

“A Critique of Faith: Dante and Kierkegaard on the Phenomenon of Belief”

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Table of Contents:

Introduction	2
I. Defining Faith	9
II. Sources and Perspectives of Faith	22
III. Faith and Ethics	33
IV. Conclusion	39

Faith in God is of the utmost importance within the Christian religious tradition. The gospels proclaim that through the singular belief in the divinity of Christ that one “shall not perish but have eternal life” (*New International Version*, Jn. 3:16). This sentiment prevails throughout Christian texts, from scripture and dogma alike. Clearly, it is faith that forms the basis for the entirety of the Christian tradition. As the reader learns in the gospel of John, it is this very act of belief that elevates humanity beyond itself and into the realm of the divine, enabling communion with the divine as “children of God” (Jn. 1:12).

There are several questions integral to a comprehensive examination of faith, chief among them involve the general characteristics of this phenomenon. It is necessary to begin with the most general definition of such an abstract topic before proceeding inward into further detail, so that this inquiry into Christian faith might provide certain parameters for the exploration of belief. From this first consideration arise further questions on the nature of faith, namely from whence this faith might arise and on whose authority one might come to understand it. Questions on this front require investigation into whether faith is an activity in which one may receive guidance from others, or if it requires the solitary investigation by the individual alone. One further question that follows from this critique of faith concerns the nature of ethics: namely, it remains to be shown what one is to make of this faith with respect to human behavior. The human interaction with the divine through this enigmatic faith possesses significant influence on the understanding of how humans are meant to act with respect to faith. Each of these questions have their own place in the study of faith; the present critique shall concern itself with considering answers to these questions, and how to most clearly identify faith through their convergence.

The present inquiry draws its origin from the works and methods of many on the topic of discussion. Messrs. Augustine, Averroes, Aquinas, and Anselm (among many others) have each provided their own various and detailed discussions on the nature of faith, while applying varying degrees of Platonist, Aristotelian, or Islamic philosophies to scriptural evidence in the process of composing their philosophical pursuits. To varying degrees, these authors employ rationality to their arguments on the nature of faith, and with good purpose--this approach enables the philosopher to rationalize the nature of this human interaction with the divine. The work of these philosophers has largely led to conceptions of faith as a virtue that supplements the light of reason, from which a modicum of understanding emerges on the particular processes and purposes of faith.

One should note, however, that reason alone may not fully account for faith. On the contrary, faith in a divine power often seems at odds with all foreseeable reason. Within the Christian tradition, one sees this among some of the most fundamental tenets of belief. In Christian belief, God is omnipresent, yet the same God is abstracted from all perceptible reality; God is omnipotent and benevolent, yet evil exists in the world. One may apply various forms of reasoning in order to approach a rational answer for these problems of faith, yet Christian faith invariably leads one to a conception of a God whose will cannot be fully measured by the extent of human reason. This is not to say that these philosophical endeavors have been fruitless; rather, they have provided significant explication of the meanings of faith within a logical framework. It should suffice to say that there are certain limitations that exist within such a logical interpretation of faith that make it difficult to fully access the phenomenon of belief.

These limitations may be identified within the following characterization of the pursuit of faith: imagine a high wire extending out into a mist-filled canyon, into whose vast expanse one

may not see until walking further out onto the wire. One is prevented from the sense of certainty allotted by seeing where the high wire ends--it could lead to an opposite facing cliff onto a sturdy plateau, or it could extend indefinitely. It is uncertain until one takes the journey onto the wire. Once embarking onto the wire, there is the need for extreme care and balance: the depths below are murky and cavernous, and one can see the bottom no more than one can see the end of the wire. The cord is neither taut nor slack, and no means exist of determining its finite length. As each step carries one out onto the wire, the balance shifts the walker about, and self-preservation demands that one maintain the center of balance directly above the wire itself. Thus has been the process of inquiry used by these philosophers and theologians with respect to faith. The cliff's edge from which the walker proceeds is the safe realm of the terrestrial, in which sensory information and reason can guide one with a degree of certainty and navigation. It is the realm of the human, the exploration into the world and surroundings, whose existence we may question but still investigate with the power of human reason.

Out there in the unknown exists all that transcends beyond humanity's grasp. The high wire itself is the means of accessing such transcendence--in the scenario above, we are uncertain if the wire leads anywhere, let alone to stable ground. The lofty aims of philosophy seek to traverse the highest of wires in a persistent attempt to approach and understand that which exists outside of the bounds of human intellect, yet this has not stopped generations of philosophers from taking the challenge and walking out onto the wire of inquiry in the pursuit of faith. Each have maintained their own modicum of balance in this task, with a plethora of different results.

The inquiries that they have identified have all led to fairly rational stopping points along the line, yet certain limitations exist in the very act of navigating the tightrope. On the one hand, the walker must maintain balance as they progress forth across the wire; on the other, there

persists the uncertainty of where the walker might find rest and stability on this journey on the wire. In the same way, the philosophers and theologians that have sought to approach faith through reason alone have found difficulty. Faith (when characterized generally) is a means of connecting the human with the divine, and as such the philosopher must seek to establish the subject in terms suitable for human understanding while still trying to approximate divinity. If this balance is not met, the scholar runs the risk of writing material more steeped in mysticism than in common meaning, or oversimplifying a mysterious phenomenon with ill-fitting terms of mundane significance.

Navigating the high wire also presupposes questioning the conclusions one earns during this death-defying feat. Upon carrying out the necessary questioning in this philosophical endeavor, do the answers gained grant a comprehensive definition for faith? It is one matter to negotiate equilibrium between the human and the divine in a single interpretation; it is entirely another matter to consider whether or not the line of inquiry truly leads to a significant understanding of reality. The problem of philosophical inquiry in this field is that it requires a logical consistency and purity of direction by which to proceed forward. Faith is kin to certain elements of this methodology, but it finds itself alien to this method when the philosophical pursuit turns to the qualitative comprehension of human experiences. Another method is needed in order to answer the questions posed with respect to faith, and it appears that human reason does not possess the scope necessary to fully traverse the chasm it travels above.

As a behavior, faith demands a sincere investigation--a calling to which many theologians (those mentioned above, as well as many others) have graciously devoted themselves. It is not enough to simply state that we do not know by our own reasoning what faith might be, for this is not an answer but a suspension of certainty. A definition for faith, then,

requires one to approach faith outside of the traditional methods of philosophy in order to approach a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. We shall not abandon reason through the pursuit of faith--it shall be our constant companion in the endeavor for further understanding of faith's qualities and meaning.

If one's intent is to consider faith as a human phenomenon with respect to the divine, then the necessary path of inquiry requires something beyond the limits of human reason--and the poetic capabilities of the human imagination are the perfect candidate. Limitless are its capabilities at conceiving of various stories and legends by which to explain where reason is lacking, though both forms of inquiry spring from the common root of wonder. Through poetry, humanity possesses the grand capacity for creation and development of worlds far beyond what reason may allow. It is no wonder that many philosophers and theologians of the ancient world would place so many censures on such a creative activity, for such poetic means of describing and illustrating the world are not inherently limited by connections to moral teachings or truths. Instead, the artistic qualities of poetry allow and can often encourage further embellishment of (or even deviation from) perceptible reality for the sake of conveying the thoughts and imagination of the poet—and yet, this act of creation can allow poets to illuminate characteristics of the human experience within a wondrous tapestry of immense color and substance. Furthermore, such writing engages with the philosophical without difficulty: this illustration demands analysis on the part of the reader to conceive the meaning the poet conveys, and in doing so, poetry leads humanity to try to understand some of the most complex elements of the human experience. In short, philosophy affords humanity a rational means of coming to terms with the state of our existence, while poetry illustrates as a means of transcending the limits of what logic alone may accomplish—together, these two forces allow humanity to approach an

understanding of phenomena that transcend the grasp of either alone. By this creative element of poetry, one may understand the synthesis of human experience and philosophical reasoning as a method of approach towards the mystery that is faith in God. In expressing this phenomenon in terms of the human element of faith, one becomes capable of managing the balancing act of philosophical endeavors towards faith in a far more understandable context.

Foremost among such texts of nuanced philosophical and poetic explorations of faith is Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. An extensive work of epic poetry, the *Comedy* chronicles the poet's metaphysical pilgrimage through the different realms of the Christian afterlife. The fantastic journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven possesses as much poetic imagery as it does theological ruminations on the nature of divine justice, mercy, and faith--culminating with the pilgrim's entry into the heights of the Empyrean and personally encountering God. Over the course of three canticles the poet intricately crafts the environments that the pilgrim encounters while providing various explanations for theological issues through applications of classical philosophy and scriptural evidence. The approach that the poet utilizes is significant in that the entire journey is undoubtedly fictional, yet the poet's first person approach and the level of detail woven into the story makes the pilgrim's adventure seem real.

Quite fitting, then, for Dante to use this section of the *Comedy* to evaluate the characteristics of the Cardinal Virtues, with faith as the foremost point of investigation. While Dante is far beyond the bounds of all human reason in his journey through the cosmos, his conversation turns to human interactions with the transcendent at the precise moment that his poetic powers are stretched to their limits to convey his experiences! Within Dante's writings in the *Comedy*, one identifies several different levels through which the poet engages with reality. The work as a whole is a fiction meant to explore matters of belief through an abstraction—it is a

tale that is told to its readers of Dante the pilgrim's experiences. At the same time, the poetry itself serves as an abstraction from a narrative standpoint—Dante explicitly acknowledges the limits to his writing and states where he may go no further. Nevertheless, Dante's journey through the cosmos inevitably leads the pilgrim to answer questions of faith. While Dante embraces poetry as the style for his investigation of faith, his work possesses unquestionable philosophical merit through its close readings of scriptural and metaphysical texts to approach matters of faith. While this dynamic integration of reason and poetic illustration shall prove invaluable in investigating faith, it would be prudent also to consider another, different approach to combining these elements.

Søren Kierkegaard, on the other hand, provides a far different approach to analyzing the topic of faith. It is difficult to categorize him within the terms of "philosopher" or "theologian" for a variety of reasons, and as such, his definition of faith possesses intricacies that do not so much test the bounds of philosophical reason—but rather soar in direct opposition of them. The faith that Kierkegaard ultimately seeks to describe is unknowable in philosophical terms, and thus Kierkegaard does not elect to hold himself to the standards and expectations of philosophical writing. The author goes further to identify the problem with expecting a philosophical treatment of his writing, and that philosophy alone cannot account for the irrational intensity of faith. He uses elements of both philosophical analysis and poetic illustration to demonstrate such a discrepancy in our faculties for reason, beginning his writing with elements of poetic interpretation and apology for faith before stepping forth into a more standardized analytical structure with the problems of faith.

Both Dante Alighieri's and Søren Kierkegaard's analyses of faith will serve as the foundation of our own inquiry into the topic. Having set forth the preliminary framework for our

critique, we shall proceed in our investigation by beginning with establishing the definitions that our authors provide for the conception of faith. From these definitions, we shall consider the necessary questions of the sources and authorities of the phenomenon, before we investigate its interaction with ethical matters. From this process, it is our hope to establish a synthesized analysis of faith through the lenses of philosophy and poetics so that we may most clearly identify faith's specific qualities and function. Thus we take the first steps on our journey from the edge of our allegorical chasm, from which that hallowed high wire of questioning extends, and from which we begin our contemplation.

I. Defining Faith

When considering the notion of faith, problems arise within even the most straightforward attempts at delineating what faith is or what it ought to be in relation to a divine power. The experience of faith appears to possess a certainty and conviction that drives one's actions; at the same time, such notions do not possess the logical possibility of existing with a being that transcends the limited scope of human perception and awareness. Therein lies the problem of faith—consistently, there exists a tendency to “know it when one sees it,” but it is so often referred to as an individual experience that a logical frame of reference for faith does not seem convincing for an ethic outside of a vague belief in something that one can fundamentally not comprehend. The parameters that frame the nature of belief and doubt in faith require further clarification should any concept of faith be comprehensible, let alone the subject of a critique.

Dante structures his *Comedy* after a metaphysical pilgrimage, in which the pilgrim journeys through the afterlife to seek salvation within the highest spheres of heaven. The poet provides his definition of faith in a particularly complex scene within Canto XXIV of the *Paradiso* in which Dante the pilgrim (ascending through the Ptolemaic heavens with his divine

guide Beatrice) arrives at the sphere of the fixed stars, standing upon the very boundary of all discernible reality. Here, the pilgrim encounters the souls of some of the most notable figures from the Biblical tradition and Church history—among which he and Beatrice meet Adam and the saintly apostles James, John, and Peter. It is Peter who is first to approach Dante and Beatrice as a shining light, circling Beatrice three times before conversing with the two. Beatrice asks Peter to test Dante on the nature of faith as a final examination of Dante's progress over the course of his journey. Dante the poet is very careful in crafting the scenery for this final examination on the mysteries of Christian faith. In considering the human interaction with the divine, the poet places the pilgrim upon the farthest limits of the Ptolemaic model of the universe. This region of reality stands at the very precipice beyond which the furthest extensions of applied human knowledge, astronomical observation and mathematical calculation, fail. Nothing that has come before in the *Paradiso*, no matter how extraterrestrial, places the pilgrim at such a limit of the established reality. Such a backdrop serves for potent imagery for the discussion to follow, with Dante's pilgrim entering a final demonstration of his aptitudes before which he might ascend into the heights of the Empyrean. Faith, the uncertain quiddity that enables humanity to engage or interact with a God, is set at the very limits of the natural universe.

The poet allots as much significance to this surreal scenery as he does to the pilgrim's interrogator. Out of all the religious figures upon which to frame the discussion of faith, Dante elects to include Saint Peter. Including Peter within this scene could invoke a variety of different tones and atmospheres within which one might consider faith. As the founder of the Church and the "rock" upon which Christ founds the Church, Peter embodies a strength of faith that possesses fractures and weaknesses. Beatrice includes an explanation within her request for

Peter to inquire of Dante “about faith, by which [he] walked on the surface of the sea” (*Par.* XXIV. 38-39). Beatrice draws this miraculous incident from the Gospel of Matthew, in which the apostles find themselves on a sea amidst a storm. Upon seeing the figure of Christ further out on the water, Peter is the one to call out, saying “Lord, if it’s you...tell me to come to you on the water” (*NIV*, Matt. 14:28). Peter proceeds to successfully walk out over the waves by his faith in the Lord; however, he promptly begins to sink--prompting Christ’s rebuke: “You of little faith...why did you doubt?” (*NIV*, Matt. 14:31). Even while evoking this imagery, Beatrice does not mention the fall or the further spiritual significance of Peter’s role in this episode. Rather, her emphasis remains on the miraculous occurrence instead of Peter’s doubt. Framing the authority of the inquisitor around the merits and powers of faith while evoking imagery of failure helps frame and establish a discussion on the paradoxical qualities of faith. It is within these circumstances that Dante the poet presses the pilgrim forth onto the high wire as Peter poses the question of faith’s quiddity.

Within the framework of these marvelous circumstances, Dante responds to Peter’s first question on faith by paraphrasing the work of Saint Paul, postulating that

faith is the substance of things hoped for and argument of those that do not appear,¹ and this seems to me its quiddity... The deep things that grant themselves to my apprehension here, are so hidden from our eyes down there that their being is in belief alone, upon which our high hope is founded, and therefore faith can be called a substance. And from our belief it is necessary to syllogize without seeing more: therefore faith is a kind of argument” (*Par.* XXIV. 64-66, 70-78).

¹ Compare to Paul’s original definition: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (*NIV*, Heb. 11:1).

On a structural level, Dante's definition makes use of Christian theology while incorporating philosophical elements ("substance"/*sustanza*, "argument"/*argomento*, "quiddity"/*quiditate*). This conception of faith begins as a "substance of things hoped for," which is altogether difficult to pin down in its own context—let alone within the larger theology of Dante's *Comedy*. As with Paul's original statement, this places faith in a manner somewhat removed from reality: if it is truly a substance or an object of existence, it is only the manifestation of one's hopes (more specifically, the objects or "things"/*cose* for which these hopes exist). In this respect, faith is characterized as having an existence of its own within the objects or ends of one's hopes; it does not possess the characteristics of an action, but rather it is removed from an individual's immediate life (hence the notion of "things hoped for"/*cose sperate*). The poet's continued description identifies that what he sees in his "transhumanized"² state within the *Paradiso* can only be conceived of within the realm of belief of those on earth. The spectacular sentiment resolves faith to the means with which humanity can attempt to approximate the true reality of God and his existence while possessing the imperfect capacities of human perception. Faith then operates in such a fashion that the human individual lacks the capacity to interact in such supernatural faculties—save for certain individuals capable of giving themselves over to true belief like Peter. The faculties of the intellect then serve as a rationalization of what does not exist, as belief leads far beyond human perception. At the same time, Dante's definition not only allows for but requires that human reason attempt to approximate or compensate for where the senses fail.

While Dante elects to frame his discussion of faith around Peter's miraculous walk upon the waves, Kierkegaard elects to go further back to the roots of the Judeo-Christian religions with

² "To signify transhumanizing [*trasumanar*] *per verba* is impossible; therefore let the comparison suffice for those to whom grace reserves the experience." (*Par. I. 70-72*)

Abraham and his most gruesome test of faith from God. As mentioned above, Kierkegaard by no means wants to consider faith through philosophical parameters alone. Indeed, his profound dissatisfaction with such a method is palpable. “Philosophy cannot and should not give us an account of faith,” he writes, “but should understand itself and know just what it has indeed to offer, without taking anything away, least of all cheating people out of something by making them think it is nothing” (Kierkegaard, 35). *Fear and Trembling* foregoes the development of any extended narrative or plot in favor of a slightly more traditional format of discussion; the format of Kierkegaard’s general discussion is set around interpretations of biblical narrative. *Fear and Trembling* opens with an “Attunement” to prepare the study of Abraham’s actions, recounting imaginatively the different circumstances of the day and of the patriarch’s mind as he and Isaac ascend towards the mountain of Moriah for Isaac’s sacrifice by Abraham’s hand. At the same time, Kierkegaard inserts an element of personality through the introduction of one learning of Abraham’s tale, beginning the account by saying:

There was once a man; he had learned as a child that beautiful tale of how God tried Abraham, how he withstood the test, kept his faith and for the second time received a son against every expectation... The older he became the more often his thoughts turned to that tale, his enthusiasm became stronger and stronger, and yet less and less could he understand it...

This man was no thinker, he felt no need to go further than faith.³ To be remembered as its father seemed to him to be surely the greatest glory of all, and to have it a lot to be envied even if no one else knew (Kierkegaard, 8; 9).

³ Specifically, compare to the Preface by Johannes *de silentio*: “The present author is no philosopher, he has not understood the System, nor does he know if there really is one, or if it has been completed” (Kierkegaard, 5).

Kierkegaard could very well be describing a literary “everyperson”; however, his descriptions of the man are far too reminiscent to statements made on the current author in his pseudonymous preface. Much akin to the narrative found within Dante’s *Comedy*, Kierkegaard’s attempts at structuring the definition of faith begin with the personal experiences of a self-insert character figure. This methodology produces a bizarre, paradoxical setting for Kierkegaard’s “Attunement”—while the general effect allows the reader to feel a personal connection with the man who considers Abraham, the reader only experiences further alienation from an understanding of Abraham himself. The reader of the “Attunement” is called to hear the story of Abraham first through this figure’s childhood before reconsidering the story in a state of perplexity with the older figure; furthermore, this introduction sets the following discussion upon an uneasy footing. That the figure “was no thinker,” that he “felt no need to go further than faith” seem to set the entire discussion to follow on the necessary inquisition of faith.

From this speaker’s introduction, Kierkegaard directs the reader to the story of Abraham and Isaac. While the original scripture from which he draws is remarkably brief in its account of Abraham’s decision to obey God’s command to slay his own son,⁴ Kierkegaard takes poetic license with the event to elaborate and build up a more detailed depiction of the turmoil and grief that must have been plaguing Abraham in this action’s deliberation. The accounts are visceral and extraordinarily detailed in their depiction of Abraham’s and Isaac’s suffering in the situation; indeed, the intent of this passage seeks to prepare the reader for the intensity and complexity of

⁴ The brevity of the account in question may be seen in Genesis 22:1-3: “Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.’ Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about” (NIV).

Kierkegaard's interpretation of faith. The emphasis here lies with the agonizing nature of faith, not through the sublime qualities that Dante describes in the *Paradiso*, nor would this interpretation compare to the brutality of suffering on display within the darkest depths of the *Inferno*. Instead, the core of the suffering lies within the core of the spirit in despair, in the metaphysical realm of doubt and uncertainty that Kierkegaard characterizes as a heartless abyss:

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 would life be but despair? If it were thus, if there were no sacred bond uniting mankind, if one generation rose up after another like the leaves of the forest, if one generation succeeded the other as the songs of birds in the woods, if the human race passed through the world as a ship through the sea or the wind through the desert, a thoughtless and fruitless whim, if an eternal oblivion always lurked hungrily for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrest it from its clutches—how empty and devoid of comfort would life be! But for that reason it is not so... (Kierkegaard, 14).

This is Kierkegaard's concern on the metaphysical state of the world, within which all of his questions of faith develop. Abraham serves as the primary example of faith in his regard because he is the originator of the Abrahamic religions, from whose test of faith humanity first obtains a covenant with God following the primordial time of Noah. The approach in response to this existentialist question on human existence develops from the doubts and fears that have afflicted humanity from its earliest days, questioning the meaning and significance lying at the "bottom of everything." The poetic language in this passage is quite potent (albeit melancholy) in illustrating human concerns on the temporality and spiritual desolation that can emerge from confronting

one's innermost doubts upon the nature of one's beliefs—namely with respect to whether what one believes correlates with reality. Within such a framework, the human phenomenon of belief possesses significance as something more than a simple question to be pondered; it becomes a matter of ontological necessity to consider whether the whole of one's entire reality possesses value or meaning.

Kierkegaard strikes forth at the dark oblivion of doubt by conceiving of the metaphysical context in which Abraham's faith exists. One is not forgotten, Kierkegaard argues, when one is able to achieve greatness—a feat that one only achieves through their act of love. The writer is defiant in his confrontation, and cries out against the void:

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*. One became great through expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal; but he who expected the impossible became greater than all. (Kierkegaard, 15)

Without using the word faith once in this passage, Kierkegaard lays forth the framework for his complex conception of faith. Against the doubt and ignorance of humanity's metaphysical condition, Kierkegaard argues that one endures oblivion through their love and devotion in life. Such a dedication allows the individual to transcend the self and connect with something enduring. While Kierkegaard's argument postulates that love for God may make one greater than loving more temporal things, the greatness itself is only truly obtained by the degree of their expectations for such love. It is in this section of the argument where one finds the faith analyzed

throughout the rest of *Fear and Trembling*: the faith of expectation for what not only *is* not (Dante's "substance of those wished for things") but *cannot* be. The greatness of faith in this sense is akin to the awesome, terrible power of the God that commands Abraham to rend his own son's flesh. It is a paradoxical and irrational faith, requiring that one cast the whole of their devotion into what they know cannot be. Abraham attains greatness, Kierkegaard argues, because he fully believes that the Lord will provide him with Isaac regardless of his bloody sacrifice.

The definition of faith that Kierkegaard proposes does not rely upon the Judeo-Christian conceptions of the Afterlife; in fact, it directly strikes against such belief as balms for the agony that faith requires. "Abraham had faith," he writes,

and had faith for *this* life. Yes, had his faith only been for a future life it would indeed have been easier to cast everything aside in order to hasten out of this world to which he did not belong. But Abraham's faith was not of that kind, if there is such, for a faith like that is not really faith but only its remotest possibility, a faith that has some inkling of its object at the very edge of the field of vision but remains separated from it by a yawning abyss in which despair plays its pranks (Kierkegaard, 20-21).

This extreme positioning of faith indicates that such faith is not an assurance as Dante describes in the *Paradiso*, in which one finds comfort and solace in their rationalized beliefs, but rather that faith is an assurance or resolution in that which is manifestly not possible. It is both torment and comfort in that the beliefs do not provide a sense of certainty of a better future, but rather a willingness and a conviction in what God commands for one—no matter how gruesome. To do otherwise and have faith for a different life would be, to Kierkegaard, to lack true belief in God's providence. It would be to comfort one's self with a certainty that our high wire indeed leads

somewhere, and to step out with self-assuredness that one will reach the end if one stays on, only to prepare one's self for the despair that creeps into the heart when one inevitably confronts the pervasive and nagging doubts associated with such self-certainty. At such a point, the walker would be set upon by the cruel tricks and inconsolable anguishes that Kierkegaard considers in the opening of his praises for Abraham, and we would be back at the beginning!

Such stipulations for the conception of faith would seem to identify the phenomenon as an extreme variation upon the ideals of the stoics or the ascetics. It would appear that the attention that Kierkegaard devotes to the agony necessary in considering the faith of Abraham that the definition of faith would rest solely on the denial of the self and extreme obedience to the will of God; however, the writer conceives of faith as transcending such a state of resignation to such an extent that doubt loses its meaning. There exists a gradation, Kierkegaard writes, between such an acceptance for the world and its occurrences and the true potency of a phenomenon like faith. It would be one thing for one to resolve for complete acceptance of all that transpires within the course of their life—for one to infinitely resign oneself to the fullness of one's fate, whatever it may be; however, it would be something else to have faith. This state of "infinite resignation" that Kierkegaard describes is "the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith; for only in infinite resignation does my eternal validity become transparent to me, and only then can there be talk of grasping existence on the strength of faith" (Kierkegaard, 52). For Kierkegaard, it is not only necessary that one who seeks faith through an absolute and final acceptance of God's providence—for good or ill, but also that one take an additional step into the infinite through the absurdity of faith.

At this point in his writing, Kierkegaard invokes the imagery of romance poetry by bringing forth the tale of a knight separated from his lady—whom, no matter what he (the

knight) does, he is separated from the lady for the rest of his life and may not be with her ever again. It is in this separation that Kierkegaard identifies the distinction between the act of infinite resignation and the act of faith. The knight of infinite resignation within the circumstances shall maintain his love for the lady for all the days of his life and shall never stray from doing so—he, according to Kierkegaard, will acknowledge that the two may never be together and move on with his life while still quietly maintaining his love for the woman. The knight of faith, however, goes beyond the knight of infinite resignation when in the same circumstances by believing—despite the absolute *impossibility* of ever being with the woman—that he may be with his love, “on the strength of the absurd, on the strength of the fact that for God all things are possible” (Kierkegaard, 52). It is the strength of the absurd that performs a necessary role within Kierkegaard’s conception of faith—not the belief in a God that seems improbable or unlikely given a set of circumstances, but *absolutely impossible!* To have faith in Kierkegaard’s definition is nothing short of a miraculous, paradoxical belief in God’s providence *in spite of* a pressing and overwhelming existential despair. The doubt within this definition is far beyond Dante’s presupposition of human removal from the divine; instead, the doubt itself is integral to the nature of faith at all. The knight of faith fully renounces all possibility of fulfilling his desire, and has already attained the necessary resignation to conclude in his understanding that such is impossible, yet the belief remains to lead him into Kierkegaard’s marvelous infinity.

Simultaneously,

he admits the impossibility and at the same time believes the absurd; for were he to suppose that he had faith without recognizing the impossibility with all the passion of his soul and with all his heart, he would be deceiving himself, and his testimony would carry

weight nowhere, since he would not even have come as far as infinite resignation (Kierkegaard, 53).

Kierkegaard's description of the knight of faith here illustrates the full extent of the paradox that is required for the intense phenomenon of faith. There exists a full awareness of the impossibility of one's beliefs that cannot be rectified through rational explanation, with the paradox resting in one's self-certainty amidst (and despite) the absurdity. To practice faith without acknowledging this necessary condition would be, to Kierkegaard, to fail to make a full motion into the infinite with faith—to fail to truly interact with the transcendent.

In returning to Abraham, Kierkegaard argues that such a paradox of faith is not capable of mediation. "Abraham represents faith," he writes,

and that faith finds its proper expression in him whose life is not only the most paradoxical conceivable, but so paradoxical that it simply cannot be thought. He acts on the strength of the absurd; for it is precisely the absurd that as the single individual he is higher than the universal. This paradox cannot be mediated; for as soon as he tries Abraham will have to admit that he is in a state of temptation, and in that case he will never sacrifice Isaac, or if he has done so he must return repentantly to the universal. On the strength of the absurd he got Isaac back." (Kierkegaard, 65).

This interpretation of faith rests beyond the limits of human awareness, at a point beyond which any person would have the capacity to fully understand or sympathize with the whole of Abraham's predicament. In the moment of his test from God, Abraham demonstrates a faith that makes him great—makes him greater than the universal—only insofar as he fully commits himself to the absurdity of his actions, of believing that by killing Isaac he redeems him through enacting God's will. Abraham is never given the opportunity to explain to others or defend the

reasoning for his actions, nor does he have the opportunity to ask God for clarification or an explanation for what he does at Moriah's peak. He is only made great through faith in an unflinching conviction in what God commands him to do, without the uncertainty of temptation. It is uncertainty, not abject doubt, that thus annihilates faith in this context. If Abraham were to experience a moment's hesitation, this would be to show a weakness in the face of the infinite motion of faith, and it is only the absurdity of Abraham's willingness to murder in God's name the miraculous child God granted him that Abraham demonstrates faith. The reader of *Fear and Trembling* thus sees the whole of Kierkegaard's image of faith. It is not a simple matter of belief in something greater than the perceptions may allow; it is a bleak and desolate state of conviction in what absolutely cannot be true nor make sense, but it is the quality that allows one to enter the infinite and take part in something wholly beyond perceptible reality. There is a terrifying confrontation that emerges from Kierkegaard's faith; however, the abyss that it overcomes is undoubtedly more horrific within the larger scope of existential fears. The true faith that Kierkegaard describes is unbelievably rare, and all the more significant in his conception of human existence.

In consideration of these distinct impressions of such an already elusive phenomenon, it would be folly to argue that the two are one and the same, or that their alignment alone would account for the whole of our present critique. Dante and Kierkegaard both (whether directly or obliquely) include themselves in the analysis of what faith is. The effect of this upon the definition renders it human; however, this also renders faith into a personal experience incapable of being fully conveyed to a person who is not experiencing the phenomenon him/herself. Kierkegaard's investigation is framed through a third person investigation of these matters with respect to a nearly untenable image of faith that requires intense personal conviction in the

impossible. Dante's approach seeks to rationalize the limits of our knowledge, to syllogize where our senses may fail with belief, but Kierkegaard's interpretation of faith as an absolute cannot allow for the mediation of reason given in Dante's definition. One sees this with their sample figures: Dante uses Peter for his walk out onto the waves at Christ's command (falling because of his own shortcomings), while Kierkegaard turns to the absolute nature of Abraham's willingness to kill his son (only stopping at God's command). It is clear that Dante's conception of faith is not an infinite motion on the strength of the absurd, but a sincere development from the synthesis of abstract belief and reason.

What may be concluded from these two definitions are a clarified set of parameters beyond which faith may exist. As has been stated from the outset, the purpose of this current inquiry is to identify the human element of faith, and it can suitably be defined from the poetic descriptions provided by Dante and Kierkegaard. Both very clearly identify faith at the highest strata of human existence—a fitting conception regardless of the existence of a God. Faith's function as a means of humanity delving into something transhuman lends itself to the poetic and illustrative medium because logical reasoning alone can never ascribe to this phenomenon the qualities found within philosophy. It is a profound uncertainty which one may approximate with the reason, but never even hope to fully access or understand in our current state—hence Dante's rhetoric of *transhumanization* and Kierkegaard's own descriptions of the faithful one becoming greater than all.

II. Sources and Perspectives of Faith

A question arises from having established a preliminary definition of the sort of faith that Dante and Kierkegaard employ, namely: From where does this faith derive? It would be inadequate to say that one simply chooses to believe *ex nihilo*, for such a choice requires a

cognition or consideration of what one can believe. From the outset of our inquiry, we moved to proceed in an investigation of the human demonstration of the elements of faith, proceeding outward as far as possible through Dante's and Kierkegaard's different methods of poetic and philosophical pursuit. While the traditional Christian theology suggests matters of divine inspiration and the miraculous power of the scripture, the present discussion seeks to investigate the human characteristics exhibiting responses to such claims. Thus we shall investigate whether faith is only an internalized process requiring the personal establishment of belief, or if external forces (whether they be others, texts, or otherwise) might function as guides in developing faith.

In returning to our graduate candidate Dante, the interrogation with St. Peter seeks to question the source of the pilgrim's faith: "We have gone over the alloy and the weight of this coin well," Peter declares, "but tell me if you have it in your purse.' And [the pilgrim]: 'Indeed I do, so shining and so round that none puts me in doubt of its minting'" (*Par.* XXIV. 82-87). The pilgrim's statement is remarkably direct and confident in response to the apostle's question, and their conversation proceeds; however, the simplicity of the pilgrim's response here hides several layers of meaning with respect to the faith of Dante's description. The wider context of the whole *Comedy* performs one of the foremost roles here. When the reader encounters Dante's pilgrim for the first time in the *Inferno*, the pilgrim is lost and alone in a dark forest, only to be saved from three beasts by the arrival of the poet Virgil's shade. From this point, Virgil and then Beatrice have personally guided the pilgrim through the different places of the Christian afterlife, protecting him from harm and instructing this pilgrim on the nature of divine love and justice. Along this journey, the pilgrim has encountered a diverse range of human experiences, from eternal suffering to sublime contentment.

The pilgrim has personally received the opportunity to perceive the “substances of those wished for things” in person with the guidance of those authorities that the poet deems necessary for the voyage. The background of these events concludes in the heavenly spheres of the *Paradiso*, in which the poet writes that such matters of faith are present and perceptible as the highest of truths: “[t]here we shall see that which we hold by faith, and not by demonstration, but it will be self-evident, like the first truth one believes” (*Par.* II. 43-45). Such a claim indicates that faith operates as the substitute for the direct interaction with and perception of God’s divinity, and that a state exists in which faith no longer exhibits a removal between the perceiver and the divine. This expresses a statement in its own right on the nature of belief, namely that one is uncertain of ever being sure of such a state’s existence without the miraculous journey that the pilgrim undergoes.

A reading of these passages may lead one to consider whether the whole of Dante the pilgrim’s journey discredits his conception of faith; in particular, if Dante only has certainty because of the wonders that he has seen, doesn’t this argue that only the personal and miraculous intervention of God allow for faith? There has been much scholarly discourse on Dante’s Catholicity over the centuries since the writing of the *Comedy*; however, such a dispute is trivial to the current discussion. Far more important in this case is his development of the pilgrim as a self-insert character, who (regardless of his poet counterpart) does demonstrate a faith in the work of God throughout the poem (albeit with very reasonable trepidation towards the bowels of Hell and certain penances on Purgatory). Dante the pilgrim was selected by Beatrice’s intervention to be directed back towards the straightforward path in his own life, to be sure, but he was given the full opportunity of seeing the Christian afterlife so that the writings inspired by the pilgrim’s journey (the *Comedy* itself) might help guide others towards this path as well.

In a sense, the pilgrim has encountered such things in personal experience or vision that normally require one to believe without evidence, and this appears to be the central motive for Dante the poet's construction of the whole *Comedy*. Before the pilgrim reaches the sphere of the fixed stars and Peter's questioning on faith, he encounters his ancestor Cacciaguida in the sphere of the planet Mars. Cacciaguida's speech illuminates a great deal through his prophetic information on what shall become of the pilgrim upon returning to earth.⁵ Over the course of this discussion, Cacciaguida serves as a mouthpiece for the poet's discourse on how one might be led towards faith through a story such as the pilgrim's. In explaining why the pilgrim ought to mention only the famous among his encounters, the soul postulates that "the spirit of one who hears does not rest or settle its faith in an example whose root is unknown and hidden, nor for any other argument that does not appear" (*Par.* XVII. 139-142). Cacciaguida's comments here indicate that faith cannot be derived by example unless such an example comes from an enduring and known source, or from an argument that makes manifest what one should believe. This statement develops Dante's ultimate definition of faith described in the prior section with respect to the concept of appearance; indeed, Dante's Italian here in describing the "argument that does not appear" is identical in phrasing to the pilgrim's later definition of faith for the "argument of those that do not appear"—it is an effective consistency that allows the poet to illustrate the pilgrim's attention to detail. Dante's conception of faith illustrates the human interaction with the divine as being incomplete and incapable of ever fathoming the whole of God's glory, but that human efforts in reason and metaphysical investigation assist efforts towards approximating the depths of this absolute being. There are limits to these attempts to expand, however, and it seems

⁵ Dante wrote most of the *Divine Comedy* following his exile from Florence, while the events of the poem are set around the celebration of Easter in the year 1300. The portents that the pilgrim receives from assorted shades during the journey functioning less as prophetic insights and more akin to Dante's adapted recollections of his political removal from the city.

that the purpose of the *Comedy* itself as a work of fiction is to provide examples and illustrations that could better lead its readers towards Dante's metaphysical conclusions on the state of divinity.

Once again returning to St. Peter's inquiry at the sphere of the fixed stars, the reader finds that Peter is intent on understanding where Dante's faith truly derives. "This precious jewel on which every other virtue is founded, whence did it come to you?" the saint asks, and the pilgrim responds that "The plentiful rain of the Holy Spirit, poured out on both the old and the new skins, is a syllogism that has concluded it for me so sharply that next to it every demonstration seems dulled" (*Par.* XXIV. 89-96). For Dante the poet, the specific origins of one's faith in the Christian God invariably return to the scripture ("the old and the new skins") as a work of divine inspiration (and thus a direct line of connection to God). This presents a difficult problem through the question on whose authority such writing rests: no living reader of the scripture would have personal or physical encounters with any of the characters explicitly mentioned in scripture save through a divine occurrence, and none of the text's earthly writers live to answer further questions on the source material. To participate in reading this decisive "syllogism" on matters of faith, one needs faith to accept the very authority on which it rests—a conundrum that has underscored every theological investigation that has explicitly relied on Scripture as its conclusive proof. Dante's wording here, however, indicates a reversal of this treatment of Scripture. Rather than saying that Scripture has its own authority because of his pre-existing faith, the pilgrim's answer here identifies that the influence of divine inspiration on this text is perceptible from the certainty of the different syllogisms contained within--that the works of Scripture function as guidance towards faith not simply because the pilgrim believes it to be so,

but that his reading of the logic in scripture is such that it represents the highest of truths and concluding that “next to it every demonstration seems dulled” (*Par.* XXIV. 95-96).

Peter is dissatisfied with this answer’s state, and asks that the pilgrim to elaborate further when he neglects to directly address the problem in detail. The poet writes: “I heard then: ‘The old and the new propositions on which you base your conclusion, why do you hold them to be the speech of God?’ And I: ‘The proof that discloses the truth to me is the resultant works, for which Nature never heats the iron nor pounds the anvil’” (*Par.* XXIV. 97-102). This is a critical question in Dante’s inquiry of faith, as such authority needs to be confirmed through this investigation amongst the stars. Dante deflects from this pursuant question in that he postulates it to be necessary that God inspired scripture because of the miraculous events that have occurred...within the pages of scripture itself. For the pilgrim, the works of scripture are divine because they include accounts that Nature itself could not make happen on its own; this answer is ultimately deemed insufficient by St. Peter as it relies on faith itself.

I was answered: “Tell who assures you that those works took place? The very book you wish to prove, not someone else, swears it to you.” “If the world turned to Christianity,” said I, “without miracles, this one miracle is such that the others are not a hundredth of it: for you came into the field poor and hungry to sow the good plant, formerly a vine but now become a thornbush” (*Par.* XXIV. 103-111).

The scene here is nearly comical, with the saint repeating his inquiry to the pilgrim twice after the pilgrim has tried to avoid confronting the actual question through vague responses. Luckily enough for the pilgrim, this second answer is deemed acceptable by the heavenly host. Dante the poet presents a somewhat complex treatment of the works that the scripture has inspired through the development of the Church. As Cacciaguida states in Canto XVII, people turning to faith

require a clear and significant example from which they can learn and perceive what faith is like—whether through the miracles of scripture or through the journeys of one man through Heaven and Hell. It would be miraculous for humanity to turn to Christianity without miracles, as there would be no logical sense to be found in such a transition without the capacity for people to have sensuous examples to lead them towards faith. Furthermore, Dante cites the Church as one such example, namely that the most powerful and widespread organization at his time could develop from the efforts of a simple fisherman like St. Peter.

Much in the vein of the Aristotelian philosophy that has informed the majority of Dante's writing, it should be clear that Dante's interpretation of matters of faith stem from the human desire to know and understand. When considering the pilgrim's authority and attempt at explaining the source of faith in the *Comedy* as a work of fiction, there is a general sense of understanding that emerges because of the willing suspension of disbelief. The poet's construction of the heavens, though incompatible with our own awareness of reality, functions within the logical constructions of the narrative—although one should note that its claims are meant to hold value outside of the text as well. One sees this in the way that Dante argues that faith derives from the heavens, but that human means of interacting with the heavens are inadequate for a full understanding in our current state. Another demonstration of this logic occurs with the need for significance and meaning in examples of faith, as spoken through characters like Cacciaguida and the pilgrim himself. Though humanity cannot hope to reach out for the heavens on its own, it can hope to do so by reaching out through examples and guidance from others. Even in the extreme case of miraculous intervention that the pilgrim experiences, he receives guidance from external sources through the forms of Virgil and Beatrice (figures that possess profound significance for him and for his pursuit of the straightforward path). On the

metatextual level, Dante the poet constructs a story that is removed from his own personal exploration of faith because the purpose for his writing is not to reflect on his life alone (though he does do so frequently in the *Comedy*), but most importantly to illustrate divine order and justice through the poetic medium.

In stark contrast with the confidence and intention to easily gesture towards the subjects of belief, Kierkegaard's conception of the authorities and sources of faith present a bleak image of existential self-examination. The central voice throughout *Fear and Trembling* expresses that it is folly to assume that his beliefs account for faith, no matter the certainty or the sense of understanding that may arise from his investigation; in fact, it is tenable to conclude that the whole of his tract dedicates itself to expressing the near impossibility of true faith. "[M]y courage," the writer confesses,

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 do not have faith; this courage I lack. God's love is for me, both in a direct and inverse sense, incommensurable with the whole of reality" (Kierkegaard, 36).

This sentiment of humility poses a profound distance between the writer and the definition of faith he seeks to illustrate. It is unnerving to read such a confession of lacking faith from the man who so earnestly sought to understand Abraham and his willing act of filicide in God's name. It would be one thing for Kierkegaard to state that he does not have faith and then renounce faith as a meaningless delusion driving its acolytes to cast themselves irrationally into the depths of the absurd; however, Kierkegaard instead conveys a sincere discontent in his inability to manifest faith. The language of this passage invokes a sense of internal lacking that is devoid of sarcasm or irony on the author's part in coming to the "trusting" dive into the absurd. The faith that he

has dedicated so much ink to is incomparable to the lacking degree of courage he conveys, and as such he finds it no mark of praise that he is unable to participate in such an activity. It would appear that Kierkegaard is still beset upon by the nightmarish despair with which he opens his “Speech in Praise of Abraham,” namely that the love of an infinitely good God is, as he puts it “incommensurable with the whole of reality” (Kierkegaard, 36).

Kierkegaard is emphatic upon his inability to possess faith, but he illustrates the point at which he is incapable of practicing his complex conception of faith. In expositing on the dialectic of faith, he seeks to explain how he is capable of partial motion towards faith.

The dialectic of faith is the most refined and most remarkable of all dialectics, it has an elevation that I can form a conception of but no more. I can make the great trampoline leap in which I pass over into infinitude...I can go upside down in existence, but the next is beyond me, for the marvel I cannot perform but only be amazed at (Kierkegaard, 39).

Kierkegaard places his conception of faith at the farthest extent of his comprehension, beyond a point at which he can enact what he understands of the paradox. Faith, as Kierkegaard identifies it through Abraham’s expectation of the impossible, is an active performance that requires something other than understanding to develop. This is not to discredit the necessary understanding of the absurdity present in this model of faith; instead, it is to say that such an understanding alone can be incomplete or inconsistent with the expectation that transcends infinite resignation. Stylistically, Kierkegaard’s language illustrates the willingness to move forth into the infinite, to fully resign himself to a fall from the high wire amidst the metaphysical doubts and despairs that plague him—but this is as far as his personal ability allows, as if to say that his personal capacity for belief prevents him from actively performing what the definition for faith necessitates to come next.

Understanding Kierkegaard's personal point of contention with faith further illuminates how his definition may be achieved. He writes that a "movement of faith" must be made continually on the strength of the absurd, though in such a way, be it noted, that one does not lose finitude but gains it all of a piece... I can describe the movements of faith but when I am thrown into the water, although I may be said to be swimming (for I'm not among the waders), I make other movements, I make the movements of infinity, while faith does the opposite, having performed the movements of infinity it makes those of finitude. Lucky the one who can make those movements, he performs a marvel, and I shall never tire of admiring him. Whether it is Abraham or the servant in Abraham's house, whether a professor of philosophy or a poor serving-maid is for me absolutely immaterial, I look only at the movements (Kierkegaard, 41).

Kierkegaard's repetitive denial of faith is as much an emphatic statement of personal discontent as it is an expression of the extreme qualifications necessary for achieving his paradoxical definition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, faith in this context is not a singular choice made at one point in a person's life—rather, it requires the continued "motion" or conviction for it to advance beyond the mundane to surpass the infinite. Even with the exhaustive insights that he provides on the agonizing process of faith, Kierkegaard only flounders in the waters he expresses such familiarity with. He is certainly not simply wading in the shallows, but instead he is attempting motions that are ultimately asynchronous with what Abraham's example of faith demands of him. In the opposition of finite and infinite movements, Kierkegaard is incapable of expecting what the knight of faith does when confronted with existential despair. He (Kierkegaard) may ponder and *seek* to fathom the depths of faith, but he does not possess the knight's courage, fortitude, what have you, to expect what cannot be and hope for providence within the finite

human life. As a result, he seeks out those who can master this artful motion of faith throughout the duration of one's life with the necessary conviction and composure to maintain the movement on the strength of the absurd; furthermore, it should be noted that Kierkegaard searches everywhere for such an admirable figure in motion. There are no restrictions that he places on where faith may begin its demonstration—only the completion of the necessary motions matter when considering the performance of such a leap of faith. Kierkegaard allows that anyone has the potential to believe, but that a marvelous few demonstrate faith.

Belief for Kierkegaard appears to demonstrate developing degrees, beginning with uncertainty to the elusive true faith he defines. It is within this spectrum that one encounters the last step before faith with the realm of infinite resignation. As described in our previous section, this form of belief characterizes a resignation towards the circumstances of one's life and a confrontation with true despair. In characterizing how his faith develops, the writer identifies this infinite resignation as the final step before faith (Kierkegaard, 52). Kierkegaard likens the effects of this state of belief to be comparable to a mythical shirt of tears, from whose sorrowful weaving one finds the strongest of armors. With respect to such a shirt of infinite resignation, he divulges that “[t]he secret in life is that everyone must sew it for himself; and the remarkable thing is that a man can sew it just as well as a woman. In infinite resignation there is peace and repose and consolation in the pain, that is if the movement is made properly” (Kierkegaard, 51). For Kierkegaard, there can be no Virgil or Beatrice to guide someone in the formation of their resignation to the infinite—let alone to the formation of faith. As much as others may provide kindnesses or words meant to lead one on their journey towards faith, only the individual can make the necessary motions towards belief. This is even more significant in the phenomenon of

faith, especially with the comfort and security that one might find by the stoic resignation of pain and despair when one dedicates the self properly.

In stark contrast is our familiar knight of faith, whose path towards faith in this definition incessantly confronts despair through absurdity. He “is kept awake, for he is under constant trial and can turn back in repentance to the universal at any moment, and this possibility can just as well be a temptation as the truth. Enlightenment as to which is something he can get from no one; otherwise, he would be outside the paradox” (Kierkegaard, 93). The knight’s faith can only develop amidst this uncertainty, although the very possibility of allowing this doubt to deter him serves as a temptation away from a full and unflinching acknowledgment of the absurd and the expectation of the impossible. If the knight were certain of the validity of renouncing his faith, then his motion would not extend beyond the infinite and there would be no expectation of what cannot be done. “[T]he knight of faith,” Kierkegaard declares, “is alone about everything” (Kierkegaard, 94), and cannot allow another to direct them through these internalized processes. If one were to truly receive guidance, then it would not be the will of the individual alone, and that decision would not exhibit the solitary perplexity demonstrated in Abraham.

Regarding the ultimate process of deliberation regarding such faith and doubts, Kierkegaard’s definition places sole arbitration on the individual: “Whether the individual is now really in a state of temptation or a knight of faith, only the individual can decide” (Kierkegaard, 95). The decision on this internal process of faith cannot be determined by external rationales to maintain the necessary contradictions that faith presents, and this lonely journey is one that nearly all (if not all) people must necessarily confront at some point during the course of human existence.

III. Faith and Ethics

Faith, within Dante's and Kierkegaard's definitions, clearly demonstrates far-reaching effects upon the life of the believer. Considering the fundamental gravity of acting on faith, one undoubtedly seeks to consider the authority of faith over one's life, regarding fundamental actions in relation to ethical decisions. Thus the conversation turns to the role of virtue in how faith interacts with one's moral decision-making.

The scene of Dante's defense before St. Peter casts faith as the source of divine virtue, from which all other virtues develop. As described in prior sections, Dante places great significance on the Scripture as a means of guiding one towards actualizing faith through a conscious belief in God that is supplemented through the exercise of the reason as a means of compensating for the uncertainty of faith. St. Peter, in responding to Dante the pilgrim's confession of faith, refers to the phenomenon as the "precious jewel on which every other virtue is founded" (*Par. XXIV. 89*). The apostle's diction here indicates faith as the means of humanity's awareness of God and his providence, and as such all virtue descends from divinity to those who have faith. A literal reading of this appellation for faith would present a markedly narrower definition of all worldly virtue as necessarily developing from faith in God. While defining virtue begs for further inquiry outside of the current discussion, Dante the poet's exultation of faith negates (or at the very least mitigates) the capacity for truly divine virtue among those without faith.

It is unsurprising that the pragmatic integration of faith requires explanation from Dante's more terrestrial considerations on the matter. In his *Inferno*, the poet writes of the legions of souls that have lived virtuous lives without taking part in the "substance of those wished for things, and argument for what one believes" (*Par. XXIV. 64-65*). Upon arriving at the fringe of Hell in Limbo, Virgil is emphatic in telling Dante that the souls there "did not sin; and if they

have merits, it is not enough, because they did not receive baptism, which is the gateway to the faith that you believe...Because of such defects, not for any other wickedness, we are lost, and only so far harmed that without hope we live in desire” (*Inf. IV. 34-36, 40-42*). The pilgrim’s only response is one of profound sadness in the understanding that “people of great worth were suspended in that limbo” (*Inf. IV. 44-45*). In this instance, the poet indicates that only faith in God will allow one’s “worth” or virtue to grant one eternal salvation; thus, faith serves to inform virtue in this context, and by believing in divine goodness one’s virtues act as developments of one’s faith into personal actions towards this divinity. Regardless of how virtuous one might live one’s life, Dante argues that the lack of faith condemns one to an existence of insufficiency and suspension within Limbo.

The ethical necessitation of faith does not by any means guarantee that believers secure a place in heaven should one make the faulty assumption that one’s faith makes one morally superior to others. Returning to the ethereal verses of the *Paradiso*, Dante converses with a celestial eagle composed of the souls of righteous and just figures from history on the justice of God’s providence for those who never received the opportunity to demonstrate faith in Christ. The eagle presents the following remarks to the pilgrim on the matter: “To this kingdom no one has ever risen who did not believe in Christ, either before or after he was nailed to the wood. But see: many cry ‘Christ, Christ!’ who at the judgment will be much less *prope* [close] to him, than someone who does not know Christ...” (*Par. XIX. 103-108*). The necessary prerequisites for Dante’s conception of *Paradise* then include both faith and personal virtue as well. Dante the poet populates the depths of his *Inferno* with numerous Christians ranging from laypeople to a number of popes. Dante’s depiction of faith is goal-oriented, meant to serve as means of trying to reach God and return to the state of bliss in Heaven, and such travels begin with believing in God

and the divinity of His Son, and then actively adhering to the teachings presented in Biblical scripture. In this manner, faith serves as a preliminary step in achieving divine communion with God when one's ethical decisions derive from one's faith in scripture.

Whereas Dante's depiction of faith and ethics was one of harmony, in which one's beliefs serve as a foundation for one's ethical decisions, Kierkegaard's definition of faith seeks to transcend morality. One sees this immediately with his usage of Abraham as the immortal example of faith. Kierkegaard makes the argument that faith and ethics are separate from one another, and that the commands of a God are unnecessarily conflated with what humanity can rationalize as ethical or moral:

If faith cannot make it into a holy deed to murder one's own son, then let the judgement fall on Abraham as on anyone else. If one hasn't the courage to think this thought through, to say that Abraham was a murderer, then surely it is better to acquire that courage than to waste time on undeserved speeches in his praise. 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. (Kierkegaard, 31)

As per the irreconcilable paradox of faith, Kierkegaard does not allow Abraham's action to disregard its ethical implications, instead allowing that there are two "expressions" for Abraham's willing action. In the religious sense, such an action takes on the sense of sacrifice to the will of one's god. Such an interpretation identifies the primary tenet of any religious ethical model, in which one's obedience to the will of the deity precedes all other commandment; hence the Abrahamic tradition holds his act of faith to be of supreme importance in establishing a

covenant with God. To disregard the circumstances of Abraham's sacrifice from a purely ethical standpoint, however, would be to ignore the baffling turn of events brought about by the element of faith. Disregarding both the existence of a higher power and even Abraham's ability to explain his actions to others (for whom could he reasonably convince of the dire nature of his situation?), one begins to formulate a very disturbing image. Abraham sought to take his son (born during his and his wife's old age) into the mountainous wilderness and violently take his life.

Abraham's is a gruesome act that cannot be rationalized fully in either the ethical or the religious senses: there is no means of disregarding the brutality of Abraham's work at God's command from the religious expression, nor is there a means of ignoring the necessity of what Abraham performs from an ethical standpoint. Both expressions fail to fully comprehend what the patriarch does without accounting for the immense struggle at trying to achieve the "courage" through the anguish that comes with trying to consider such an action.

As shown in our previous analysis, the conflicting nature forms the core of Kierkegaard's definition of faith. "For faith," Kierkegaard writes,

is just this paradox, that the single individual is higher than the universal, though in such a way, be it noted, that the movement is repeated, that is, that, having been in the universal, the single individual now sets himself apart as the particular above the universal. If that is not faith, then Abraham is done for and faith has never existed in the world, just because it has always existed (Kierkegaard, 63).

For Kierkegaard's knight of faith, the one's conviction in both the absurdity of one's belief as well as one's willingness in acting on such belief are of absolute necessity. The individual's leap into the infinite through faith brings one beyond the boundaries of the universal (ethics included), in such a manner that the individual places oneself above the universal with the

particularity and infinitesimal nature of one's existence. Kierkegaard's preliminary doubts in his "Speech in Praise of Abraham" return again here: faith becomes the consideration of one's existential place in the world, in which confronting meaninglessness with belief overcomes all bounds of reason on the strength of the absurd. For Abraham to be the epitome and originator of faith in God—Abraham who willingly took his son to die by his father's hand—faith must possess a dark and horrific contrast that cannot be remedied.

Faith thus does not require that one adhere to the will of God as an ethical choice; rather, faith in God outright surpasses one's moral obligations to perform what one believes in direct contrast with what is ethical by accounts of reason (let alone later commands this same God makes later).⁶ The writer's high standards for faith paint a dark image of how one might enact faith with respect to action, and there is little guidance presented on the limits of such a conclusion. The reader will find it apparent that this sort of definition affords a "justification" to any manner of atrocities committed wholeheartedly on the infinity of belief, but one would do well to remember how difficult it is to achieve such faith in Kierkegaard's definition in the first place. This culminating discussion of ethics only develops from the Kierkegaardian descriptions of anguish and confrontation with the irrationality of belief and the establishment of the necessary motions developing beyond infinite resignation to all of reality.

In this respect, faith does not function in relation to ethical decision-making at all similarly to Dante's conception in the *Paradiso*. In both interpretations, faith predicates one's

⁶ I refer specifically to the sixth commandment in Exodus 20: 13: "You shall not murder" (*NIV*). One sees this superiority in more clear contrast when considering that the first three of the five commandments preceding this one deal explicitly with direct matters of belief in God—that there are no other gods apart from God, that there shall be no idols, and that none shall misuse God's name. Such is the analytical preeminence of faith above personal morality that Kierkegaard seeks to analyze as components of the existential problem of belief in God. For Kierkegaard, it is the paradox of faith that drives humanity beyond itself into the divine, regardless of the capacity or incapacity to "prove" the existence of such divinity.

personal development of ethical choices; however, the intimacy between these two processes differ immensely. With Dante's depiction of faith, ethics develop from faith as such ethical decisions derive from God's divinity, and faith serves as the necessary component that conveys the human individual towards developing such a personal adherence to God's will for humanity. Kierkegaard proposes the opposite in his analysis of the situation, identifying that Abraham's foundation of faith serves as a direct contradiction of any willingness to adhere to earthly ethics or religious sentiments. Instead, the writer's inquiry into the nature of faith reveals that faith requires one's absolute devotion to what one believes, regardless of one's doubts and hesitations due to morality.

IV. Conclusion

From the outset, we sought to explore the notion of faith by considering the answers that Dante and Kierkegaard provide, acknowledging their different pursuits for the purposes of synthesizing a more cohesive understanding. We began this process through establishing the preliminary grounds for their definitions, in which discussion we encountered Dante's celestial encounter with St. Peter at the sphere of the fixed stars and Kierkegaard's preliminary exultations for the miraculous faith of Abraham. As was shown, Dante's definition of faith in the *Paradiso* seeks accordance with reason, developing from certainty in what does not appear and supplemented by the usage of metaphysical reason as support for what one believes. The poet intentionally evokes faith at the farthest limits of human knowledge with the saint whose faith allowed him to walk on water (temporarily). Kierkegaard's usage of Abraham's trek to Moriah throughout *Fear and Trembling* serves as a testament against reason ever fully sustaining a definition of faith on its own. Affording far more *pathos* to Abraham's story allows the necessary imagery to illustrate the complexity of faith as a nearly impossible feat to the man who would

deny being a philosopher: a convinced expectation of the impossible accomplished upon absurdity. Faith cannot be fully accounted for by reason, Kierkegaard states, because it exists by virtue of its paradox.

Both Dante and Kierkegaard acknowledge that faith demonstrates a connection to the divine that exists despite the lack of direct proof; furthermore, their interpretations serve as frameworks of where the limits ought to lie in pursuing faith. The journey that Dante the poet recounts through the eyes of the pilgrim in the *Comedy* intends to provide an explanation on the nature of divinity in relation to humanity, extending a view of faith that allows for one to develop a certainty through the application of this element of belief along with the guidance of reason. When Dante's pilgrim confronts St. Peter in the interrogation on faith, the answers that he provides serve to express faith in feasible terms amidst the utter spectacle and marvel that he encounters in Paradise. For the poet, faith is achievable by application of one's intellect along with one's conviction in what eludes perception. The Kierkegaardian notion of faith serves as a necessary counterweight acknowledging the nearly soul annihilating process that faith requires. Kierkegaard is convinced that faith does not exist either in himself or in the world without an extremely complex process of anguish and despair leading to a state of motion that categorically ought to deny Dante's conception of the phenomenon.

Synthesis emerges from the juxtaposition of these different definitions, however, with regard to the application of faith. As much as conflict emerges with the differences in severity that these two writers provide, one finds a sustained equilibrium for their respective approaches to faith through the employment of their poetics and philosophies together throughout the course of their works in a necessary process of traversing our initial high wire. As I stated initially, the high wire across which we encounter faith requires a necessary sense of balance of both reason

and our acknowledgment of our ignorance. Knowing both of these are necessary for faith is one thing, but representing the latter is more difficult: philosophical attempts possess the appeal of the *logos* in explaining concepts through reasoning, but philosophy is insufficient at clearly identifying where the limits of our knowledge exist to the reader. I propose that the creative element of poetics plays a necessary role in any inquiry into faith, as poetic creation allows for humanity to craft and illustrate what it cannot hope to comprehend with reason alone, all the while engaging with a reader's capacity for the suspension of disbelief. In effect, by crafting depictions and explanations for where our reason reaches its limit, one demonstrates clarity and offers the hopes of an expectation where one might not exist otherwise.

Dante and Kierkegaard serve as primary candidates for providing such a comprehensive definition of faith because they employ a necessary combination of philosophical reasoning and poetic elements. For the most part, Dante is a poet who writes as much with his imagery as he does with the engagement of his reason and philosophical background to craft an intricate journey into the very mind of God, while still acknowledging the limitations present in these very approximations. Kierkegaard, as much as he denies his status as a philosopher, puts forth an impressive display of reason in identifying the difficulties of faith within the context of what was originally a handful of lines of scripture. His approach to Abraham from all possible angles, whether they be personal attempts at understanding the patriarch's mentality or the process of ethically analyzing his adherence to faith, serves to fully develop an image of faith that captures the sense of utter uncertainty that emerges when considering the elusive phenomenon. In terms of the high wire, Dante's definition projects the reader outward onto the wire through the usage of imagery and references that guide the reader to incorporate reason as a supplement to the awesome transcendence of faith; Kierkegaard's definition rejects the path of the rope and

advocates a willing leap across the chasm in the expectation that one will find a landing on the other side. One cannot enact both of these actions at once, but the efforts illustrate the necessary points at which one may reach out for faith (Dante) and at which one must know that reason cannot take one further (Kierkegaard). In accomplishing the journey out into the chasm with a balanced sense of purpose and an acknowledgment of the limits presented by the individual, one gestures towards the ineffable components of faith far more clearly than restricting oneself to the measured approach by reason alone. The understanding of faith that develops thence is as comprehensible and humane as it is transcendent and unobtainable—certain in where the path leads, and mysterious where our gifted intellects can no longer guide us.

Concluding here only leads me to anticipate the necessary questions emerging from such statements—namely, how this could possibly differ from the works of other philosophers, and how such answers lead us closer to truth. In response to the first question, I affirm that the difference lies within a more specific statement of limitations with the understanding of faith. It would be obscenely arrogant (to say the least!) of me to assume that the current inquiry somehow solves all necessary questions of faith that have and will continue to plague humanity for as long as it searches for meaning. The balanced approach uniting Dante's and Kierkegaard's methodologies allows (without attempting to solve for Kierkegaard's necessary contradictions or leave matters open in a begged question) for one to understand faith as a necessary desire for meaning and provides greater importance that is neither alienated from approaching accuracy nor opaque to human experience. Reading and engaging with Dante and Kierkegaard provides a realistic and personal path of questioning on faith that helps illustrate where philosophy approximates in more sterile environments; the necessary cautions that exist for this path rest upon reading too far into detail or imagery than into such imagery's meaning or purpose. In

response to the second question, namely how such answers about faith can lead us closer to truth, human reason fundamentally cannot be certain with respect to the truth of what belief is, because belief requires that one be uncertain in the first place, and the object of Christian belief itself exists outside of human capabilities of awareness. It is through questioning such belief, however, and through establishing necessary limits, that one furthers their own approach towards understanding the phenomenon that has lead humanity to expect from the heavens above. Whether on pilgrimage through the stars or on the anguish of sleeplessness, one turns towards the phenomenon of faith in search of meaning and certainty amidst the uncertainties of human existence.

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