurd can "save" a person by giving them more faith, but in order to "grasp[]" the absurd, that same person must already have some faith—each grows in proportion to a person's acceptance of the other until that person finally achieves the happiness and freedom only found through total faith and trust in God.



## INFINITE RESIGNATION

Søren Kierkegaard was one of the most influential European philosophers of the 19th century, and *Fear and Trembling* is one of his most powerful and enduring works. In it, Kierkegaard explores the topic of religious faith and, through the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, tries to explain what real faith is and how to embrace it. According to Kierkegaard, one of the necessary steps a person must take in order to develop faith is infinite resignation, meaning they must be willing to sacrifice what is most precious to them. Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac at God's request, is one example of a "**knight of faith**," which is a person who has moved past infinite resignation by sacrificing (or, in Abraham's case, by being *willing* to sacrifice) the thing that is most precious to them, while simultaneously believing that they haven't truly lost that thing in this world. On the other hand, a "**knight of infinite resignation**" is someone who has taken the step of infinite resignation, but not the next step into faith—they *don't* believe they'll get back whatever they've sacrificed in this world, although they've reconciled themselves to the pain of loss. Different still, a "**tragic hero**" is someone who makes an enormous one-time personal sacrifice for the greater good. Kierkegaard contrasts the knights of faith

with the knights of infinite resignation, stating that a knight of faith keeps their hope and belief that they'll get their sacrifice back in this life while a knight of infinite resignation simply resigns themselves to the idea that they've irrevocably lost what they love in this life. However, infinite resignation is one of the last steps before faith, which is why Kierkegaard believes that a person must resign themselves to losing everything in order to have it all.

Kierkegaard uses the story of Abraham and Isaac as an example of what both infinite resignation and faith looks like. The story begins when God asked Abraham to bring Isaac—Abraham's beloved son—to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him on an altar. Kierkegaard explains why Abraham decided to do what God asked of him: "He knew it was God the Almighty that tried him, he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him; but he also knew that no sacrifice was too hard when God demanded it." In other words, Abraham was resigned to doing as God asked because he had faith that God wouldn't have asked him to do it if it was too hard—in other words, if it meant truly losing Isaac in this world forever. Infinite resignation means giving up what's most precious, so "When God asks for Isaac, Abraham must if possible love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him." In this way, Abraham faces the ultimate test: he must demonstrate his infinite resignation to prove himself to God, and he does this in the fervent belief that he will not really lose Isaac. As the story goes, God stopped Abraham from killing Isaac at the last second, although Kierkegaard argues that Abraham really sacrifices Isaac "when his act is in absolute contradiction with his feeling" (when he raises the knife). This both illustrates and justifies Abraham's faith that he wouldn't truly lose Isaac in this world by sacrificing him.

Like Abraham, a knight of infinite resignation or a tragic hero is willing to sacrifice what's most precious to them, but the manner of their sacrifices are different. Kierkegaard writes, "The tragic hero renounces himself in order to express the universal; the knight of faith renounces the universal in order to be the particular." This means that the tragic hero makes a personal sacrifice for the greater good, but a knight of faith violates what many people believe is the greater good for what seems like a much more specific (or personal) reason. Because of this, the "tragic hero acts and finds his point of rest in the universal." Kierkegaard means that the tragic hero does everything with the greater good in mind, and that brings them comfort after their sacrifice. A knight of faith, however, "has only himself, and it is there the terrible lies." In other words, a knight of faith really only has themselves to look to for comfort in this world after their sacrifice, and this would be terrible (they could be hounded by regret or despair) without their faith that they can still have what they sacrificed in this world.

The knight of faith's journey doesn't end with sacrifice but goes on because they keep the idea that they haven't really lost

anything alive in their heart and mind. Kierkegaard writes that the knight of faith "resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd." This means that a knight of faith never really loses anything because their faith in God and the absurd tells them that through God they can have whatever in this life is most precious to them, even if they've already sacrificed it. In this way, the knight of faith can have it all. Through making a great sacrifice, they are able to develop true faith; in return, that faith restores to them whatever they sacrificed because it helps them believe that God can and will return their sacrifice in *this* world (rather than having to wait to be reunited in heaven after death).



## THE UNINTELLIGIBILITY OF FAITH

In *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard (under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio) launches a powerful argument against the prevalence of religious indifference or even blatant disbelief in God's existence. He mourns the fact that so many people want to "go further" than faith to find something more just to arrive at doubt. However, Kierkegaard also acknowledges that "stopping" at faith requires courage because the truly faithful are often misunderstood. Kierkegaard selects the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to highlight the fact that faith is unintelligible by those who don't have it, but becomes intelligible to those who open themselves up to faith's possibilities.

Kierkegaard hones in on two possible interpretations of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac: the ethical and the spiritual. From an ethical perspective, Abraham is an evil, murderous old man. Kierkegaard writes, "if you simply remove faith as a *nix* and *nought* there remains only the raw fact that Abraham was willing to murder Isaac." In other words, when one takes Abraham's actions at face value (tying up Isaac, placing him on a sacrificial altar, and then raising up a knife to stab him) without any consideration of his motives, then he is a cold-blooded killer. Indeed, the "ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac." This means that even when one considers Abraham's motives, the chilling fact remains that he was willing to kill his own child. Furthermore, as a human being, Abraham "belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer." Regardless of motives, faith, or even the fact that Abraham didn't actually stab Isaac, his mere *willingness* to kill his son is enough to condemn him as a murderer in the universal (meaning the temporal world), and this is how many would treat him in the modern day.

However, if Abraham was truly acting in accordance with God's expressed desires, then he is actually a great and truly faithful man—not a heartless murderer. Kierkegaard points out that "the religious expression is that [Abraham] was willing to sacrifice Isaac." By *sacrificing* instead of *murdering* Isaac,

Abraham wouldn't have been fulfilling the insane desires of a murderous madman but surrendering the most precious part of his life to God at a great personal cost. The story of Abraham changes shape when "one makes faith the main thing—that is, make it what it is." If a person understands faith as the greatest and most powerful motivator, then they will also understand that Abraham's actions were courageous, selfless, and even brave because they were done for God. In Kierkegaard's opinion, "Abraham represents faith." In other words, Abraham embodies the courageousness and surrender that characterizes faith, which is in direct opposition to the ethical perspective of the case which casts Abraham as a villain.

What it all comes down to is the idea that faith is difficult to understand, and the sacrifices and choices people make in the name of their faith are even more so. Because of this, the faithful are nearly always isolated and often misunderstood. Kierkegaard highlights the isolation that comes with faith by writing that "he who walks the narrow path of faith no one can advise, no one understand." This means that not only do the faithful have nobody to turn to for guidance or advice, but nobody would understand them if they did. For example, if Abraham asked a friend for advice about any pain he might feel over having to sacrifice Isaac, that friend might have pointed out the alternative (to not kill Isaac) and question why Abraham would choose to do it anyway.

For anyone to understand Abraham's actions—or the actions of any faithful person—they would have to reconcile two difficult facts: "it [was] the expression of extreme egoism (doing this dreadful deed for his own sake) and on the other hand the expression of the most absolute devotion (doing it for God's sake)." The "extreme egoism" is at the root of what makes faith unintelligible to most people, but can be explained by the fact that faith requires sacrifice, and it's not really a sacrifice if what a person gives to God is something they're indifferent about; therefore, in order to prove his faith and pass God's test, then "for his own sake" Abraham had to be willing to sacrifice the thing that meant the most to him and which God specifically asked for—Isaac. Faith is a "hope whose outward form is insanity," and is therefore unintelligible to most. However, anyone can understand Abraham's actions if they are willing to lay aside their ethical horror at the bare fact of murder and learn more about faith, which demands personal sacrifice in exchange for the security of knowing that nothing is ever truly lost.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## KNIGHT OF FAITH

The knight of faith is a concept Johannes de silentio uses to represent any person who has true faith in God. To become a knight of faith, a person must first make the spiritual movement of infinite resignation, giving up whatever it is in this world that is most precious to them and completely reconciling themselves to the pain of losing it. This is where the **knight of infinite resignation** stops, but the knight of faith goes further because they believe that they will get back whatever they gave up *in this world*—in other words, they won't have to wait to die and go to heaven to get back whatever they gave up. Because of this, the knight of faith finds great happiness in both the temporal world and in their belief in the infinite. Abraham is a clear example of a knight of faith because he developed real faith, as shown by his willingness to sacrifice Isaac when God asked him to. Even though a reasonable person might believe that once Isaac was dead then he couldn't possibly come back to life, Abraham believed that he could get Isaac back in this world because everything is possible through God. The knight of faith is something any person can become, but it takes a lot of courage and hard work to make all the necessary spiritual movements to become one.



## KNIGHT OF INFINITE RESIGNATION

The knight of infinite resignation is a concept Johannes de silentio uses to represent any person who has made one of the last big steps before becoming a **knight of faith**. Infinite resignation is a spiritual movement by which a person both gives up whatever in the world is most precious to them and reconciles themselves to the pain of that loss. Unlike a knight of faith, though, a knight of infinite resignation has no hope of ever getting back what they've given up in this world. Instead, they might look forward to getting it back in the spirit world, like in heaven. Because a knight of infinite resignation reconciles themselves to the pain of giving up what's most precious to them, they don't hold anger or resentment against God or the world—they just don't believe that God will give them back whatever it was they gave up. They can even achieve greatness (as Kierkegaard explains, anyone can be great, but the greatest people are the ones who have faith) because people admire their infinite resignation, but to achieve the same level of greatness as a knight of faith they would have to make one more movement and embrace the absurd. In other words, they would have to leap into faith and start believing that, through God, they will get back whatever they've sacrificed *in this world*, no matter how impossible it seems.



## TRAGIC HERO

The tragic hero is a concept Johannes de silentio

uses to represent a person who makes great personal sacrifices for the greater good and is praised for it by everyone because everyone benefits from their sacrifice. Like a **knight of faith** and a **knight of infinite resignation**, a tragic hero is willing to give up something very precious to them, but it's more like an exchange. They give up one precious thing for another benefit, one that helps not just themselves but everyone else around them. Johannes uses Agamemnon—who sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to appease an angry goddess—as a prime example of a tragic hero. On the other hand, a knight of faith makes a personal sacrifice for both God's sake and their own (God's sake because it's his will and their own sake so that they have the means of proving their faith and devotion to God), and it sometimes violates universal ethics in such a way that they are condemned by all those who don't understand faith. Because all it takes is sacrificing something personal for the greater good, it is relatively easy to become a tragic hero and achieve greatness that way.

with faith” but try to find something *more*—they turn to science to explain phenomena and other things that they used to attribute to God, and they turn to philosophy for new codes of conduct, ethics, or morality to guide their behavior. These things are complicated; faith, on the other hand, is simple, which is why it's so easy to “go[] further” than faith and into the land of science and doubt.

Kierkegaard portrays faith as something that comes a little more naturally to people than science or philosophy. Kierkegaard notes that he believes “everyone does indeed have faith” because they are trying to go beyond it, which implies that they have attained it at some point in time. What this also indicates is that, in the modern world, people are getting bored with faith; they no longer want it to be “a task for a whole lifetime,” but something they can leave behind them and move on to things that seem bigger and better.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Fear and Trembling* published in 1985.

### Preface Quotes

☝ Today nobody will stop with faith; they all go further. It would perhaps be rash to inquire where to, but surely a mark of urbanity and good breeding on my part to assume that in fact everyone does indeed have faith, otherwise it would be odd to talk of going further. In those old days it was different. For then faith was a task for a whole lifetime, not a skill thought to be acquired in either days or weeks.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 42

#### Explanation and Analysis

In the opening paragraphs of *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard—through his pseudonym, Johannes de silentio—explains *why* he feels compelled to write this book. This passage also indicates what the primary topic of the book is: faith. Kierkegaard believed that 19th-century Europe was at something of a tipping point—things were rapidly changing, the world was increasingly interconnected, and more people were turning to science for answers instead of to God. This is what Kierkegaard means when he says people in today's world won't “stop

### Speech in Praise of Abraham Quotes

☝ If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that twisting in dark passions produced everything great or inconsequential; if an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness lay hid beneath everything, what then would life be but despair?

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 49

#### Explanation and Analysis

Before launching into his detailed analysis of the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard (through his pseudonym Johannes de silentio) praises faith and belief in God. In the opening pages of the book, Kierkegaard mourned that so many people want to “go further” than faith, and here he indicates what life would be like if there really were no God to have faith in: “despair.” Humanity's “eternal consciousness” is the general belief in God or some other intelligent, omniscient being that purposely created life and continues to look out for all living creatures. With that belief comes the belief in an eternal life after death, which can either be a positive or a negative thing depending on one's actions on earth. This belief, according to Kierkegaard, gives life substance and meaning—humanity wouldn't have these things if the only thing outside of the temporal is a “wild ferment” or “an unfathomable, insatiable emptiness.”

If faith and belief give life meaning by giving people an “eternal consciousness,” then doubt—the thing so many people find when they “go further” than faith—leads to life having no real meaning. Nothing a person does in life will really come to anything because once they die, even if they’re remembered for a time, they simply cease to exist. Life would be “despair” because there would be nothing to work towards or look forward to, and everyone would always have the sense that, ultimately, humanity is alone and isolated in the universe.

This passage also indicates *why* people want to achieve greatness: to be remembered. Kierkegaard assures the audience that “no one who was great will be forgotten,” which means that even people who only become great through achieving earthly success will be remembered. However, greatness has varying levels—some deeds are greater than others, and the same holds true for people. The irony is that those who “go further” than faith looking for greatness won’t achieve the same level of greatness as those who stop at faith, at least in Kierkegaard’s estimation.

☛ Therefore no one who was great will be forgotten: and however long it takes, even if a cloud of misunderstanding should take the hero away, his lover still comes, and the more time goes by the more faithfully he sticks by him.

No! No one shall be forgotten who was great in this world; but everyone was great in his own way, and everyone in proportion to the greatness of what *he loved*. For he who loved himself became great in himself, and he who loved others became great through his devotion, but he who loved God became greater than all. They shall all be remembered, but everyone became great in proportion to his *expectancy*.

☛ There was one who was great in his strength, and one who was great in his wisdom, and one who was great in hope, and one who was great in love; but greater than all was Abraham, great with that power whose strength is powerlessness, great in that wisdom whose secret is folly, great in that hope whose outward form is insanity, great in that love with is hatred of self.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 50

### Explanation and Analysis

In the beginning of the book, Kierkegaard mentioned that people in the modern age are eager to “go further” than faith in their search for something greater. This passage in Kierkegaard’s reminder to the world that the greatest people achieve their greatness through faith, not through wars or conquest or even public service. This is because things like war and public service are purely temporal matters, they are only tangentially connected to eternity or the divine, and they are rarely done out of true faith or love for God. Kierkegaard states that everyone who becomes great does so “in proportion to [their] *expectancy*,” meaning they can only achieve the same level of greatness as they set their sights to. So, when a person dedicates themselves to earthly matters then they will only ever achieve earthly greatness. However, if they set their sights to the divine and doing God’s will, then they achieve eternal greatness in addition to temporal greatness.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 50

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard has previously explained that the highest form of greatness anyone can achieve hinges on faith and devotion to God’s will, and now he goes on to explain that “greater than all was Abraham.” This introduces the reader to the primary focus of the rest of the book—Abraham’s perfect faith and how it made him what Kierkegaard calls the “father of faith.” Kierkegaard describes Abraham as having many of the typical qualities someone would associate with greatness—wisdom, strength, hope, and love—but in Abraham these qualities don’t express themselves in traditional ways.

Kierkegaard writes that Abraham was “great with that power whose strength is powerlessness.” As part of his faith, Abraham believed that God ultimately controlled everything. The best Abraham could do, then, was to put his entire trust in God, which included trusting that God wouldn’t really take Isaac away even though God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham was powerless in the face of God’s demand, but it made him faithful which in turn made him great. Kierkegaard also says Abraham was “great in that wisdom whose secret is folly.” The word “folly” insinuates that Abraham was foolish or unreasonable.

Indeed, the thing he was prepared to do (willingly sacrifice his own son without question just because God asked him to) something that to most seemed foolish. However, it showed a lot of wisdom on Abraham's part—he was wise enough and faithful enough to know that God was giving him a trial to test his faith, and so the best way to pass (and therefore to be worthy of both God and Isaac) was to do as God asked, no matter how seemingly horrible. Kierkegaard also says Abraham was “great in that love which is hatred of self.” However, his words here are somewhat misleading as “hatred of self” doesn't mean that Abraham hated himself (this is something Kierkegaard addresses later); it just means that Abraham didn't give his own feelings the same amount of consideration as he did to his love for God, Isaac, and faith. This enabled him to put his horror at God's request behind him long enough to carry it through, and thus prove his faith and receive Isaac back.

☛ Had Abraham wavered he would have renounced it. He would have said to God: ‘So perhaps after all it is not your will that it should happen; then I will give up my desire, it was my only desire, my blessed joy. My soul is upright, I bear no secret grudge because you refused it.’ He would not have been forgotten, he would have saved many by his example, yet he would not have become the father of faith; for it is great to give up one's desire, but greater to stick to it after having given it up; it is great to grasp hold of the eternal but greater to stick to the temporal after having given it up.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Abraham

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 51-52

### Explanation and Analysis

While Kierkegaard gives a quick synopsis of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, he dwells on the time Abraham and his wife Sarah spent waiting for God to fulfill a promise he made that Abraham and Sarah would have a son—something that would be difficult because they were both well beyond their child-bearing years. Having this son was important because God also told Abraham that through this son, his descendants would inherit the “Promised Land” and spread out all over the world. A lot of time went by between the time God made this promise and the time Sarah had Isaac, which is why it would be reasonable to believe Abraham might have “wavered” in his faith in God's promise. Although Abraham would still have achieved

greatness, he wouldn't have been as quite great as he became by steadfastly holding on to his faith, which echoes Kierkegaard's earlier statement that the highest form of greatness can only be achieved through faith, not through a devotion to the temporal.

Kierkegaard writes that “it is great to grasp hold of the eternal but greater to stick to the temporal after having given it up.” What he means is that it is great to give up the temporal but then still find happiness and joy there, too (instead of that person then directing all of their hope, happiness, and belief to the eternal, simply waiting to get to the afterlife to recover what they lost). This highlights not just faith, but loyalty. A person who gives up the temporal and then still “stick[s] to” it is not just faithful, but loyal to whatever they gave up. If they were to lose interest in it—for example, if what they gave up was a relationship and then after a few months they naturally follow out of love with the other person—then whatever they gave up wasn't really that meaningful to them; furthermore, this would mean it wasn't really much of a *sacrifice*.

## Preamble from the Heart Quotes

☛ Conventional wisdom aims presumptuously to introduce into the world of spirit that same law of indifference under which the outside world groans. It believes it is enough to have knowledge of large truths. No other work is necessary. But then it does not get bread, it starves to death while everything is transformed into gold.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 57-58

### Explanation and Analysis

After explaining that in the temporal world there are entire classes of people who are able to accumulate wealth without having to work for it, Kierkegaard moves on to explaining how many people treat faith the same way. He writes that many believe it's okay to just “have knowledge of larger truths,” meaning knowledge of God's existence, his commandments, and other basic tenets of Christianity. However, they only “have” this knowledge, they don't internalize or live by it if it requires too much sacrifice or becomes uncomfortable. In other words, they're not willing to do the “other work” that's required to not only develop real, genuine faith, but keep it fresh.

When a person simply holds onto a truth without internalizing it, they starve, spiritually speaking. The “bread” Kierkegaard refers to is spiritual nourishment. While someone might have a lot of material or worldly wealth and luxury, without real faith they are actually starving. On the other hand, someone might be extremely poor, but with faith they have everything and, in a way, are much wealthier than those at the top of the social and economic ladders.

☛ If the rich young man whom Christ met on the road had sold all his possessions and given them to the poor, we would praise him as we praise all great deeds, but we would not understand even him without some labour. Yet he would not have become an Abraham even had he given away the best he had. What is left out of the Abraham story is the anguish; for while I am under no obligation to money, to a son the father has the highest and most sacred of obligations. Yet anguish is a dangerous affair for the squeamish, so people forget it, notwithstanding they want to talk about Abraham. So they talk and in the course of conversation they interchange the words ‘Isaac’ and ‘best.’

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Isaac, Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 58

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard stresses the fact that when people tell the story of Abraham (or similar stories of people being willing to make sacrifices for God), they leave out what it was that made him great. It was not just his unquestioning willingness to follow God’s commands, but the fact that he was willing to follow them despite the “anguish” he felt at hearing them and that he experienced between the time God issued the command and when it was time to follow through with it. Furthermore, people tend to forget that Abraham had to wait a long time for Isaac, all that Isaac represented for both Abraham and Sarah, and the extreme love Abraham and his wife had for Isaac. This is because it makes people uncomfortable, or “squeamish.” Because it’s an unpleasant thought—especially in comparison to the miracle at the end of the story—people simply pass over it and focus on the end.

Kierkegaard makes an important point when he says that people who share Abraham’s story “interchange the words ‘Isaac’ and ‘best.’” This is also a form of skipping over the

“squeamish” parts of the story to make it more palatable or easier to understand. Abraham’s “best” could be anything—money, material goods, a career, or even his own life. These are things that are easier for a modern audience to relate to. But Isaac is a human being, Abraham and Sarah’s own son. It’s deeply uncomfortable to think about, but that is precisely the point—Abraham had to make a very uncomfortable, painful sacrifice to prove that his faith in God was real and strong. For someone to even begin to understand Abraham’s story, they cannot skip over the “anguish” or ignore the fact that Abraham’s “best” was his son—they have to be willing to explore even the darkest and most uncomfortable parts of the story.

☛ The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac; but in this contradiction lies the very anguish that can indeed make one sleepless; and yet without that anguish Abraham is not the one he is. [...] For if you remove faith as a nix and nought there remains only the raw fact that Abraham was willing to murder Isaac, which is easy enough for anyone without faith to imitate; without the faith, that is, which makes it hard.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Isaac, Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 60

### Explanation and Analysis

After telling Abraham’s story, Kierkegaard hones in on different details of the story to try and explain why they’re significant and shouldn’t be ignored. However, in doing so, Kierkegaard also has to admit that, from certain perspectives, Abraham is far from admirable. In particular, from a purely ethical perspective, Abraham is akin to a murderer. On the other hand, when one considers Abraham’s faith, he wasn’t trying to *murder* Isaac, he felt that he had to *sacrifice* Isaac. This implies that Abraham had a justifiable reason for being willing to kill Isaac, which would mean that he’s not a cold-blooded murderer that should inspire horror. This is one reason why this part of Abraham’s story is a source of “anguish.” Surely Abraham himself knew that if he sacrificed Isaac, other people would vilify him and be horrified by him, possibly even his own wife. Abraham knew what he was doing violated ethics, but faith is higher than an earthly code of ethics, and this is why Abraham was

willing to sacrifice his son.

More importantly, anyone can “imitate” Abraham by murdering someone and saying it was out of faith or love of God. In these cases, however, the murder itself is selfish and therefore easy. Faith can make some things “hard” because it sometimes requires doing things that go against the ethics a person has been raised to respect and adhere to. This is why faith is often misunderstood—it sometimes requires doing things that other people don’t understand, and so they won’t have anyone to talk to about their actions and motives.

☛ Love, after all, has its priests in the poets, and occasionally one hears a voice that knows how to keep it in shape; but about faith one hears not a word, who speaks in *this* passion’s praises? Philosophy goes further. Theology sits all painted at the window courting philosophy’s favour, offering philosophy its delights. It is said to be hard to understand Hegel, while understanding Abraham, why, that’s a bagatelle. To go beyond Hegel, that is a miracle, but to go beyond Abraham is the simplest of all.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 62

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard returns to the topic of how little importance most of society attaches to faith, this time stressing the fact that faith isn’t even taken seriously in art. There are very few poems about the glories of faith, especially in comparison to the amount of attention the topic of love receives. Kierkegaard says that faith is a “passion,” which shows that, like love, it can consume a person’s entire life. Kierkegaard believes faith is a visceral experience, not something that someone can develop and then put out of their mind most of the time.

Kierkegaard has mentioned more than once that most people in the modern world try to go beyond faith, and philosophy does an excellent job of presenting new ideas and beliefs that help people do so. This is why Kierkegaard says it is difficult for people “to understand Hegel, while understanding Abraham.” Hegel was an extremely popular and important philosopher, and he embodies everything that philosophy has to offer. Abraham, on the other hand,

embodies faith. What Kierkegaard means here is that it’s hard to be both philosophical *and* faithful because philosophy is all about going further than faith. The real trouble, Kierkegaard points out, is finding something beyond Hegel (philosophy) because philosophy is what people arrive at when they go beyond faith. It is easy to go further than faith because just one moment of doubt is enough to shatter it unless one is always working to keep it strong.

☛ I have seen horror face to face, I do not flee it in fear but know very well that, however bravely I face it, my courage is not that of faith and not at all to be compared with it. I cannot close my eyes and hurl myself trustingly into the absurd, for me it is impossible, but I do not praise myself on that account. I am convinced that God is love; this thought has for me a pristine lyrical validity. When it is present to me I am unspeakably happy, when it is absent I yearn for it more intensely than the lover for the beloved; but I do not have faith; this courage I lack.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 63

### Explanation and Analysis

After describing Abraham’s faith and the importance of faith in general, Kierkegaard reveals that developing faith requires something more than belief and love for God—first and foremost it requires courage. Not everyone has this courage; in fact, Kierkegaard isn’t courageous enough to take the necessary leap into faith. Kierkegaard seems to acknowledge that some people might think it’s admirable of him not to “close [his] eyes and hurl [him]self trustingly into the absurd” by reassuring the reader that he doesn’t “praise” himself for it. This is because he does actually believe in God; more than that, he loves God and that love of God brings him comfort and joy even though he’s unable to take the next step in developing faith. In fact, he makes that next step sound terrifying because he’d have to close his eyes and “hurl” himself into something, which implies that he also loses a lot of control—he doesn’t know where he’ll land or if he’ll even survive the fall.

Even though Kierkegaard describes the leap of faith as something terrifying that requires a lot of courage, this also emphasizes the fact that those who *can* do it are worthy of admiration and respect. They have done something not

everyone can do, no matter how much they love God. This is because faith isn't just believing in God or loving him, but being willing to blindly trust God's word even when it doesn't make sense or even defies temporal ethics.

Let us go further. We let Isaac actually be sacrificed. Abraham had faith. His faith was not that he should be happy sometime in the hereafter, but that he should find blessed happiness here in this world. God could give him a new Isaac, bring the sacrificial offer back to life. He believed on the strength of the absurd, for all human calculation had long since be suspended.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Isaac, Abraham

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 65

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard frequently considers alternative scenarios when he uses stories to illustrate a concept or a point he's making, and that is what he does in this passage. By creating this alternative ending to the story—one where Abraham really *does* sacrifice Isaac instead of God stopping him at the last second—Kierkegaard is able to highlight what he means when he says faith requires trusting in the absurd. If Abraham were to use pure reason in deciding whether or not to listen to God's command to sacrifice Isaac, then he would very likely back out of it because reason says that once Isaac is dead it will be impossible to get him back. The absurd, however, says that Isaac is not beyond reach, that God can either resurrect him or even give Abraham and Sarah a new baby that's really a reincarnation of Isaac. This, of course, defies "human calculation" because it requires the divine.

The most important aspect of faith is the belief that anything that a person sacrifices can be restored to them "in this world." This means it can be restored to them here on earth; nobody has to wait to die and get to the afterlife to be reunited with whatever or whoever they've lost. That is why people who truly have faith are able to simultaneously make sacrifices and experience "blessed happiness." To them, nothing is truly gone forever, as they can receive any number of seemingly impossible blessings through God.

Abraham I cannot understand; in a way all I can learn from him is to be amazed. If one imagines one can be moved to faith by considering the outcome of this story, one deceives oneself, and is out to cheat God of faith's first movement, one is out to suck the life-wisdom out of the paradox. One or another may succeed, for our age does not stop with faith, with its miracle of turning water into wine; it goes further, it turns wine into water.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 66-67

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard explains that he is able to wrap his head around some of the steps faith takes (such as infinite resignation), but faith itself is very difficult to understand. However, rather than treating Abraham (who embodies faith) with suspicion, Kierkegaard is "amazed" by him and sees him as a great man. This is because Kierkegaard pays attention to every detail of the story, not just the end of it when Abraham is saved from having to stab Isaac to offer him as a sacrifice. In Kierkegaard's opinion, the reality of faith is most truly seen in the actual journey to Mount Moriah when Abraham must have been tortured by what he would have to do but was still willing to do it.

Kierkegaard believes that using the ending of Abraham's story as a basis of faith ignores "faith's first step": infinite resignation. People ignore the journey to Mount Moriah because they place too much importance on the acts of tying Isaac up and raising the knife. Still, some people get away with claiming they have faith just to then go beyond it. Kierkegaard describes how society "turns wine into water" after faith "turns water into wine." This is a reference to a story of Jesus Christ, who was said to be able to turn water into wine. What society does is strip life of its color, flavor, and depth by turning "wine into water." By going beyond faith, society spiritually starves itself, and the only thing beautiful about life is its exterior (wealth, luxury, material goods, and so on). Faith, on the other hand, creates a beautiful interior life.

●● He drains in infinite resignation the deep sorrow of existence, he knows the bliss of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, whatever is most precious in the world, and yet to him finitude tastes just as good as to one who has never known anything higher, for his remaining in the finite bore no trace of a stunted, anxious training, and still he has this sense of being secure to take pleasure in it, as though it were the most certain thing of all. [...] He resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 69-70

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard says that he's never met someone who is a true knight of faith (someone who has attained real faith), but he is able to describe what that person would probably be like. Through infinite resignation, the knight of faith is able to get a glimpse of the eternal (which Kierkegaard describes as "bliss"), but there is still a lot of happiness to be found in the temporal world. However, a knight of faith has had to make sacrifices (of "whatever is most precious in the world") that any person guided by something less than faith (such as logic or reason) would think spoils the temporal (what Kierkegaard here calls "finitude"). While a person guided by reason might succumb to misery after such a huge sacrifice, the knight of faith thinks it "tastes just as good as to one who has never known anything higher." This is because their faith tells them that nothing is really lost because they can physically get it all back through God.

Kierkegaard states that the knight of faith has "resigned everything infinitely" but then "took everything back on the strength of the absurd." This doesn't mean that they physically take back whatever they've given (for example, Abraham wouldn't physically grab Isaac back if he actually offered him as a burnt sacrifice), but they genuinely and confidently believe that God will give it back to them to enjoy in this world. In this way, nothing is ever really lost, but everything is possible. Therein lies the knight of faith's happiness.

●● The absurd is not one distinction among others embraced by understanding. It is not the same as the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 75

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard frequently refers to the absurd and how faith is closely connected with a person's ability to grasp and believe in the absurd, but this is the only time he really explains that, in this context, the absurd goes a little beyond what people typically associate it with. For one, it isn't as simple as "the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen." These are all things that exist within the realm of believability and, as Kierkegaard points out, are "embraced by understanding." Instead, the truly absurd is seemingly impossible and defies all logic. A person guided by reason would scoff at a truly absurd idea, like that God could resurrect Isaac after Abraham sacrifices him. However, most people who believe in God also believe that God can do literally anything. The difference between most people and people with faith is that the faithful have truly internalized the idea that God can do anything, and they take it a step further by believing he will reward them for their faith by giving them back all that they sacrifice to him. This is also part of the reason most people can't understand the motives and actions of people who are guided by faith.

●● I can see then that it requires strength and energy and freedom of spirit to make the infinite movement of resignation; I can also see that it can be done. The next step dumbfounds me, my brain reels; for having made the movement of resignation, now on the strength of the absurd to get everything, to get one's desire, whole, in full, that requires more-than-human powers, it is a marvel.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 76

### Explanation and Analysis

Through the pseudonymous Johannes de silentio, Kierkegaard reveals the true state of his personal spiritual

journey. Kierkegaard has a unique perspective as someone who recognizes what the necessary steps are, how they can be done, and how great the reward at the end of it all is, but his “brain reels” just thinking about doing them himself. This is how he knows that one needs courage to take the leap, but they also need “strength and energy and freedom of spirit.” This emphasizes Kierkegaard’s belief that faith is not easy, nor is faith something anyone can passively accept or immediately grasp.

Making “the movement of resignation” is something relatively simple because it’s something that even reason can think clearly about and understand. Making sacrifices is understandable, but most people assume that whatever a someone sacrifices is gone forever. People with faith, however, believe they will get it all back in this life. In this way, people with faith are able to make immense sacrifices without the same amount of fear as people who don’t have any faith or who believe they might get what they sacrifice back but only in death. Kierkegaard says that it “requires more-than-human powers,” which highlights how faith is not a one-way street but a real connection between an individual and the divine.

## Problema 1 Quotes

☛ Seen as an immediate, no more than sensate and psychic, being, the single individual is the particular that has its *telos* in the universal, and the individual’s ethical task is always to express himself in this, to abrogate his particularity so as to become the universal.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 83

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard begins his discussion about the teleological suspension of ethics in Abraham’s story by explaining the individual *telos*. *Telos* means an “end” or “purpose.” When Kierkegaard writes that a person has their “*telos* in the universal,” he means that a person’s entire purpose has to do with the universal, or the temporal world around them. Society in general believes that individual people have an “ethical task” or obligation to live their lives by temporal rules of conduct (ethics). Part of this obligation is to “abrogate [their] particularity so as to become the universal.” This actually means that society expects people

to give up their individuality (“particularity”) to fit in with the community (“universal”). In other words, people must conform to the rules of conduct around them, both legal and social. They must do this in order to fulfill their *telos* (purpose) as a human being and a member of the universal (society).

This concept, however, becomes complicated when one considers faith, which (as Kierkegaard will explain) sometimes demands people do things that seem to violate temporal ethics. An example would be Abraham sacrificing Isaac because God asked him to. Ethically speaking, this would be murder. In this case, the disconnect between what temporal ethics demands and what God asked Abraham to do is what makes faith unintelligible in a largely secular society.

☛ Faith is just this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is justified before the latter, not as subordinate but superior, though in such a way, be it noted, that it is the single individual who, having been subordinate to the universal as the particular, now by means of the universal becomes that individual who, as the particular, stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. This position cannot be mediated, for all mediation occurs precisely by virtue of the universal; it is and remains in all eternity a paradox, inaccessible to thought. And yet faith is this paradox.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 84-85

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard begins tackling the first of three “problemata” regarding Abraham’s story by explaining the relationship between the individual, the universal (temporal world), and the eternal. Kierkegaard frequently refers to paradoxes of faith, and this is the first big one: faith both sets a person apart from the universal and requires them to be a part of it. Kierkegaard has already established that the individual is ethically expected to conform to the universal and be a part of their community instead of setting themselves apart, so this is also an instance of how faith violates accepted temporal ethics. When an individual is “subordinate to the universal” it means that they are conforming to temporal ethics, following society’s rules of conduct that are designed to make sure society is harmonious. Individuals, whether

they're faithful or not, only have the temporal world in which to act, so it's through the universal that they are able to make the sacrifices and movements towards faith. In other words, it's "by means of the universal" that the "individual [...] stands in an absolute relation to the absolute." Having an "absolute relation to the absolute" means having a real, meaningful relationship with God ("the absolute").

This is a complicated idea, but so is faith. In fact, as Kierkegaard writes, it's "inaccessible to thought" and one more reason why faith itself remains unintelligible to most people.

☛ Then why does Abraham do it? For God's sake, and what is exactly the same, for his own. He does it for the sake of God because God demands this proof of his faith; he does it for his own sake in order to be able to produce the proof. The unity here is quite properly expressed in the saying in which this relationship has always been described: it is a trial, a temptation. A temptation, but what does that mean? What we usually call a temptation is something that keeps a person from carrying out a duty, but here the temptation is the ethical itself which would keep him from doing God's will. But then what is the duty? For the duty is precisely the expression of God's will.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 89

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard tries to explain why Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac instead of either refusing to or sacrificing himself instead. Kierkegaard writes that Abraham sacrificed Isaac both for God's sake and for his own. This is also the reason why so many people are appalled by Abraham's actions: they violate ethics (Abraham's ethical duty as a father is to love and protect Isaac) but without a tangible benefit to the universal. Abraham seems selfish because half of his motive *is* selfish: he wants to be able to prove his faith and so he has to kill Isaac. Still, it would be wrong to say that Abraham *likes* what God asked him to do—he just knows that he has a higher duty to God than he does to anything temporal.

Kierkegaard says that Abraham is faced with both "a trial" and "a temptation," which "is the ethical itself." This means

that Abraham is tempted to do the ethical thing: to *not* kill Isaac. A temptation usually "keeps a person from carrying out a duty," but Abraham seems to have two duties—a duty to God, who demands Isaac for a sacrifice, and a duty as a father to protect Isaac from harm. Abraham, then, has to choose which duty to fulfill. Because God and faith are higher than universal ethics, he must fulfill his duty to God or else he won't be a knight of faith, let alone the "father of faith" (which is how Kierkegaard refers to him). The trial, of course, is a test of faith that lasts from the moment God asked him to sacrifice Isaac until the moment Abraham raised the knife and proves his willingness to trust totally in God and the absurd.

☛ But it is the outcome that arouses our curiosity, as with the conclusion of a book, one wants nothing of the fear, the distress, the paradox. One flirts with the outcome aesthetically; it comes as unexpectedly and yet as effortlessly as a prize in the lottery; and having heard the outcome one is improved. And yet no robber of temples hard-labouring in chains is so base a criminal as he who plunders the holy in this way, and not even Judas, who sold his master for thirty pieces of silver, is more contemptible than the person who would thus offer greatness for sale.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Isaac, Abraham

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard frequently criticizes people who focus only on the nice parts of Abraham's story—such as when God delivers Isaac and provides a ram to sacrifice instead—and ignore the uncomfortable parts (like the fact that Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son or the three-day journey it took for him to get to Mount Moriah). This is because people don't like "the fear, the distress"; they only want the happy ending and to be inspired. For this reason, they "flirt[] with the outcome aesthetically," which means they praise how it looks and preach about how nice it is. Like a "prize in the lottery," the intervention of God is miraculous, a true testament to his power and Abraham's greatness for having trusted him so.

Kierkegaard sees this tendency as a moral failing and a deep wrong. Faith requires sacrifice, leaping into it is scary, and the path of faith is isolating. Perhaps the most important part of faith is that it is difficult—it takes a lot of work and

sacrifice, so when people only share the happy parts of Abraham's story, they "offer greatness for sale" and cheapen faith, making it seem like it's easy to attain. Kierkegaard says that people who only share the happy parts of Abraham's story are worse than people who "rob[] temples" because they are willfully misrepresenting the reality of faith, and thus making it more difficult for other people to realize how great faith really is.

with God. They don't act just for themselves, but for God as well. They do this knowing that God is watching and cares about what they're doing. It is almost like an exchange. Abraham knows that if he can definitely prove his faith by sacrificing Isaac, then God will reward him by giving him back Isaac (this is the absurd). In this way, Abraham has a real connection with God, and anyone who has true faith can enjoy a similar one.

## Problema 2 Quotes

☝☝ To the question, why?, Abraham has no other answer than that it is a trial and a temptation, which, as remarked above, is what makes it a unity of being for both God's sake and his own. [...] On one hand it contains the expression of extreme egoism (doing this dreadful deed for his own sake) and on the other expression of the most absolute devotion (doing it for God's sake). Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for in that case it would be cancelled. Faith is this paradox, and the single individual is quite unable to make himself intelligible to anyone.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Abraham

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 98-99

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard again explains how Abraham's actions were both an expression of his personal will and an expression of his devotion to—and faith in—God. Kierkegaard makes another interesting point in this passage: "Faith itself cannot be mediated into the universal, for in that case it would be cancelled." When an individual has faith, they are able to transcend the universal even while they're still a part of it (this is the paradox of faith). However, if anyone tries to mediate (which here means to express, convey, or explain) faith into universal terms, they have to drag it down from its high place in the spirit world in order to try to make it intelligible. Even though the person can't truly make anyone understand them when they discuss faith, this is still how faith gets "cancelled." This also forces a knight of faith into isolation—they can't mediate faith into the universal, and so nobody in the universal can understand them.

Kierkegaard also describes how there is a "unity" in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac because it's both for himself and for God. This also highlights how when one acts on faith and the absurd, they do develop a real connection

☝☝ The moment he is ready to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical expression for what he does is this: he hates Isaac. But if he actually hates Isaac he can be certain that God does not require this of him; for Cain and Abraham are not the same. Isaac he must love with all his soul. When God asks for Isaac, Abraham must if possible love him even more, and only then can he *sacrifice* him; for it is indeed this love of Isaac that in its paradoxical opposition to his love of God makes his act a sacrifice. But the distress and anguish in the paradox is that, humanly speaking, he is quite incapable of making himself understood. Only in the moment when his act is in absolute contradiction with his feeling, only then does he sacrifice Isaac, but the reality of his act is that in virtue of which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Isaac, Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 101-102

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard explains the contradiction between the ethical and spiritual perspectives of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Kierkegaard notes that a father's highest ethical obligation to their children is to love and protect them, but Abraham blatantly violates this by bringing Isaac to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him. From an ethical perspective, Abraham must hate Isaac or else Abraham would never dream of hurting him, let alone killing him. However, as Kierkegaard points out, if Abraham hated Isaac, then God would never have asked specifically for Isaac as a sacrifice. A sacrifice only counts as such if it means something to someone, and Isaac means more than anything else to Abraham. This means that, spiritually speaking, Abraham is *sacrificing*, not murdering, Isaac. In fact, as Kierkegaard states, Abraham must "if possible love him more" because Abraham also knows that this is his greatest spiritual trial, the ultimate test of his faith.

Kierkegaard notes that Abraham's love for Isaac stands in "paradoxical opposition to his love of God." This is related to another point Kierkegaard makes: God demands absolute love. Abraham, then, is being asked to demonstrate his absolute love for God by doing something that, from an ethical perspective, demonstrates hatred for Isaac. That doesn't mean that Abraham really does hate Isaac, just that he has absolute love in God *and* trusts that God would never ask him to do anything too difficult (hence his belief that, on the strength of the absurd, he won't really lose Isaac when he sacrifices him). The moment Abraham raises the knife over Isaac, "his act is in absolute contradiction with his feeling," and he has proven his faith and willingness to renounce the universal in favor of the spiritual.

there is something higher than ethics that they have to abide by—God's will. They do this in order to be "the particular," or the individual in a world that generally demands conformity. On one hand, this gives them a real relationship with God, the security and happiness of faith, which says that nothing is ever really lost in this world. On the other hand, because they become "the particular," they are isolated and alone, even in a bustling city or crowded room. As the particular, they no longer quite belong to the universal; the universal doesn't understand them, and often stigmatizes them. Although, like Abraham, a knight of faith might be recognized as great in the future. A tragic hero, however, is typically praised for their greatness during their lifetime and for generations after.

☞ The tragic hero renounces himself in order to express the universal; the knight of faith renounces the universal in order to be the particular.

☞ The true knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher, and in this lies the deep humanity in him which is more worth than this foolish concern for others' weal and woe which is honoured under the name of sympathy, but which is really nothing but vanity. A person who wants only to be a witness confesses thereby that no one, not even the least, needs another person's sympathy, or is to be put down so another can raise himself up. But because what he himself won he did not win on the cheap, so neither does he sell it on the cheap; he is not so pitiable as to accept people's admiration and pay for it with silent contempt; he knows that whatever truly is great is available equally for all.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard highlights the difference between a knight of faith and a tragic hero (such as how they're perceived and what their path to greatness is like). This quote succinctly explains the fundamental difference between the two. According to Kierkegaard, a tragic hero "renounces himself in order to express the universal." This really means that the tragic hero makes a personal sacrifice; they set aside their personal feelings, relationships, inclinations, and beliefs to do something else "to express the universal." The ethical belongs to the universal, which is why Kierkegaard says elsewhere that the tragic hero engages in a higher expression of the ethical. In the context of the tragic hero, this "higher expression" typically means that they violate some part of the ethical (Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia, for example) in order to prevent an even worse tragedy from occurring (by sacrificing Iphigenia, Agamemnon saved more lives).

The knight of faith, however, seems to do the opposite: they "renounce[] the universal in order to be the particular." By renouncing the universal, a knight of faith declares that

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 107-108

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard addresses the question of whether a knight of faith could simply show others how to become faithful and thus spread the happiness and security that comes with faith. Unfortunately, as Kierkegaard explains, a "true knight of faith is a witness, never a teacher." This means that a knight of faith is, quite literally, a witness to God's power and ability, and they derive a real comfort from their belief that God is always with them, knows their pain and their joy, and will help them through life's trials. They are also a witness to faith's ability to create joy in times of despair, which is why they don't have a "foolish concern for others' weal and woe." It sounds heartless and cold, but it doesn't

necessarily mean that a knight of faith won't try to comfort someone who's in pain or help those who need it. It just means that a knight of faith recognizes that for the person to have real comfort, they must try to make the spiritual movements that lead to faith.

Unfortunately, faith requires sacrifice, which necessarily leads to pain. It takes work for a person in pain to reconcile themselves to it and find joy, and this is why the journey to faith takes so long. This is why Kierkegaard says, "what he himself won he did not win on the cheap." The knight of faith knows that faith doesn't come through a special one-size-fits-all formula and there is no easy road leading to it, but anyone can have faith if they have belief, determination, love, strength, and passion.

people are naturally somewhat closed off and secretive—everyone has an entire inner life that isn't open to observation or comment by others. In order to honor the ethical, everyone must learn how to make their lives transparent by explaining themselves and acting out in the open rather than hiding their actions. However, if the paradox is true and the individual is higher than the universal, then it follows that there must be exceptions to this—some people must have justifiable reasons for remaining silent. On the other hand, ethics states that concealment is a sin. This only adds to the unintelligibility of faith because people are quick to condemn those who conceal anything (such as Abraham hiding the fact that he was going to sacrifice Isaac).

### Problema 3 Quotes

☛ The ethical is as such the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed. Seen as an immediate, no more than sensate and psychic being, the individual is concealed. So his ethical task is to unwrap himself from this concealment and become disclosed in the universal. Thus whenever he wants to remain in concealment, he sins and is in a state of temptation, from which he can emerge only by disclosing himself.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 109

#### Explanation and Analysis

The final *problema* that Kierkegaard examines asks whether it was right of Abraham not to tell his wife, son, or trusted servant about what God asked him to do (sacrifice his son Isaac). Kierkegaard again states that the "ethical is as such the universal." However, the paradox of faith declares that the individual is higher than the universal and stands in absolute relation to the absolute, but they must do this through the universal. For this reason, the individual is generally justified in acting in seeming opposition to the universal (for example, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac for both his own sake and God's, but not for the universal). Kierkegaard also states that because ethics is the universal, it is "the disclosed." This means open, honest, and transparent. Everyone must be able to both see a person's actions and know the motives behind them.

Human beings are by nature "concealed." This means that

☛ Abraham is silent—but he *cannot* speak, therein lies the distress and anguish. For if when I speak I cannot make myself understood, I do not speak even if I keep talking without stop day and night. This is the case with Abraham. He can say what he will, but there is one thing he cannot say and since he cannot say it, i.e. say it in a way that another understands it, he does not speak. The relief of speech is that it translates me into the universal. Now Abraham can say the most beautiful things any language can muster about how he loves Isaac. But this is not what he has in mind, that being the deeper thought that he would have to sacrifice Isaac because it was a trial. This no one can understand, and so no one can but misunderstand the former.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Isaac, Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 137

#### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard begins his explanation for why Abraham chose not to tell Isaac, Sarah, Eleazar about his plan to sacrifice Isaac. Kierkegaard has previously stated that people who walk the path of faith are isolated, and this passage helps explain that: they "*cannot* speak." There is a difference between talking and speaking: talking can be casual and relatively meaningless, but speaking involves sharing serious thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Abraham can't do this because he knows that he can't make anyone else understand him. This means he can't ask them for advice, share his feelings, or look for comfort. He can only look to himself and God to organize his thoughts and find comfort.

Kierkegaard notes that Abraham can talk freely about his love for Isaac. This is because a parent's love for their child is easy to understand; more than that, society generally believes these feelings are ethically proper and it would be a violation for any parent to *not* love and protect their children. While Abraham might be thinking about this, it's not the "deeper thought" that he's preoccupied with. Abraham knows God has given him a "trial," and it involves sacrificing Isaac. Abraham also knows that this trial in particular is going to be harder than when God told Abraham to go into the desert or when he promised that the elderly Sarah would give Abraham a son—this trial demands that Abraham prove once and for all the extent of his faith. However, faith is unintelligible, and nobody can understand what one person's faith means to them or why they would choose to violate the universal and risk being branded as a villain for it. If anyone were to discover Abraham's deeper thought about the trial, they would inevitably doubt all that Abraham had to say about how much he loved Isaac.

☛ But as the task is given to Abraham, it is he who must act, so he must know at the decisive moment what he is about to do, and accordingly must know that Isaac is to be sacrificed. If he doesn't definitely know that, he hasn't made the infinite movement of resignation, in which case his words are not indeed untrue, but then at the same time he is very far from being Abraham, he is less significant than a tragic hero, he is in fact an irresolute man who can resolve to do neither one thing nor the other, and who will therefore always come to talk in riddles. But such a *Haesitator* [waverer] is simply a parody of the knight of faith.

**Related Characters:** Johannes de silentio / Søren Kierkegaard (speaker), Isaac, Abraham

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 143

### Explanation and Analysis

Kierkegaard explains why Abraham was right to give Isaac an ironic answer when Isaac asked him where their sacrificial lamb was (Abraham said God would provide one). Kierkegaard believes Abraham had to carefully consider how he answered Isaac because it'd be wrong to lie and the truth would have been unintelligible, and he succeeded in finding an answer that didn't actually say anything (neither an untruth nor a truth). When Isaac asked Abraham about the lamb, it was a temptation; Isaac essentially gave Abraham an opening to reveal the truth. By overcoming this temptation, Abraham effectively confirms that he has definitely decided to sacrifice Isaac in the exact way God asked him to. Had Abraham wavered here, it would have indicated that he wasn't infinitely resigned, and then he'd be "far from being Abraham." This doesn't mean that Abraham wouldn't be great, he just wouldn't be the "father of faith" or a paragon of faith and belief.

Kierkegaard writes that if Abraham hadn't made the movement of infinite resignation when Isaac asked about the lamb, then Abraham would be "less significant than a tragic hero." A tragic hero is still a great person, but they sacrifice for the universal, not for faith (which is higher). A tragic hero is confident in their decisions, although that confidence comes from the universal praise they receive for their actions. Without infinite resignation, Abraham would be "irresolute," and, even if he did sacrifice Isaac, it would be more like mere chance (that at that moment he believed he would do it even though a moment before he was sure he wouldn't) than a testament of faith. In this way, Abraham would have been a "parody of the knight of faith"; in other words, he'd have been somewhat fraudulent and therefore not the "father of faith."



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PREFACE

Johannes de silentio writes that, in the modern day, ideas are bought and sold on the cheap, and modern intellectuals are devoting all their energy to doubting everything. However, none of these doubters have shared how they took the first step towards doubt, and nobody who wants to understand this tendency will be able to find it out on their own. Johannes asserts that while the ancient Greeks believed doubt took an entire lifetime to perfect, most of today's thinkers start with doubt. Nobody "stop[s]" at faith, although they must have experienced faith or else it'd be difficult to go beyond it. This, too, was different in the old days—people believed faith, like doubt, had to be developed over a lifetime, not just a few days or weeks. Johannes says he's not a philosopher and believes this work will mostly be ignored, although some will criticize him.

*Johannes de silentio is Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonym (one of many that he used throughout his writing career) and, roughly translated, means "John the silent." Kierkegaard is specifically concerned with the fact that nobody "stop[s]" at faith. This implies that people do achieve faith, but then they leave it behind for something else, presumably something newer, bigger, and better. Kierkegaard displays a strong admiration for the past because that is when faith was really taken seriously, and people devoted their whole lives to it. It's because people in the modern age don't take faith seriously that Kierkegaard believes this book will be mostly ignored.*



## ATTUNEMENT

Johannes tells the story of a man who had learned about and loved the biblical story of how God tested Abraham. As the man grew older, he became more and more interested in the story, but he also understood it less and less. What the man wanted above everything was to witness the actual events in the story because his adult thoughts about it were so varied and complicated. Johannes says that if the man had been able to read Hebrew, then maybe it would have been easier for him to understand the story.

*The man in this story begins with simply loving the story of Abraham, but over time he becomes confused by it. This highlights how as people get older and start thinking more deeply, faith (Abraham's primary motive in all of his actions) becomes increasingly unintelligible. In the story, Johannes illustrates how people tend to complicate faith by thinking about it, which is also why he'll later state that faith actually starts where thinking stops.*



In the story, God commands Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him there. So, Abraham wakes up early one morning and goes off into the desert with Isaac. As they get closer to Mount Moriah, Abraham gently indicates to Isaac what is going to happen. Confused, Isaac begs Abraham to explain, but to no avail. When they reach the top of the mountain, Abraham suddenly turns on Isaac with a terrifying look on his face and tells Isaac that he wants to do this for himself, not because God commanded it. Isaac cries out that God will be his father. Abraham mutters under his breath that it's better for Isaac to think he's a monster than to lose faith in God.

*The man at the beginning of the story considers four alternative scenarios in Abraham and Isaac's story. In this scenario, Abraham decides to try and make Isaac hate him so he won't blame God, which is notable because it indicates that Isaac might not have the same amount of faith in God as Abraham. If Isaac did have that same faith, Abraham wouldn't have needed to lie about why he was sacrificing Isaac.*



Johannes writes that a mother who is weaning her baby “blackens her breast” so the baby will think the breasts have changed while the mother herself is the same. This mother is lucky that she doesn’t have to do any worse to wean the baby.

*In this analogy, the mother appears to obscure the baby’s source of nourishment (Abraham), but makes sure the mother (God) remains the same. This way the baby’s anger is directed at the source of nourishment for disappearing, but not the mother herself.*



In another version, Abraham and Isaac leave Sarah early in the morning. The two ride their donkeys to Mount Moriah in silence. Abraham ties Isaac up and prepares to sacrifice him but catches sight of the ram just in time. The father and son sacrifice the ram and return home together. However, from that day forward Abraham is unhappy because he can’t forget that God asked him to sacrifice Isaac.

*In this version, Abraham actually loses his faith and becomes angry at God for asking him to make such a tremendous sacrifice—something he had to agonize over for days as they traveled to Mount Moriah—just to intervene at the last moment. To Abraham, it seems like God has trifled with him and hurt him needlessly.*



Johannes writes that when the baby is old enough to be weaned, the mother covers her breast entirely, and the child believes he or she no longer has a mother. However, the baby is lucky that they didn’t lose their mother in any other way.

*In this analogy, the baby only loses the mother’s breasts, not the mother herself. However, in Isaac’s case, although he still has his father physically with him, Abraham is fundamentally changed because of his anger at God. Unfortunately for Isaac, he’s lost his father in a much darker way than the baby in the analogy lost their mother.*



In a third version, Abraham wakes up early to go to Mount Moriah, but he sees Sarah kiss Isaac before he goes. Abraham thinks about Hagar and the son he drove away into the desert while he travels to Mount Moriah alone. When Abraham gets to the top of the mountain, he throws himself on the ground and begs God’s forgiveness for having been willing to sacrifice Isaac—a father’s primary duty, after all, is to love and care for his son. Abraham believes it was the greatest sin of all to consider sacrificing Isaac.

*In this scenario, even though Abraham was only willing to sacrifice Isaac because God directly asked him to, he feels like he’s committed a major sin by being willing to do it. This is because Abraham, and many other fathers, believe that their primary and most sacred duty is to love and protect their children. So, Abraham feels like he’s failed some sort of test by being willing to sacrifice his beloved son.*



Johannes writes that when a mother weans her baby, she becomes sad because she and her baby are growing apart. However, she and her baby experience this sorrow together, and she is lucky that she’s been able to keep her baby so close.

*This analogy highlights the close connection between a parent and their child. Like the mother and baby, Abraham and Isaac will be able to work through life’s trials together because Abraham did not violate his sacred duty to protect Isaac, even from himself.*



In a fourth version, Abraham and Isaac arrive at Mount Moriah together, and Abraham faithfully prepares to sacrifice Isaac. However, just before Abraham pulls the knife out, Isaac sees him clench his fist and shudder in anguish before raising the knife. The two go back home together, but Isaac has lost his faith—he never tells Abraham about this, nor does Abraham suspect anything is amiss.

*In the final scenario the man thinks of, it’s actually Isaac that loses his faith and becomes angry. Seeing Abraham waver in his faith by betraying a sign of anguish left Isaac confused and hurt in much the same way Abraham felt confused and hurt in the second scenario.*



Johannes writes that when the mother is prepared to wean her baby, she keeps solid food close by so the baby won't starve to death. The mother is lucky that she has more food to offer the baby.

*In this analogy, the solid food represents faith. At the end of the fourth scenario, Isaac is spiritually starving but Abraham doesn't know, and so he can't provide nourishment. Unfortunately, that means Abraham is not as lucky as the mother in the analogy.*



The man who loves the story of Abraham considers all four of these possibilities but still doesn't understand Abraham, even though he was truly a great man.

*Because the man himself doesn't really have faith, he can't understand Abraham, who embodies pure faith in God.*



## SPEECH IN PRAISE OF ABRAHAM

Johannes writes that if humanity didn't have an "eternal consciousness" or if everything beyond the temporal world were empty, then life would be nothing but despair. Without noticeable change and progress from one generation to the next, life would be meaningless. However, according to Johannes, this is why God created poets and heroes—heroes to do great deeds and poets to publicly praise them, keeping their heroic actions alive in humanity's collective memory. Thanks to the poets, no truly great person is ever forgotten, and every person has the potential to be great in their own way and in proportion to what they devote their lives to. Some devote their lives to themselves and some people devote their lives to others, but the greatest are those who love and devote their lives to God, namely Abraham even though he seems full of contradictions (such as finding power in powerlessness).

*The "eternal consciousness" Johannes refers to is believing in eternal life after death. Having an eternal consciousness gives life more meaning because it hinges on the belief that whatever a person does in this world will live on and carry on to the next. However, not only does a person's spirit go on, but humanity itself goes on and changes (hopefully for the better) from generation to generation. What makes Abraham and others who devote their lives to God so great is that they set their sights beyond the temporal and into the eternal. Instead of focusing their energy on their earthly life, they consider both their earthly life and their eternal one.*



Through faith, Abraham found the courage to leave his comfortable life behind to wander in the desert, even though he didn't fully understand why God chose him to do it. Furthermore, Abraham left no "song of lament" about his confusion because his faith was greater. It was also through faith that Abraham found the patience to wait for decades for the son God promised him he'd have with Sarah. Johannes notes that if Abraham ever wavered in his faith, he would have given up on waiting for God's promise. Nobody would have blamed Abraham for this, and he would still be great, but he wouldn't be "the father of faith," and Sarah might have died of grief. Fortunately, Abraham and Sarah remained faithful—which Johannes claims kept them young—and God's promise was ultimately fulfilled.

*Abraham's life is characterized by his various choices: choosing to go into the desert, choosing to faithfully wait for God's promise of a son with Sarah to materialize, and choosing to follow God's command to sacrifice that son later. These things seem to defy reason, highlighting how faith is often difficult to understand. The fact that Abraham left no "song of lament" shows that he accepted all these events without question and had total faith in God. This faith in Abraham also made him the "father of faith," meaning that he inspired faith in future generations.*



However, as Johannes explains, God tested Abraham further by commanding him to take Isaac to Mount Moriah and offer him up as a burnt sacrifice. Johannes writes that it was ridiculous of God to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac after so much waiting and suspense, but Abraham himself didn't laugh at this command—he would have to sacrifice Isaac, despite God's promise that through Isaac his bloodline would spread throughout the world and be great, and despite Abraham and Sarah's immense love for Isaac. However, Abraham had faith that no matter what God asked of him, in "this life," he would still have Isaac through God's ability to make all things possible. Johannes believes that if Abraham had wavered in his faith for a moment, he would have sacrificed himself rather than Isaac, but his faith remained strong and he prepared to do as God asked.

Johannes writes that when God asked Abraham where he was, Abraham was confident and ready to answer his call. Abraham woke up early and, without saying a word to Sarah or Eleazar, took Isaac to Mount Moriah and prepared to sacrifice him on an altar. Without hesitation, Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac because he knew God would never tell him to do something that would be too hard. Again, had Abraham doubted, the story might end differently—had he seen the ram before pulling out the knife, then returning home would have been more like running away rather than experiencing something profound that confirmed his faith. Johannes praises Abraham for this unwavering faith and promises that he'll never forget that "in one hundred and thirty years [Abraham] got no further than faith."

## PREAMBLE FROM THE HEART

Johannes states that the temporal world is imperfect—frequently hard work isn't enough to earn the same social status and wealth that some of the laziest people enjoy. The spirit world, however, is dominated by divine justice and everyone must work for what they want. Johannes proclaims that modern wisdom says it's enough to know of God in general in order to reap the benefits, and that no other work is necessary. However, people who adhere to this belief starve even though everything around them "is transformed into gold." Abraham's story is unique because it's even inspiring to people who don't really understand it. People must work hard to understand either Abraham or his story, but few people are willing to do this. As a result, they refer to Isaac as the "best" Abraham had instead of by his name.

*When Johannes explains that Abraham believed he could still be happy with Isaac in "this life" even after sacrificing him, he's referring to the temporal world. In other words, Abraham wouldn't have to wait until he died and entered heaven to be happy with Isaac. This passage also reveals how fragile faith can be. If Abraham had wavered in his faith even for a moment, the entire story might have changed, and he wouldn't be known as the great man he's generally believed to be. Basically, one moment of doubt can undo everything, so a faithful person must always be on their guard against it.*



*Johannes is most struck by the fact that "in one hundred and thirty years [Abraham] got no further than faith" while people in the modern age (who don't typically live for that long years) seem to be always trying to go beyond faith into something else. At the root of Abraham's greatness is that he never tried to go further than faith—he stopped at it and then devoted himself to maintaining it. Based on this logic, the current age can never achieve the same level of greatness because so few people are willing to stop at faith, or even have the courage to develop it in the first place.*



*Johannes highlights the ultimate meaninglessness of material wealth if it's not supplemented with faith. A person's external life might be "transformed into gold," but if they don't also have faith in God, then they won't have the same kind of happiness as even the poorest person who does have faith. Johannes also points out a strange habit that people who tell Abraham's story have: they call Isaac the "best" Abraham had instead of referring to Isaac by name. This helps them distance themselves from the true horror of what God was asking Abraham to sacrifice: his son.*



Johannes writes that there's something that people leave out of Abraham's story: the anguish he must have felt knowing he had to sacrifice Isaac. Because that anguish makes people uncomfortable, they use the terms "Isaac" and "best" interchangeably, and the danger is that someone hearing the story told that way might want to prove their faith by making a similar sacrifice, which horrifies the preacher who told them the story. They do this because the preacher left out Abraham's faith and his anguish at hearing what God wanted him to do. There is a contradiction here: what Abraham did made him great, but when the listener tries to do the same thing they're vilified. Ethically speaking, Abraham was willing to *murder* Isaac; when one takes Abraham's faith into account, however, the expression changes to that he was willing to *sacrifice* Isaac. Therein lies the difference between Abraham and the listener: faith.

Johannes says that the only safe way to talk about Abraham's story is to make his faith the "main thing," not the willingness or the act of preparing to sacrifice Isaac. Johannes writes that if he were to be in charge of sharing Abraham's story, it would take several Sundays as he dwelled over how devout Abraham had to be to be chosen by God to make such an immense sacrifice and the great love Abraham had for Isaac. If any of his listeners still felt tempted to sacrifice their own sons as a sign of faith, Johannes would follow them and do his best to talk them out of it and realize their error, all the while asserting that not even he truly has faith.

The topic of love receives endless attention from poets, but nobody gives the same amount of attention to faith. Philosophy and theology leave faith in the dust, which is why Johannes believes it's easy to "go beyond" Abraham but nearly impossible to go further than Hegel. For Johannes' part, he finds it easy to understand Hegel, but impossible to understand Abraham. Johannes assures his audience that he is no stranger to greatness, and that he can visualize himself as a great hero, but he can't relate in the same way to Abraham. This is because Abraham had true faith, which is something Johannes lacks. Although Johannes can face horrible things without flinching, he doesn't have the courage to take the next step into faith like Abraham. So, although he loves God, he doesn't have faith.

*The mistake Johannes describes highlights how difficult it is for people to understand faith. Because they don't understand it, it's difficult for them to talk about it; because they don't talk about it, people get the wrong idea about why Abraham's actions were justifiable. What they also seem to forget, according to Johannes's account, is that God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in particular, but this is also due to the fact that they consider the terms "best" and "Isaac" interchangeable. All of this emphasizes how important it is not to shy away from the darker details about Abraham's story—the truth, even when it's uncomfortable, is important.*



*Faith is both the "main thing" of Abraham's story and of Fear and Trembling. This is particularly notable because Johannes says he doesn't actually have faith himself, which makes his perspective and beliefs about faith unique. He can't speak through personal experience, only through what he feels in his heart. This also shows that even though technically anyone can have faith, not everyone is cut out for taking the necessary steps toward developing it.*



*Hegel was an important philosopher in the 19th century, and here Johannes uses him to represent philosophy in general. Philosophy, then, is where people turn when they "go beyond" faith (represented by Abraham). Unfortunately, philosophy often leads to religious doubt as people turn all of their attention to temporal matters and away from the eternal. The fact that Johannes professes to love God without faith also brings up an important point: simple belief in or love for God isn't the same as faith, and shouldn't be confused as such.*



Johannes says that he prefers to talk about Abraham's story as if it recently happened so the only distance between the two is Abraham's greatness and Johannes' lack thereof. Johannes says that if God asked him to make the same sacrifice as Abraham then he would have done it, but he would have seen it as sacrificing all his hope for joy in this world (although he'd still believe in God's love). While some people might say this is more commendable than Abraham's "narrow-mindedness," Johannes says it would only be a substitute for faith. More importantly, Johannes doesn't think he could have accepted Isaac back as easily and joyfully as Abraham did—the pain would be too difficult for Johannes to overcome. Abraham, however, truly believed "on the strength of the absurd" that God would not really take Isaac away if Abraham proved he was willing to give him.

Johannes proposes to take the story one step further and imagine that Abraham really *did* sacrifice Isaac. Still, Abraham would have believed that God would give him Isaac back to enjoy in this life. That is what faith is—giving up everything and, in the same instant, taking it all back by believing it will come back in this world. Johannes says that if Abraham had changed one thing—sacrificing Isaac at home instead of following God's command to the letter, for instance—then Johannes wouldn't admire him as much. As it is, Abraham followed directions and joyfully received Isaac back (another testament to his faith; if he hadn't been joyful, then his faith wouldn't have been real). Abraham moved past infinite resignation and now stands at the extreme of faith, and so Johannes can't entirely understand him.

Johannes writes that if anyone feels like they have become faithful after hearing the outcome of Abraham's story, then they are deceiving themselves or possibly trying to cheat God by claiming they have faith without going through all the spiritual movements to develop it. Some people might succeed in this because in the modern day, everyone tries to go further than faith. Johannes asks if it wouldn't be better for people to stop at faith and then direct their energy towards keeping it. He also explains that while he can't make all the movements of faith himself, he admires the people who do. His observations have shown him how to differentiate between a **knight of infinite resignation** by their boldness, and a person of true faith (who often seems like an average member of the middle class).

*Johannes states that other people might see Abraham's faith as "narrow-mindedness," again highlighting how unintelligible faith can be to people who have none themselves. This is because faith requires believing in the "absurd." The absurd is something that people who are primarily guided by reason can't fathom or understand; it belongs to the realm of the impossible. People with faith, then, believe in the impossible. In Abraham's case, the absurd is believing that even if he sacrifices Isaac, he won't really lose him.*



*Abraham joyfully receives Isaac back after demonstrating his willingness to sacrifice him like God asked, which is a sharp contrast with what Johannes said he'd feel in the same situation. Johannes said he'd struggle to receive Isaac back joyfully, which means he wouldn't have believed that Isaac could come back, hence he doesn't have faith. Furthermore, any deviance between Abraham's actions and God's request would have revealed some kind of doubt or hesitation on Abraham's part, which is why Johannes wouldn't have been able to admire him to the same degree as he currently does.*



*It is notable that Johannes thinks that people who have faith are simultaneously great because of their faith, but also wholly unremarkable. Their faith isn't entirely obvious, they don't wear it on their sleeve and show it off—they look and act like average people. On the other hand, people who have gotten to the step of infinite resignation are noticeable because they wear it boldly.*



Although Johannes has never met a true **knight of faith**, he believes that if he ever did, then he'd divide his time between admiring them and practicing the spiritual movements that lead to faith. Johannes states that a typical knight of faith would lead a wholly unremarkable life and it'd be almost impossible to pick them out of a crowd based on appearances, and yet all they do. A knight of faith has renounced whatever is most important to him, but they still find as much happiness in this world as if they never had to give up a thing. What's more, the knight of faith is always making this movement—infinite resignation and then getting it all back through faith. Johannes likens it to a ballet dancer gracefully leaping and making a perfect landing. Knights of faith do it gracefully enough that most people don't even realize they're doing it.

Johannes says he wants to illustrate these movements by telling a story about a young man who falls in love with a princess. The man's whole life is bound up in his love for the princess, but it's impossible for him to marry her. If the man is a **knight of infinite resignation**, then after a good deal of thought over the impossibility of the relationship, he will renounce the relationship and reconcile himself to the pain. However, that doesn't mean he'll move on or be jealous of anything the princess does—his love becomes eternal and transcends the temporal. It's still his life's substance, but he loves her without hope that they'll be united in this life. Anyone can make this movement of infinite resignation and achieve peace through it, but it is still only a step (albeit the final one) before faith.

Johannes moves on to describe how the young man would handle the situation as a **knight of faith**. He would go through the same process of renunciation and reconcile himself to its pain, but he goes one step further and declares that he believes he'll still get the princess back in this life "on the strength of the absurd." Here, Johannes explains that the absurd isn't anything that can be "embraced by understanding," but something much more complex. According to all human understanding, it is impossible for the man and the princess to be together, but he nevertheless believes that they will. The knight of faith recognizes the impossibility and still grasps onto the absurd—that the impossible can and will happen in this life—and through it discovers the faith which will comfort and bring him joy.

*Johannes has already conveyed that he'd be able to recognize a knight of faith, but here he says that he's never met one. This calls into question whether he (who admittedly lacks faith and therefore can't totally understand it) would truly recognize faith if he saw it. Still, Johannes is devoted to the idea of a knight of faith because if he found one then he could get to know them better and maybe even learn better how to make the spiritual movements toward faith.*



*Here, Johannes illustrates an important characteristic of a knight of infinite resignation. They've sacrificed something very important to them, but they don't then spend the rest of their lives being bitter and angry. Like a knight of faith, they reconcile themselves to the pain, and in a way they move on because they are still able to live a happy life—they just don't believe they'll ever get the thing they sacrificed back in this world.*



*The difference between a knight of faith and a knight of infinite resignation seems simple, but, as Johannes explains, the step from infinite resignation to faith is complicated, scary, and difficult to take. This is because it requires believing and trusting in the absurd, which can't be "embraced by understanding." In other words, it defies logic and seems wholly impossible and even crazy to anyone who doesn't have faith.*



Johannes states that faith is something more than a purely “aesthetic emotion” that one develops all in a second without taking the proper steps. For this reason, even an innocent young girl who’s been raised to be a faithful Christian and believes in God doesn’t necessarily have faith, although she has certainty. Johannes says that he can see that that the movement of infinite resignation can be done, but the movement from that to faith baffles him. What he does know is that certainty or conviction is not equal to faith when it comes to facing the impossible. The first movement—that of resignation—doesn’t require faith, but rather opens the door to it by creating an “eternal consciousness.” Resignation means renouncing everything, but through faith one can receive it all over again and find happiness with it in this world.

Johannes writes that he is strong enough to renounce everything temporal, especially if he continues to love God more than worldly joy. However, this takes strength, and Johannes says he spends all his strength on continually renouncing things. However, faith declares that he can simultaneously get it all back. Unfortunately, Johannes is unable to make the movement into faith, although he knows it must be wonderful to experience the same peace and confidence as a **knight of faith** who believes they’ll receive everything back on the strength of the absurd.

Referring to his original observation that many modern people want to “go further” than faith, Johannes wonders if it’s possible that his generation really has grasped faith and, if they have, why they are still so unwilling to stop at it. Johannes himself can’t understand this unwillingness—if he were able to develop real faith, he would flaunt it by driving in a carriage. Johannes again says that he can’t make the final movement of faith (not out of any unwillingness, but a lack of courage), but he insists that nobody has the right to portray faith as something easy to develop or inferior to anything because it’s the hardest and yet greatest thing of all.

Johannes returns to Abraham, saying that many people focus on the ending and skip over the three-day long journey he had to take, knowing where it would end and even knowing that he could change his mind. According to Johannes, Abraham’s story should be either entirely forgotten or the modern age must try to really understand it. Johannes says that if he were to tell the story, he would focus on the pain of the trial, emphasizing that it lasted days and not just a moment, and in that way hopefully dissuade them from any temptation to prove their faith in a similar way. Johannes goes on to say that he’s going to further discuss Abraham’s story by exploring several questions to illustrate the power of faith and how it can’t truly be understood because it “begins precisely where thinking leaves off.”

An “aesthetic emotion” is one that, compared to faith, is just skin-deep. It looks good, and it’s a good emotion to have, but it’s not one that people typically internalize. Johannes again refers to “eternal consciousness,” which he’s previously said helps give life greater meaning. The young girl Johannes describes is similar to Johannes in that she believes in God, but unlike Johannes she confuses certainty with faith. Johannes, however, has a superior understanding of faith and so he knows he doesn’t have it.



Johannes again makes it clear that even though he’s talking about faith, it’s not something he has, as he is unable to take the necessary steps to develop it. This is meant to convey how difficult faith is to have—even those who want it can’t always find it.



Johannes has already stated that the modern world—to him, 19th-century Europe—is materialistic, so if a knight of faith seems like a regular middle-class person, then it follows that they may also be somewhat materialistic. This is perhaps why Johannes says he would flaunt his faith by driving a carriage. Overall, though, what Johannes is getting at here is the idea that having faith should be something to be proud of and to flaunt—not something to want to move past.



Johannes doubles down on his claim that the most important part of Abraham’s story is the journey between his home and Mount Moriah with Isaac. Even though this is the part of Abraham’s trial that took the longest, it’s the part that receives the least attention. By emphasizing that the journey took days and that Abraham would have been quietly suffering the whole time, Johannes hopes to make people realize that they can’t take the shortcut straight to sacrificing something to prove their faith—it requires time, thought, and perseverance.



## PROBLEMA 1: IS THERE A TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF THE ETHICAL?

Johannes remarks that the ethical is part of the universal and thus applies to everyone at all times. Individuals have their “telos” in the universal and must be part of the universal. When a person acts as the “particular,” then they violate ethics and must make up for it through repentance and by forfeiting their “particularity.” Presumably, the eternal and universal telos is the same, otherwise it would be wrong to say one “suspend[s]” it for any reason since that would also mean forfeiting it.

Abraham is a unique study because he acted through faith for the eternal, seemingly in violation of the ethical. Johannes says faith presents a paradox: the individual becomes greater than the universal through being a part of the universal and then setting themselves apart from it. Either this is faith or one can justifiably condemn Abraham and “faith has never existed [...] because it has always existed.”

Johannes states that Abraham’s story involves a “teleological suspension of the ethical.” Abraham embodies faith, which is rightly expressed only by people whose lives are paradoxical. This is because faithful people act on the absurd, and no action done on the strength of the absurd can be properly “mediated” in the universal. If Abraham were to try to do this, he would have to admit that he was being tempted. Furthermore, it was through the absurd that Abraham got Isaac back, and so he can’t be considered a **tragic hero**—he either has and acts on faith, or he’s a murderer. Johannes says that he will examine Abraham’s story through an ethical lens to determine if there is a way to ethically justify Abraham’s willingness to kill Isaac.

Johannes writes that if a father had to make a sacrifice similar to Abraham’s under different circumstances—to appease an angry deity (like Agamemnon sacrificing Iphigenia to appease a vengeful goddess) or because the law demands it—then people admire them for their sacrifice and sympathize with their pain. However, if at the last second, these fathers said that they don’t believe it will really happen on the strength of the absurd, then nobody would understand them. The difference between Abraham and these men (who fall under Johannes’s definition of **tragic hero**) is that their actions are a “higher expression” of the ethical and they effectively subjugate the private relationship between parent and child to the individual’s relationship to the universal. For this reason, people consider them great. On the other hand, Abraham had a telos higher than the ethical, and his greatness is achieved through a purely personal act.

Telos means “purpose” or “goal,” so a person’s telos is their purpose in the universal (the temporal world). The “particular” is the individual or exception, meaning that they are something other than the universal. To “suspend[]” ethics would mean to pause it, but this in turn means forfeiting it. When Kierkegaard writes that “faith has never existed [...] because it has always existed,” he means that either faith has always been the justifiable means of the individual transcending the universal, or it has never existed because it’s always been completely in line with ethics, and there can be no exceptions in ethics. In other words, faith is either the particular, or it has always been the universal.



A “teleological suspension of the ethical” is what happens when a person feels they can “suspend” (pause or stop) the ethical for a higher purpose or end (the telos). In this context, “mediated” means conveyed or expressed. So, when people are acting on faith, they can’t express or convey their own meaning, purpose, or motives in universal terms. If Abraham were to try to convey his motives in sacrificing Isaac in universal terms, it would be nearly impossible because the only way to explain it is that he’s being tempted; only, in this case, he’s being tempted to follow the ethical (to just not kill Isaac) rather than leaping into faith and the absurd (sacrificing him with the belief that Isaac won’t really be lost).



Tragic heroes are understandable because their actions are a “higher expression” of universal ethics. In other words, their actions are for the greater universal good even though they simultaneously break some ethical rules; in fact, it would be a far greater breach of ethics if they didn’t act because far more people would be hurt. This highlights the idea that individual people have a higher obligation to their community or the world than they do to their private relationships (parent and child, spouses, siblings, and so on). This is what makes Abraham’s story so controversial. He violates ethics, but not for the universal good; actually, it seems as if he does it for himself (which, as Johannes will point out, is half true), and so it seems like a flagrant and unjustifiable breach of ethics.



Johannes explains that Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac for both his own sake and God's—God's because he demanded proof of his faith, and Abraham's so he would have the means of proving his faith. In this way, the event was both a temptation and a trial. Johannes believes this means there needs to be a new category for Abraham's actions, although this will be difficult because there's no language (which is universal) to adequately explain Abraham's actions except to call the situation a temptation. For this reason, Johannes both admires and is appalled by Abraham. A **tragic hero**, at least, makes a definite sacrifice for a definite result, and so anyone can weep for Agamemnon's sacrifice. Abraham made a sacrifice to try to grab something above the universal, and so his actions don't inspire the same sympathy.

Abraham is justified through the paradox of faith, which allows him to be the particular above the universal. But how does anyone know if they are justified in their actions? Johannes points out that most people would say this should be determined by the outcome, and even some heroes have said that time will prove their greatness. In fact, there are whole groups of people who judge the actions of people from centuries ago to decide whether their actions were justified. However, by focusing on the outcome people forget that everything has a beginning, and nobody will begin anything if they think they can only judge the rightness of their actions by the outcome. Johannes also asks if Abraham would've been less justified if he'd sacrificed Isaac. Either way, the outcome of the story is what grabs people's attention, and they unfortunately ignore all that came before it.

Johannes urges the audience not to speak of greatness like it's very far away, but to embrace it and remember that all the people who are recognized as great had to begin somewhere, and anyone can begin. Johannes turns his attention to the Virgin Mary, who gave birth to Jesus Christ and is generally believed great. Yet in this case, like Abraham's, people focus on the outcome and forget that Mary, a young girl, had to endure a pregnancy that she couldn't explain to anyone else because the ministering angel only came to her. Mary, like Abraham, became great through faith's paradox and the distress they endured before they arrived at the end of their trials.

*Language is a universal concept, and as such it is inadequate to mediate what one does on the strength of the absurd and faith (which is higher than the universal). This is why it's so difficult to understand Abraham when examining the details of his story, and it's why Johannes says he both admires Abraham for his faith and is appalled by him because his bare actions violate ethics. Furthermore, Abraham's actions seem selfish, so few people can sympathize with the pain he must have felt. After all, he could have just not sacrificed Isaac; however, this would have meant failing the spiritual trial he had to endure to prove his faith.*



*One of the reasons people love the story of Abraham is because it illustrates what faith should look like. Abraham was going to sacrifice Isaac because God ask him to, and everyone should be willing to do whatever God asks of them. This is why Johannes wonders if Abraham's actions would be harder to justify if he had sacrificed Isaac. He still would have been doing as God asked, and if people are supposed to be willing to do whatever God asks of them then Abraham's actions were justified.*



*Johannes makes an interesting point about Mary's story. Most people know that an angel visited Mary before she married Joseph and told her she was going to have God's son, Jesus Christ. It was great of Mary to be Jesus's mother, but it was greater for her to keep faith in the angel's words during her pregnancy even though some people must have doubted her story and because pregnancy itself was a scary time for any woman during that time period (high maternal and infant mortality rates).*



Johannes says that Abraham was either a murderer every minute of his trial up until the end (when the outcome was good), or the audience agrees to embrace the paradox of faith. Ultimately, Johannes believes Abraham's story involves a teleological suspension of the ethical because he entered the paradox of faith (if this isn't true, again, it means he was nothing but a murderer). Either way, Abraham cannot be a tragic hero. A **tragic hero** can talk to others and get advice during their journey to heroism. A **knight of faith**, however, must walk alone because nobody can understand them, let alone properly advise them. Still, anybody can have faith—it is a passion that unites all humanity.

*Johannes's conclusions here highlight how easy it is to discount faith and, by extension, just how difficult it is to act on faith. Abraham's story is riddled with "ifs"—if one judges him by the ethical, if he had actually sacrificed Isaac, if he had talked to someone about it—and the conclusion is that if he had acted differently, everything might have been different and he wouldn't be the same great man of faith. Any knight of faith knows that if they deviate from the path of faith at all, they risk failing entirely.*



## PROBLEMA 2: IS THERE AN ABSOLUTE DUTY TO GOD?

For the second *problema*, Johannes begins by stating that the ethical is the universal, but it's also part of the divine. Therefore, all duty is duty to God even when it doesn't directly involve God (such as the duty to love one's neighbor). Hegelian philosophy declares that the outer is higher than the inner, but faith says the inner is higher than the outer. In the realm of ethics, the individual is expected to externalize their sense of duty, but the paradox of faith states that there's a type of interiority that incommensurable with the exterior. Johannes reiterates that through the paradox of faith the individual is higher than the universal and explains that the individual creates their relationship with the universal through the "absolute." Because of this there is an absolute duty to God, and the ethical becomes relative. If this isn't the case, then Abraham should be condemned.

*Johannes notes that Hegelian philosophy says the outer is higher than the inner. The reason for this is that what people do externally can be seen and has a direct impact on other people; hence what people do is generally considered more important than what they feel or think (both of these are internal experiences). That is why ethics demands that people focus their energy on their external actions, because these actions make a real impact in the universal. Faith, however, does the opposite—it declares that the internal is higher than the external. This is because motives are internal, because they are part of thought and feeling. For example, Abraham's motives were based in faith, and this should save him from condemnation for his external actions (raising the knife to sacrifice Isaac).*



The paradox of faith can't be mediated because as soon as the individual wants to express their duty in the ethical or universal, they become aware that they're being tempted. For this reason, Abraham wouldn't have been able to make anyone else understand him. If someone asked him why he must sacrifice Isaac, Abraham would have had to admit that it's both a temptation and a trial. Abraham's sacrifice is both endlessly selfish and an expression of pure devotion to God. Because faith can't be mediated in the universal, Abraham can't make anyone understand him. Unfortunately, a **knight of faith** can't even make themselves understood by another knight of faith—even if they try to share their story in universal terms, neither can be sure that the other is telling the truth.

*Because faith is higher than the universal, there is no way to mediate faith-based actions in universal terms to make them intelligible to others. When a knight of faith tries to mediate their actions into the universal, they have to use universal terms like "temptation," which has a lot of negative connotations even to a knight of faith. For this reason, it's better that Abraham and knights of faith don't even try to make themselves understood in universal terms; unfortunately, this increases their sense of isolation.*



Johannes brings up a verse in the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament which says that anyone who doesn't "hate" their entire family can never be a disciple. Johannes says people like to soften the verse by swapping "hate" for "give less priority to." Johannes, however, believes the verse should be taken literally. While God can (and does) demand "absolute love," any person who thinks that demanding love from someone means that person must become cold to everyone else they love is a fool. There is another paradox that can be seen in Abraham's story. Once Abraham is ready to sacrifice Isaac, the ethical says that Abraham hates him. But if Abraham really hated Isaac, then God wouldn't have asked Abraham to sacrifice him. Abraham loves Isaac, so the sacrifice occurs once Abraham's actions contradict his feelings. Still, the universal says Abraham's a murderer.

Johannes points out that even if it's the "Church" that demands something of a person, whatever they do only makes them a **tragic hero** because the "Church" belongs to the universal; a **knight of faith** acts on something higher (faith). Johannes also notes that there's a popular misconception that living and acting as the individual (particular) rather than the universal is easier, and that those who do will waste their lives away on base pleasures. This is actually the opposite of the truth—to live as the individual is scary and isolating, although people who know this also know its greatness. In fact, a true knight of faith knows that it is wonderful to be part of the universal and understood by everyone. However, they also know that there is a higher path, and the higher they climb, the less other people understand them.

Like a **knight of faith**, Abraham must have known how secure, inspiring, and glorious it must be to make sacrifices for the universal. In fact, Johannes theorizes that Abraham likely wished that God had asked him to love Isaac instead of to sacrifice him, or even to sacrifice Isaac for the greater good so Abraham could inspire others. However, Abraham would have recognized these thoughts as temptations and kept walking. Johannes points out that it took Abraham 70 years to get Isaac, and in all that time his faith never wavered—but then God gave Abraham a new test, and he knew he wouldn't be able to explain it to anyone. Johannes emphasizes that this is what makes Abraham's story so terrible; anyone who can't see that is certainly not a knight of faith.

*Johannes has previously mourned the fact that people don't pay enough attention to the more distressing parts of Abraham's story or other Bible verses and stories. Part of the reason Johannes wants to take this passage from Luke literally is that he doesn't want people to try to sugar-coat or look over powerful, albeit uncomfortable, verses and stories from the Bible. In Abraham's story, he must almost simultaneously love and hate Isaac—love Isaac enough that killing him really will be a sacrifice, but (ethically speaking) hate him enough to kill him. This is what the passage from Luke could mean: sometimes to prove faith (to be a disciple), a person must seem to hate their family from an ethical perspective.*



*When Johannes refers to the "Church," he means formal, organized religion. The Church, then, is a product of the universal; indeed, it is typically dominated by temporal politics and subject to universal ethics. This is why a command from the Church is not the same as a command from God, and belief in the Church is not the same as faith in God. Johannes writes that the further up the path of faith a person travels, the more difficult it is for other people to understand them and the more isolated they become.*



*Johannes again sends the message that being guided by the universal is easier than being guided by faith and leaping into the absurd. Even the act of killing Isaac would have been easier to Abraham if he knew that he was doing something for the greater good rather than something that would be unintelligible to everyone else around him. There are many things that make Abraham's story terrible, but the fact that he was so alone in his actions, and that he couldn't even make his family understand him, is one the most horrifying things Abraham must have faced.*



A **tragic hero**'s struggle is painful, but quick. When they're finished, they can find comfort in the universal that praises their actions. The **knight of faith**, however, doesn't have this comfort. They are constantly aware that they can return to the universal (a temptation), and so are constantly in a state of tension. A knight of faith can direct all of the ethical that they violate into one thing; if they can't do this, then they are actually in a state of temptation. A tragic hero does something similar, but they can resort to the universal whereas a knight of faith cannot. Agamemnon prepared to sacrifice Iphigenia, took comfort in the universal, and then sacrificed her. However, Abraham couldn't turn to the universal. Instead, he made one more movement and concentrated his soul on the "marvel."

It's ultimately up to the individual to determine if they're a **knight of faith** or just in a state of temptation. However, they might realize they're a knight of faith if they are always in total isolation. This is something a false knight would never be able to endure, and they might even try to cheat their way into greatness by joining up with other false knights, but it will all be for naught. A knight of faith knows that other people will never understand them and has no interest in teaching others the way to faith. This is because the knight of faith knows other people don't need sympathy or to be sold faith because truly great things are already available to everyone equally. Johannes concludes that there must be an absolute duty to God as he's explained it, or else Abraham can and should be condemned.

*Johannes has previously mentioned that a knight of faith is following a path, but it's a lonely, scary, and isolating path. At any point, however, the knight of faith can jump off the path of faith and rejoin the universal. The reason this is a temptation is that it would be easier and more comfortable. They could make themselves understood and not feel so lonely. However, they would lose the security of faith, which says that, on the strength of the absurd, literally anything is possible. The "marvel" is the miracle of God giving Isaac back to Abraham.*



*Earlier in the book, Johannes talked about the possibility of someone deciding to sacrifice their own child to prove their faith after hearing Abraham's story. This is an example of someone who is simply in a state of temptation; even though they say they're acting on faith, they're not a true knight of faith. Furthermore, a knight of faith can't teach another person how to be one also. This is because faith itself can't be expressed in universal terms—it is an entirely personal experience, which is also why it's isolating. It's something that people have to be willing to work towards themselves, unaided by anyone else.*



### PROBLEMA 3: WAS IT ETHICALLY DEFENSIBLE OF ABRAHAM TO CONCEAL HIS PURPOSE FROM SARAH, FROM ELEAZAR, FROM ISAAC?

Johannes writes that, as the universal, the ethical is also the "disclosed." When a person conceals anything, they are sinning and can only rectify it by becoming more open. For this reason, unless Johannes can establish that there are situations in which the individual (as a being higher than the universal) can ethically justify concealment, then Abraham can be rightly condemned for not telling Sarah, Eleazar, and Isaac about God's demand. Johannes proposes to look at the question in an aesthetic way, especially in the category of the interesting. To become interesting is a "fateful privilege," but one that involves a lot of personal pain. Because the interesting serves as the border between the aesthetic and the ethical, this examination will constantly refer to ethics while trying to invoke an aesthetic feeling from the reader.

*To "disclose" is to bring a secret to light so that everyone knows what it is. The ethical, then, is out in the open, transparent, and known to all. By this logic, anything that a person feels like they should conceal is actually a sin; concealment is a violation of ethics, so if a person isn't comfortable with their actions or thoughts being known, then there's a good chance that whatever it is violates ethics. Johannes describes being interesting as a "fateful privilege." This indicates that it is out of a person's control—either their life will be interesting or not. However, it's also a privilege because people will be interested in it; it could even open the door to becoming great.*



In drama (both Greek and modern), concealment creates tension while recognition helps resolve the tension. In Greek drama, Fate conceals things (maybe a son murders his father but doesn't learn it was his father until later), but in modern drama both concealment and revelation are the hero's responsibility. If what the hero hides is silly, then the drama is a comedy; if an idea is concealed, the drama is likely a tragedy. For the purposes of this investigation, Johannes says he will deal exclusively with the tragic, such as when two lovers are nearly separated because they each conceal their love for one another. In drama, a third party (maybe a housekeeper) would reveal the secret, the lovers would talk, and in the end they are united as heroes. Ethics, however, would condemn both for concealing anything because ethics doesn't consider feelings or experience when passing judgment.

Aesthetics asks for concealment and rewards it, but ethics punishes concealment because it demands disclosure. Sometimes aesthetics calls for disclosure, though. For instance, Agamemnon had to keep his grief over having to sacrifice Iphigenia quiet because he's the hero, but aesthetics demands that somehow the other characters find out why Agamemnon must do this terrible deed. So, a servant reveals everything, and everyone understands. Ethics makes no allowances for third-party interventions and coincidences, though. Agamemnon becomes an ethical **tragic hero** by telling Iphigenia what will happen to her himself. Still, there are times when people achieve greatness through keeping a secret. Johannes argues that silence can be both divine (communion between divinity and the individual) or demonic (as a lure that gets stronger the longer a person is silent).

Johannes says that before he returns to Abraham's story, he will examine some other poetic figures. He starts with the story of a bridegroom who was scared by an augur who predicted that misfortune would befall him if he got married. The man loved his fiancée but worried about what the misfortune would be. He had three choices: say nothing, get married, and risk both misfortune and the bride's anger if she learns the truth; say nothing, don't get married, and face the bride's family's anger; or tell everyone about the prediction. Ethics requires him to speak, although aesthetics would prefer that he stay silent. The man has these options because the augur's words can be understood by anyone—the man can speak about them to anyone. If the words had come privately from God, the man wouldn't be able to speak intelligibly to anyone and so *must* be silent.

*Johannes chooses to focus on drama because it's something that evokes emotions (or what he calls aesthetics). Drama and fiction have the unique ability to get people involved in the story; they put themselves in the hero's shoes or try to feel with the heroine. Drama is also unique because it uses the ethical and unethical as tools to create something interesting. Johannes also highlights how unfeeling ethics is because it leaves no wiggle room for exceptions or special cases. Anyone who doesn't abide by ethics will be condemned by the universal.*



*Ethics doesn't just demand disclosure; it demands that each individual disclose whatever they're concealing themselves. If they don't do it, then they would still be in a state of sin and thus condemned by the universal. Agamemnon, however, finds something of a loophole after his secret gets out to others: he discloses himself to the one person his actions will affect the most. When Johannes notes that a silence can be demonic, he means that it can, like a demon, be designed to torment, usually to torment oneself but possibly to torment another person. This is similar to what's supposed to happen in Hell: a demon torments the souls that didn't make it into heaven. In this way, someone who gives into demonic silence is like a demon themselves.*



*Like Abraham, the bridegroom receives a message from a deity (an augur was a well-respected spiritual leader who could convey messages from the deities). However, the bridegroom doesn't get the message direction, it comes to him through the augur. This automatically makes the prediction something anyone can understand because it's clearly been delivered in universal terms. As part of the universal, a person might rightly say the bridegroom has an ethical obligation to disclose the information to his fiancée because ethics (the universal) demands this kind of direct disclosure.*



The story of the bridegroom had to do with the divine, and now Johannes will share a similar story that has to do with the demonic: Agnete and the Merman. The Merman is a seducer who lures innocent women to the ocean and then drags them in when they bend over the water. The Merman successfully lures Agnete to the sea, but just as he's about to drag her into the depths she looks at him with eyes full of trust; the Merman is unable to drag her into the ocean and so he brings her back to her house and says he just wanted her to see how beautiful the ocean was. Johannes now takes control of the story and declares that Agnete's innocence has destroyed the seducer in Merman—he will never seduce again and must decide between repenting of his sinful past by himself or with Agnete.

Johannes says that if the Merman chooses to repent alone, he's choosing to be a concealer; on the other hand, if he chooses to be with Agnete, then he'll have to disclose himself. Agnete will be unhappy if he chooses the former because she loves him; the Merman will be unhappy because he has genuine passion for Agnete. This is the demonic side of repentance—it tells the Merman that it's a good thing for him to be tormented. The Merman can even try to make Agnete hate him to ease the separation—he can mock and belittle her but telling her the truth won't be enough to destroy her love. This option is a lot like the paradox of faith in that the Merman would be trying to be the particular that's higher than the universal. However, the Merman *can* speak, so he can also be a **tragic hero**.

The Merman can save himself from the demonic in two ways: stay hidden and hope the divine will save Agnete or be saved by marrying Agnete. Johannes says it's important for him to point out that through sin the individual can be higher than the universal (the demonic paradox). Johannes believes that any ethics that ignores sin is useless, and it goes beyond itself if it tries to determine sin. Johannes then states that he can understand the previous two stories, but they don't help him understand Abraham because Abraham didn't become the particular through sin. Any analogy with Abraham must involve an individual who accomplishes the universal, thus repeating the paradox. The Merman must either become a demon or be lost to the world if he's silent, but only aesthetics believes he can be saved through marrying Agnete. If he disclosed himself, he'd be the greatest man Johannes knows.

*The Merman is transformed by Agnete in a similar way to how people are transformed by faith after catching a glimpse of it. After seeing what true love, trust, and innocence looked like, the Merman became unwilling to risk tarnishing it in anyone else. It makes him want to be a better person, as shown by Johannes's statement that the Merman decided he'd never be able to seduce another person again. Similarly, once someone attains faith and understands the eternal, they strive to break their bad habits and devote their energy to their faith.*



*If the Merman chooses to be silent—even if he makes Agnete hate him to save her the pain—then he is also devoting himself to being punished. His guilt will eat away at him, and it will be a lifelong hurt. This is the kind of torment that characterizes the demonic. Staying quiet would also require infinite resignation, which highlights another thing the demonic and divine have in common.*



*Sin takes the individual above the universal because sin implies some spirituality. Spirituality is not subject to the universal the way ethics is. When a person sins, they effectively say that they have some higher authorization for their actions, albeit a higher authorization that comes from nefarious forces (Satan). Because ethics is the universal it has no right to determine anything about the spiritual, which is why Johannes says ethics would go beyond itself by trying to define or determine sin. The Merman can become great through disclosure because disclosure is the primary thing that ethics and the universal asks from individual people.*



The Merman uses all his strength making the movement of repentance and so he can't make the next movement "on the strength of the absurd." However, some people don't have the requisite passion to make either movement; they are the ones who have given up on really living. Johannes remarks that very few people enter monasteries, but this doesn't mean that the majority of people are greater than those who do enter monasteries. In fact, Johannes is impressed by people who can dedicate so much of their lives to exploring every secret thought and dark corner of their mind. In society, few people consider and even avoid those thoughts. Furthermore, a person who moves into a monastery is just one movement away from the absurd.

Johannes moves on to a story from the Book of Tobit, but he modifies it somewhat for his examination. Tobias wants to marry a beautiful woman named Sarah, but Sarah knows that a demon will kill anyone she marries on their wedding night. It is tragic, but Sarah goes through with the wedding and, that night, Tobias proposes they pray to God for mercy. In an aside, Johannes notes that most poets would select Tobias as the hero, but Johannes believes Sarah is the real hero for letting Tobias risk himself to marry her. A man in the same situation would hide away and succumb to the demonic. Johannes uses Shakespeare's Richard III as an example of someone who was set aside from the universal from birth due to physical deformity; his anger over this led to Richard III turning to the demonic through contempt for humanity.

Johannes writes that Faust also tried to save the universal by his silence. Most people see Faust as a "doubter" and seducer, but Johannes sees Faust as a doubter with a deeply sympathetic nature. However, at some point Faust realizes that spirit sustains life, although he firmly believes the spirit doesn't really exist. However, because Faust is sympathetic and loves life himself, he keeps quiet about his realizations and his doubt. Faust knows that if he shares his discovery (the spirit doesn't exist) then everything will devolve into confusion and despair. Ethics condemns this silence, but if he stands in absolute relation to the absolute then his silence can be justified (although his doubt will become guilt because he'll enter the paradox). Additionally, passages in the Bible show that sometimes it's better to conceal—even Jesus recommends that people should clean their face to hide the fact that they're fasting.

*Johannes notes that the Merman would have made another movement "on the strength of the absurd" if he had the energy. This means that the Merman might have made the final movement into faith. Even though the Merman would have had to renounce Agnete, if he made this final movement then he would have received a lot of comfort because he'd believe that he and Agnete would still surely be together one day.*



*Both Sarah and Tobias make a movement of infinite resignation by deciding to get married: Tobias renounces his life and Sarah renounces the future of her marriage. However, they have hope that God will spare them the fate they think they'll face. This shows that both of them are on the path to faith. They could also just be tragic heroes because they appear to be able to make themselves understood to the other (faith, of course, is unintelligible to anyone else).*



*When Johannes calls Faust a "doubter," he means that Faust doubts in the existence of God, the spirit, eternity, or anything divine. Faust's sympathetic nature makes him more human, though, because it enables him to actively avoid doing anything that might ruin or disrupt another person's life. Even though ethics categorically condemns concealment regardless of motives or feelings, Johannes finds ample evidence that concealment has divine support through Jesus's own words. This indicates that Abraham's silence can be justified, particularly because he stays quiet for spiritual reasons.*



Johannes turns his attention back to Abraham, who didn't tell Sarah, Eleazar, or Isaac about God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Aesthetics says that it's okay to be silent if silence saves someone else. For obvious reasons, this can't be applied to Abraham's story—Abraham is actually an outrage, aesthetically speaking. Aesthetics might understand a person's decision to sacrifice themselves, but not one person sacrificing another for their own sake. Ethics demands disclosure, which is why ethics loves the **tragic hero** (who acts for the universal and is disclosed somehow). Abraham, however, remains silent and does nothing for the universal. Unless the individual can stand in absolute relation to the absolute, ethics reigns supreme and Abraham is neither an aesthetic nor a tragic hero.

Abraham's anguish and distress are rooted in the fact that he *can't* speak and be understood, that he *must* be silent. This is because no universal terms can help anyone understand that Abraham must sacrifice Isaac *because* he loves him and because God has given him a trial. This is something a tragic hero can't understand, in part because they've given counterarguments the chance to be heard (such as Agamemnon letting Iphigenia and others talk to him about the sacrifice he must make). Abraham can't do this—his family would ask him why he would sacrifice Isaac if he could just as easily choose not to, and if Abraham looks to them for comfort, they will think he's a hypocrite. There is simply no way for Abraham to speak without compromising his identity as a faithful man.

Although Abraham can't speak, he is simultaneously making the movement of faith, which tells him that Isaac won't really be lost. This comforts Abraham in his silence. In fact, the only thing Abraham reportedly says to Isaac is that God will provide the lamb (this in response to Isaac's question about where the lamb they are sacrificing is). Johannes says he will explore Abraham's last words, which gives his story more depth. There is some debate over whether a tragic hero should make any final statement before their sacrifice (Johannes believes Agamemnon might have cheapened his sacrifice if he insisted on saying something at the last second), but it seems appropriate in cases where the hero's life tends towards the spiritual—final words in this case would help immortalize the hero.

*A lot of what Abraham's story boils down to is his connection with God, or his absolute relation to the absolute. Johannes has already established that there is an absolute duty to God and it's possible for there to be a teleological suspension of the ethical, but these things also depend on whether it's possible for one individual to have a personal connection with God. If Abraham doesn't have this connection, it would mean that everything else about his story is a lie. This is why he wouldn't be any kind of hero; he'd be more like a villain.*



*Abraham is not only condemned to sacrifice his own son he's condemned to silence about it. If he's not silent, he risks the legitimacy of what he's doing because trying to speak about it would reduce everything to the universal; in other words, it would no longer be so much a spiritual trial as a temptation. Abraham's family would see him as a hypocrite for looking for comfort in a couple of ways: either he's an ethical hypocrite because he's saying he loves his son but will still sacrifice him for personal reasons (which would mean he actually hates Isaac), or he's a spiritual hypocrite because he's looking to the universal for comfort instead of finding comfort in his faith and through God even though he preaches faith to others.*



*When a hero has spiritual leanings, their last words should contain some moral lesson or some other inspiration. This is why final words can make (that is, immortalize) or break a hero for future generations. Abraham's last words about the lamb are unique for what they don't say—either an untruth or the truth. Abraham came up with the perfect non-answer that still technically answers the question. Indeed, God will provide the lamb, but there is no saying whether Isaac (who was a literal gift from God) isn't that lamb. Isaac doesn't see or understand this, though, and is content with Abraham's words.*



Abraham has to be very careful in his choice of words—he shouldn't tell a lie, but if he tries to share the bare truth then he risks tumbling back into the universal and transforming the situation into total temptation. Abraham's words are a form of irony because even though words come out of his mouth, he doesn't say anything. However, his words do show that Abraham is constantly making the double movement of infinite resignation and faith. Johannes believes this becomes more obvious because Abraham knew what would happen on Mount Moriah—Abraham will sacrifice Isaac. If Abraham didn't know that, then he wouldn't have made the movement of infinite resignation and then he wouldn't even amount to a tragic hero.

Johannes says that he can understand Abraham, but he lacks the courage to speak or act like Abraham did. While people admire the **tragic hero**, they are baffled by Abraham. However, Abraham doesn't need praise or tears—he loses sight of his own suffering in his deep, abiding love for God. Johannes concludes that there really is a paradox and a person can stand in absolute relation to the absolute, or Abraham should be condemned.

## EPILOGUE

Johannes reminisces about a time when the spice market in Holland slowed down so much that merchants dumped some of the cargo into the sea to increase the price. Johannes asks if there's something similar happening regarding the spiritual in the modern age—has society really reached such heights that it must doubt that it's really come very far at all just to have something to talk about? Each generation starts anew in learning about the truly human element of temporal life. Johannes identifies this element as passion, which is why no generation learns from the previous how to love. Faith, however, is the highest passion and each generation is tasked with learning how to have it. No generation can get tired with this because it's the highest it can strive toward and it takes a lifetime.

Faith is the highest passion a person can have, but many people may not get that far; it's doubtful that anyone can go further. Johannes leaves it to his audience to determine whether many people in the current generation get as far as faith; he admits that he, at least, has a long way to go. Even if a person doesn't have faith, there are enough things to do in life that their life won't be wasted if they learn to love it. Furthermore, arriving at faith doesn't mean coming to a standstill in life—a person can have a full life in faith, just as they can in love.

*Johannes notes that Abraham talks without speaking, which hearkens back to Johannes's earlier statement that Abraham truly couldn't speak. This is why Abraham chose words that didn't actually reflect his thoughts. However, Abraham doesn't speak complete nonsense because the words themselves are calm, confident, and decided. They reveal that Abraham has made the movement of infinite resignation. The words also convey Abraham's certainty that even though God has asked him to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham won't actually lose Isaac—surely God will send a lamb on the strength of the absurd.*



*People are confused by Abraham because, unlike a tragic hero, he isn't making a sacrifice that abides by traditional ethics nor does he act like a true hero (Abraham doesn't disclose himself). However, unlike a tragic hero Abraham also doesn't need approval from the universal—he gets his sense of approval from both himself and God, both of which are higher than the universal.*



*Johannes likens the modern age's insistence on embracing doubt to merchants purposely dumping spices into the sea to increase prices of the stock they kept. By this logic, the popularity of doubt makes faith itself that much more valuable; furthermore, these same people calling for doubt might be doing it on purpose, although Johannes doesn't explain how or why. Although the current generation embraces doubt, the next generation might act differently because they will start over for themselves and eventually decide for themselves. Johannes, then, sees hope for faith in the future.*



*Johannes began this book by mourning the fact that people want to go further than faith, but now he bluntly states that he doesn't really think anybody can. This means that modern people who try to go further are deluding themselves and others. Johannes also dispels the belief that once a person has faith, they no longer really move forward because they are stopping at faith. However, because even the most faithful person still exists in the universal, they are still able to move forward in other areas of their lives. The difference faith makes is that people who have it aren't afraid of the future, but hopeful and optimistic.*





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