ERNST AND FALK
CONVERSATIONS FOR
THE FREEMASONS

Written in 1778/80
First Conversation

ERNST: Of what are you thinking, friend?
FALK: Of nothing.
ERNST: But you're so silent.
FALK: That's exactly the reason. Who thinks when he is enjoying something? And I am enjoying this refreshing morning.
ERNST: You're right. And you would have only needed to turn my question back upon me.
FALK: If something were to enter my mind, I would speak about it. There's nothing better than thinking aloud with a friend.
ERNST: Indeed.
FALK: If you have enjoyed this fine morning enough, or if something has occurred to you, well then, go ahead and say something. I can't think of anything.
ERNST: Very well! I do recollect that I have been wanting to ask you about something for some time.
FALK: Well then, ask away.
ERNST: Is it true, friend, that you are a Freemason?
FALK: That's the question of someone who is not one.
ERNST: Of course! But answer me more straightforwardly. Are you a Freemason?
FALK: I believe myself to be one.
ERNST: That's the answer of someone not quite sure of his position.
FALK: Far from it! I'm rather quite sure of my position.
ERNST: Then of course you certainly well know, if and when, where, and by whom you were admitted.
FALK: Indeed I do. But that wouldn't reveal very much.
ERNST: No?
FALK: Who is it that doesn't admit, and who doesn't get admitted?
ERNST: Explain yourself.
FALK: I believe myself to be a Freemason; not so much because I was admitted by older Masons into a legally constituted lodge, but rather because I realize and see what Freemasonry is, and why, when, and where it existed and why and by what means it is fostered or hindered.
ERNST: And you nevertheless express yourself so irresolutely? "I believe myself to be one"!
FALK: An expression to which I have simply grown accustomed. Not, of course, as if I lacked conviction, but rather because I don’t care to put myself directly in anybody’s way.

ERNST: You’re answering me as if I were a stranger.

FALK: Stranger or friend!

ERNST: You’ve been admitted, you know everything . . .

FALK: Lots of others have also been admitted and think they know everything.

ERNST: Could you have been admitted without knowing what you know?

FALK: Unfortunately.

ERNST: How so?

FALK: Because many of those who do the admitting don’t even know it themselves, while the few who know, are not allowed to express it.

ERNST: So then could you know, what you know, without being admitted?

FALK: Why not? Freemasonry is not some arbitrary thing, not something superfluous, but rather it’s a necessity, founded in the essence of man and civil society. As a result a person ought to be just as able to arrive at it through his own reflection as be led to it through instruction.

ERNST: Freemasonry is not arbitrary, you say? Doesn’t it have words, signs, and customs, every one of which could be different and therefore arbitrary?

FALK: It does. But these words, signs, and customs, none of these is Freemasonry.

ERNST: Freemasonry is not something superfluous? Well then, what did people do when Freemasonry did not yet exist?

FALK: Freemasonry has always existed.

ERNST: All right, what is it then, this necessary, indispensable Freemasonry?

FALK: As I just gave you to understand, something that even those who know are not able to say.

ERNST: An absurdity then.

FALK: Don’t be too hasty.

ERNST: Anything I can conceive of, I can express in so many words.

FALK: Not always, and at least many times not always in such a way that others acquire from these words the exact same concept which I thereby possess.

ERNST: If not exactly the very same, at least an approximate one.
FALK: An approximate concept would be useless or even dangerous here. Useless if it contained not enough, and dangerous if it contained the slightest excess.

ERNST: That's strange! If even the Freemasons who know the secret of their order are not able to convey it in so many words, how do they spread their order nevertheless?

FALK: Through deeds. They let good men and youths, whom they consider worthy of close company, surmise, guess, or observe their deeds, insofar as they can be observed. The latter find them to their taste and perform similar deeds.

ERNST: Deeds? Deeds of Freemasons? I know of none except for their speeches and songs, which for the most part are more attractively printed than thought out and expressed.

FALK: That's something they have in common with quite a few speeches and songs.

ERNST: Or am I to take for their deeds, the things they praise themselves for in these speeches and songs?

FALK: As long as they don't merely praise themselves for them.

ERNST: Besides, what is it that they praise themselves for? Nothing but things that we expect from every good individual or upright citizen. They are so full of friendship, so altruistic, so obedient, so patriotic.

FALK: Well? Is that nothing?

ERNST: Nothing!—to single one's self out from other people. Who should not be that way?

FALK: Should!

ERNST: Who doesn't have motive and opportunity enough even outside of Freemasonry to be like that?

FALK: But within it and through it, one motive more.

ERNST: Don't give me anything about accumulated motives. It's much better to impart all possible intentional powers to one single motivating desire. The number of such motivational forces is like the number of gears in a machine. The greater the number of gears, the more changeable.

FALK: I can't contradict you there.

ERNST: And what sort of one motive more? One that minimizes or renders all others suspect! And purports to be the strongest and the best!


ERNST: Which is to say, Brother Speaker is a windbag.
FALK: Which is only to say, what Brother Speaker praises about the Freemasons, is precisely not their deeds. For at the very least Brother Speaker is not just an empty windbag, and deeds do speak for themselves.

ERNST: Ah, now I see what you’re aiming at. How could these deeds not be obvious to me from the outset, these deeds which speak for themselves. I’d almost like to say cry out for themselves. It’s not enough that the Freemasons support one another, support one another in the most energetic way; after all, that would only be a quality necessary in any sort of group. What is it they don’t do for the entire population of every state whose citizens they are?

FALK: For example? Just so that I can see whether or not you are on the right track.

ERNST: For example the Freemasons in Stockholm! Didn’t they just erect a large orphanage?

FALK: Let’s hope the Freemasons in Stockholm have shown themselves active on other occasions as well.

ERNST: What other occasions?

FALK: Any other ones, I mean.

ERNST: And the Freemasons in Dresden! The ones who are keeping poor young girls busy working. Having them make lace or do knitting—just so the orphanage might not get too large.

FALK: Ernst! You know quite well what I mean, when I remind you of your name.

ERNST: All right then, no more sarcastic remarks! How about the Freemasons in Braunschweig? The ones who have poor talented boys instructed in drawing.

FALK: Why not?

ERNST: And the Freemasons in Berlin! Supporting Basedow’s Philanthropic Educational Institute.*

FALK: What’s that, you say? The Freemasons? Supporting the educational institute? Whoever told something like that?

ERNST: It was all over the newspaper.

FALK: The newspaper! I’d have to see the receipt written in Basedow’s very own hand. And I’d have to be sure that the receipt was not to Freemasons in Berlin but to those Freemasons.

ERNST: What’s that? Then you don’t approve of Basedow’s institute?

FALK: Not approve? Who can approve of it more?

ERNST: Well then, surely you don’t begrudge him such support?

*An institute for the education of the young opened in Dessau in 1774 by Johann Bernhard Basedow.
FALK: Begrudge him? Who doesn’t wish him well more than I?  
ERNST: Now wait a minute! You’re confusing me completely.  
FALK: I do believe I am. And I’m wrong to do so. After all, those  
Freemasons can do a thing which they don’t do as Masons.  
ERNST: And is that supposed to hold for all their other good deeds as  
well?  
FALK: That might be. It might be that all the good deeds you have just  
mentioned to me, to use a scholastic expression for the sake of  
brevity, are only their good deeds ad extra.  
ERNST: What do you mean by that?  
FALK: Only their deeds to catch the eye of the populace as a whole,  
those deeds that they perform merely because they are intended to  
catch the eye of the populace.  
ERNST: To gain respect and toleration?  
FALK: That could well be.  
ERNST: But what about their real deeds? You’ve nothing to say?  
FALK: Suppose I have already given you an answer? Their true deeds are  
their secret.  
ERNST: Ho, ho! Therefore not explainable in words either?  
FALK: Probably not. I can and will tell you only this much, the true  
deeds of the Freemasons are so great, so farseeing, that whole cen-
turies may well pass before it will be possible to say, this is what they  
have done! Nevertheless, they have done all that is good that still  
exists in the world—note that: in the world. And they continue to  
contribute to all good that will still come to be in this world—note  
that: in this world.  
ERNST: Oh go on! You’re pulling my leg.  
FALK: Really, I’m not. But look there! There goes a butterfly I’ve got to  
have. It’s the one from the spurge caterpillar. In haste, I’ll add only  
this: the true deeds of the Freemasons have as their goal, rendering  
what in general are customarily termed good deeds, superfluous.  
ERNST: And yet they are nevertheless good deeds as well?  
FALK: There can be none better. Just think about it for a minute. I’ll be  
right back.  
ERNST: Good deeds which have as their goal making good deeds  
superfluous? That’s a riddle. And I’m not going to waste my time  
thinking about a riddle. I’d rather lie down here for a while under  
this tree and watch the ants.
Second Conversation

ERNST: Well? Where have you been? And no butterfly yet either?
FALK: It lured me on from bush to bush, as far as the brook. And then suddenly it was on the other side.
ERNST: Ah, yes indeed. There are those who lure you on like that.
FALK: Have you thought about it?
ERNST: About what? That riddle of yours? I won’t catch that pretty butterfly either! That’s also why it’s not going to give me any more trouble. Talking about Freemasonry with you once is plenty. Never again. It’s perfectly clear to me, you’re just like all the rest of them.
FALK: Like all the rest of them? The rest of them don’t say that sort of thing.
ERNST: They don’t? Well then, it certainly looks as if there are heretics among the Freemasons. And as if you are one of them. But all heretics still always have something in common with true believers. And that’s what I was talking about.
FALK: What was it you were talking about?
ERNST: True believers or heretical Freemasons—they all play with words and let themselves be asked questions and give answers without answering.
FALK: Do you think so? Well then, let’s talk about something else. Because there was a time when you tore me out of a comfortable state of silent admiration.
ERNST: There’s nothing easier than to put you back into that state. Just sit down right here next to me and take a look.
FALK: At what then?
ERNST: The goings-on in and around this anthill here. What activity, and yet what orderliness! Everyone is carrying or dragging or pushing something, and not a one gets in the other’s way. Just look there. They’re even helping one another.
FALK: Ants live in society like the bees.
ERNST: And yet in an even more amazing society than bees. Because they don’t have anybody among them who keeps them together and governs them.
FALK: Order must therefore be capable of existing without government.
ERNST: If every individual knows how to govern himself, why not?
FALK: Do you think it will ever come to that among humankind?
ERNST: Hardly likely.
FALK: Too bad!
ERNST: I’ll say!
FALK: Get up and let’s be going. Otherwise they’ll crawl all over you, those ants of yours, and I’ve just had something occur to me that I do have to ask you just now. I haven’t got the faintest idea about your attitude toward it at all.

ERNST: About what?

FALK: About civil society among humankind in general. What do you think of it?

ERNST: It’s a very good thing.

FALK: No doubt about it. But do you consider it an end or a means?

ERNST: I don’t understand you.

FALK: Do you believe that men were created for the state? Or states for men?

ERNST: Some seem to maintain the former. The latter seems, however, to be more likely.

FALK: I think so too. States unite men so that through and in such a union every individual can all the more perfectly and more securely enjoy his measure of happiness. The sum of the individual happiness of all members is the happiness of the state. Beyond this, there is none whatsoever. Every other happiness of the state, by which however few individual members suffer or are compelled to suffer, is a cover-up for tyranny. Nothing else!

ERNST: I wouldn’t care to say that so loudly.

FALK: Why not?

ERNST: A truth which everyone judges according to his own situation can easily be misused.

FALK: Do you know, friend, you are already halfway a Freemason?

ERNST: Me?

FALK: You. Because you already recognize truths which are better left unsaid.

ERNST: But which could be said.

FALK: The wise man cannot say, what is better left unsaid.

ERNST: All right then. Just as you will. But let’s not start over about the Freemasons again. I certainly don’t want to hear any more about them.

FALK: Pardon me! But at least you see my readiness to tell you more about them.

ERNST: You’re joking. All right then! Man’s life in civil society. The governmental forms of all states are nothing more than means for the achievement of human happiness. What comes next?

FALK: Nothing more than means. And means of man’s invention. Although at the same time I also won’t deny that nature so arranged
things that mankind would soon have had to arrive at such an invention.

ERNST: This has probably led to some considering modern society to be the ultimate end of nature. Because everything, our passions as well as our needs, all have led to such an end. Consequentially, it must seem to be the ultimate goal towards which nature proceeds. That's what they concluded. As if nature had not also needed to produce the means in a purposeful way! As if nature had had as its end the happiness of some abstract idea—such as the state, the fatherland and so on—rather than the happiness of every really existing individual.

FALK: Very good! You're meeting me halfway on the right path. For now tell me this, if the governmental forms of states are a means—means of human invention—are they alone to be exempt from the destiny of human means?

ERNST: What do you call the destiny of human means?

FALK: That which is inevitably associated with human means, and which differentiates them from infallible divine means.

ERNST: What is that?

FALK: That they are not infallible. That they frequently not only fail to correspond to their intent, but that instead even bring about exactly the opposite.

ERNST: An example! If you can think of one.

FALK: Well, maritime commerce and ships are a means to reach distant lands, and they are also the reason why many persons never reach them.

ERNST: Particularly those who suffer shipwreck and drown. Now I think I comprehend what you're driving at. But certainly the reasons are clear why so many individual persons don't gain anything in the way of happiness through the forms of state government. There are all kinds of governments. State governments have many kinds of forms. Therefore one is better than the others. Many a one is quite lacking, obviously in conflict with its goals. And the best has perhaps yet to be created.

FALK: Let's not even take that into account! Imagine that the best form of government which could be conceived of has already been created. Imagine that all the people in the entire world have already accepted this best form of government. Don't you think that even then, precisely as a result of this best form of government, that things will have to take place which are extremely injurious to human happiness,
and of which man in his natural state would have simply had no idea whatsoever?

ERNST: I believe that if things of that sort were to come about as a result of the best form of government, then it wouldn’t be the best form of government.

FALK: And that a better one would be possible? Well then, I’ll accept this better one as the best and ask the very same thing.

ERNST: It looks to me as if from the start you are doing a bit of quibbling on the basis of our assumption that every means of human invention, which you declare one and all forms of state government to be, can’t be anything except faulty.

FALK: Not just that.

ERNST: And it would be difficult for you to name one of those injurious things.

FALK: Which necessarily would have to proceed from the best form of government? Oh, I’ll give you ten for one.

ERNST: Just one for a start.

FALK: Let’s assume then, that the best form of government has been created. Let’s assume that all persons in the world live under it. Would therefore all persons in the world constitute just one state?

ERNST: Not very likely. Such a gigantic state would not be capable of being governed. It would therefore have to subdivide into several small states which would all be governed by the same laws.

FALK: That is, the people would still then be Germans and Frenchmen, Dutchmen and Spaniards, Russians and Swedes, or whatever else they might be called.

ERNST: Absolutely!

FALK: Well then, we’ve got one there already. Because it’s true, isn’t it, that each of these smaller states would have its own interests? And every individual citizen of them would have the interests of his own state?

ERNST: How could it be otherwise?

FALK: These differing interests would frequently collide with one another, just as they do now, and two members of two different states would be just as unable to encounter one another in an impartial state of mind as right now a German encounters a Frenchman, or a Frenchman an Englishman.

ERNST: Very probably!

FALK: That is, whenever at the present a German encounters a Frenchman, or a Frenchman an Englishman or vice versa, it is no
longer just one person encountering just another person, who on the basis of their similar natures are reciprocally drawn to one another, but rather one sort of person encounters another sort of person, both of whom are aware of their differing inclinations, which makes them cool, reserved, and distrustful toward one another, long before they have the slightest bit to do with each other as individuals.

ERNST: That is unfortunately true.

FALK: Well then, it is therefore also true that the means which unites men to assure them of their happiness precisely through this union, separates them at the very same time.

ERNST: If you understand it that way.

FALK: Go one step further. Many of the smaller states would have a completely different climate, consequently totally different needs and gratifications, as a consequence of that totally different customs and morals, as a consequence of that a totally different morality, consequently totally different religions. Don’t you agree?

ERNST: That’s quite a step!

FALK: Men would then still be Jews and Christians and Turks and the like.

ERNST: I don’t bring myself to say no.

FALK: If they were to do that, they would also, whatever they might want to be called, behave towards one another in exactly the same way as our Christians and Jews and Turks have behaved all along. Not merely just as persons towards just other persons, but as one sort of persons towards another sort of persons who argue for a certain spiritual preference and establish rights on the basis thereof, which would never occur to man in his natural state.

ERNST: That’s a very sad state of affairs, but unfortunately nevertheless also very probable.

FALK: Just probable?

ERNST: Because you see, under any circumstances, I would have thought, just as you’ve postulated, that if all states had the same form of government, that they all probably could have the same religion too. In fact, I really don’t understand how having the same form of government without having the same religion could even be possible.

FALK: Neither do I. Actually, I just assumed that position in order to cut off your way out. The one is assuredly just as impossible as the other. One state—several states. Several states—several forms of state government. Several forms of state government—several religions.

ERNST: Yes indeed. So it would seem.

FALK: So it is. Now let me show you the second misfortune which—
totally contrary to its intention—civil society causes. It cannot unite
men without dividing them; not divide them, without establishing
rifts between them, without putting walls among them.
ERNST: And how terrible these rifts are! How impossible these walls so
often are to cross!
FALK: Now let me still add the third. As if it were not enough that
society divides and separates mankind in various peoples and re-
ligions, this division—if in a few large parts, of which each were of
itself a whole—would still always be better than no whole at all. No
indeed, civil society continues its division on into every one of these
parts as well, so to speak right on into infinity.
ERNST: How so?
FALK: Or do you really think that a state could be conceived of without
differences of class? Be it good or bad, closer or less close to
perfection, it is impossible that all its members can have the same
relationship to one another. Even though they all participate in the
legislative process, yet they cannot have an equal share, at least not an
equally direct share. As a result there will be more and less promi-
nent members. And if at the beginning all possessions of the state are
equally distributed among them, nevertheless this equality of dis-
tribution cannot go on even for two generations. Somebody will
know how to use his property better than somebody else. In the
same manner, somebody will have to distribute his less wisely em-
ployed property among several more descendants than the other. As
a result, there will be richer and poorer members.
ERNST: That’s obviously true.
FALK: Well then, just consider, how much evil there probably exists in
the world which does not have its origin in this difference of classes.
ERNST: If only I could contradict you somehow! But what basis would I
have to contradict you anyway? Well then, it’s true, mankind can be
united only by division, and only kept unified through unceasing
division. It’s simply the way things are. And it simply can’t be any
other way.
FALK: Just what I’ve been saying!
ERNST: Well then, what are you driving at with all of this? Trying to
sour me on civil society? To make me wish the idea of uniting in
states had never occurred to mankind?
FALK: Do you really misunderstand to such an extent? If civil society
had only that one good thing about it, that within it alone human
reason can be cultivated, I would bless it still, even if it had far greater
failings.
ERNST: As the saying goes, whoever wants to enjoy the fire has to put up with the smoke.

FALK: Exactly! But just because smoke can't be avoided when there's fire, does that mean that the chimney ought not to have been invented? And the fellow who invented the chimney, did doing that make him an enemy of fire? Do you see, that's what I've been driving at.

ERNST: At what? I don't understand you.

FALK: The metaphor was actually quite fitting. If men cannot be united in states in any other way than through these divisions, does that therefore make them a good thing—these divisions, I mean?

ERNST: Probably not.

FALK: Do they therefore become sacred—these divisions?

ERNST: In what way sacred?

FALK: That it might be forbidden to lay hands on them?

ERNST: With the intent...?

FALK: With the intent of preventing them from tearing apart more than necessity demands. With the intent of rendering their consequences as harmless as possible.

ERNST: How could that be forbidden?

FALK: But it can also not be hidden either, hidden by means of civil laws. Because civil laws never extend beyond the borders of their state. And this would in fact lie beyond the borders of each and every state. As a result it could only be an Opus supererogatum* and one would only wish that the wisest and best persons of every individual state would voluntarily submit themselves to this Opus supererogatum.

ERNST: That could only be wished for, but wished for very much indeed.

FALK: I would think so! It's very much to be wished for that there might be in every state men who were above the prejudices of the populace and who would know exactly where patriotism ceases to be a virtue.

ERNST: Very much to be wished for.

FALK: Very much to be wished that there might be in every state men who would not succumb to the prejudices of the religions to which they had been born; who did not believe that everything they recognize as good and true must of necessity be good and true.

ERNST: Very much to be wished for.

FALK: Very much to be wished that in every state there might be men

---

*Opus supererogatum: a concept of scholasticism—"good works" going beyond ordinary expectations.
not blinded by social eminence and not repelled by social insignificance, in whose company the individual of high estate is happy to reach out to those below, and a person of low estate is quickly raised up.

**ERNST:** Very much to be wished.

**FALK:** And if it were to be fulfilled, such a wish?

**ERNST:** Fulfilled? Well, I suppose of course there is such a man, here or there, at one time or another.

**FALK:** Not just here and there, not just at one time or another.

**ERNST:** At certain times, and in certain countries, even a few of them.

**FALK:** What if right now there were men of that sort everywhere? And that there will be their like at all times?

**ERNST:** Would to God!

**FALK:** And that these men don't live scattered about impotently. Not always in some invisible church.

**ERNST:** That's a beautiful dream!

**FALK:** To be brief about it—and what if these men were the Freemasons?

**ERNST:** What's that you say?

**FALK:** What if it were the Freemasons, who were to make it just one of their endeavors to draw those divisions, whereby men become so alien to one another, as close together as possible?

**ERNST:** The Freemasons?

**FALK:** I say, just one of their endeavors.

**ERNST:** The Freemasons?

**FALK:** Oh forgive me. I had forgotten again that you didn't wish to hear any more about the Freemasons. They're just waving to us to come to breakfast. Come along!

**ERNST:** Hold it! Wait a minute! The Freemasons, you say?

**FALK:** Our conversation led me to them again against my will. Do forgive me! Come on! Over there, in a larger group we'll soon find a more appropriate topic for discussion. Come along!

**Third Conversation**

**ERNST:** You've been avoiding me all day in the crowd of people here. But I'm following you right into your bedroom.

**FALK:** Do you have something so important to tell me? I'm tired of mere conversation for today.

**ERNST:** You're making fun of my curiosity.

**FALK:** Your curiosity?
ERNST: Which you were able to arouse so masterfully this morning.
FALK: What was it were we talking about this morning?
ERNST: About the Freemasons.
FALK: Well then? In the intoxication of that Pyrmont mineral water we were drinking, I didn’t reveal the mystery to you, did I?
ERNST: Which, as you say, can’t be revealed anyhow.
FALK: Ah, of course. That reassures me once more.
ERNST: But you did tell me something about the Freemasons I didn’t expect, something that caught my attention, made me think.
FALK: And what might that have been?
ERNST: O don’t torture me like this! You remember it for sure.
FALK: Ah yes. It’s gradually coming back to me. And that was what so preoccupied you the whole day long among your gentleman and lady friends?
ERNST: That was it! And I won’t be able to fall asleep if you don’t at least answer one more question for me.
FALK: It all depends on the question.
ERNST: Well then, how can you prove to me, at least make it seem probable for me, that the Freemasons really have such great and worthy intentions?
FALK: Did I say anything to you about their intentions? I don’t recollect doing so. Rather, since you were unable to get any sort of idea of the true deeds of the Freemasons, I merely sought to call your attention to a point, where a great deal can still take place of the sort of thing our cleverest political minds can’t even dream of. Perhaps the Freemasons are working around that. Perhaps just around that! Merely to disabuse you of your prejudice that all those places still in need of repair have been found and occupied, or that all the undone tasks have already been distributed among the necessary hands.
ERNST: Twist about now however you want. It suffices that from your descriptions I now envision the Freemasons as people who have voluntarily taken it upon themselves to labor against the unavoidable evils of the state.
FALK: That idea can at least not cause any shame for the Freemasons. Stay with it! Just be sure you grasp it in the right way! Don’t go mixing things into it which don’t belong. The unavoidable evils of the state! Not of just any state. Not those unavoidable evils which, once it has been assumed, necessarily precede from an assumed form of civil government. The Freemasons never involve themselves in that sort of thing. At least not as Freemasons. The amelioration and cure of things like that they leave to the individual citizen, who may
Ernst and Falk Conversations for the Freemasons • 293

occupy himself with it according to his judgment, his courage, and at his own peril. It’s evils of a totally different sort, a much higher sort, which are the object of their endeavors.

ERNST: I understood that quite well. It is not those evils which make for a dissatisfied citizen, but evils without which even the happiest citizen cannot be.

FALK: Right! Against those—how did you put it?—laboring against those?

ERNST: Exactly!

FALK: That phrase does overdo it a bit. Laboring against them! Abolishing them completely? That can’t be. For the state itself would have to be destroyed along with them. They mustn’t even be suddenly made apparent to those who as yet have no perception of their existence. At best, creating an awareness in the individual from afar, fostering the way it sprouts, transplanting the seedlings, cultivating and thinning it, that can be called laboring against them in a case like this. Do you now understand why I say, although the Freemasons have always been at work, nevertheless centuries can pass without it ever being possible to say, this is what they have done?

ERNST: And I comprehend the second part of the riddle too—good deeds which render good deeds unnecessary.

FALK: Exactly! Now go and study those evils and learn to identify every one of them and balance all of their effects against one another; and let me assure you that this study will reveal things to you which on gloomy days will seem like utterly depressing, incontrovertible objections to Providence and virtue. This insight, this illumination, will make you calm and happy—without being called a Freemason.

ERNST: You put so much emphasis on this being called.

FALK: Because one can be something without being called it.

ERNST: That’s good! I understand. But to come back to my question, which I merely have to clothe a bit differently: since now I really do know them, these evils against which the Freemasons proceed . . .

FALK: You know them?

ERNST: Didn’t you just name them for me?

FALK: I named a few of them for you as a sample. Merely a few of those which are obvious even to the most shortsighted eye, a few of the most indisputable, the widest-ranging ones. But how many more aren’t there still, which although not so obvious, not so indisputable, not so wide-ranging, are yet any less certain, any less necessary?

ERNST: Well then let me limit my question merely to those examples which you yourself have named for me. How can you prove to me
from these examples that the Freemasons are really concentrating their intentions upon them? You’re silent? You’re thinking about it?

FALK: In truth, not about what I could give as an answer to this question! But I don’t know what might be its cause, why you even ask me that question?

ERNST: But you will answer my question if I explain its cause to you?

FALK: That I promise you.

ERNST: I know and fear the sharpness of your mind.

FALK: The sharpness of my mind?

ERNST: I fear you’re passing off your speculations to me as fact.

FALK: Much obliged!

ERNST: Does that insult you?

FALK: On the contrary, I really must thank you for calling something sharpness of mind, which you could well have called something entirely different.

ERNST: Not at all. But I do know how easily someone who is sharp of mind deceives himself, how easily he applies or imputes plans or intentions to others, which never ever occurred to them.

FALK: But where do we get the conclusions we draw regarding people’s plans and intentions? From their individual actions, wouldn’t you say?

ERNST: Where else? And this brings me back to my question. From what individual and indisputable activities of the Freemasons, can we deduce that it is also merely secondarily, their intent, through and in themselves, to again unite those divisive forces named by you, which the state and states in general necessitate among individuals?

FALK: And, moreover, not to the disadvantage of the state or states in general.

ERNST: All the better. They perhaps need not be activities from which we can derive something like that. If they are just certain characteristics, particular details, which are directed toward it or emerge from it. Something of that sort must have served as the starting point of your speculations, assuming your system were only a hypothesis.

FALK: Your distrust keeps on showing itself. But I hope it will disappear when I make a basic principle of the Freemasons clear to you.

ERNST: And what might that be?

FALK: Something of which they have never made a mystery, and according to which they have always acted before the eyes of the entire world.

ERNST: Which is?

FALK: Which is: to accept into their order every worthy man of fitting
disposition, regardless of fatherland, regardless of religion, regardless of social standing.

ERNST: Really!

FALK: Of course this basic principle seems rather to presume men of the sort who are already beyond these divisive factors, than having the intent of creating them. But of course the nitre must already be in the air before it adheres to the walls as saltpeter.

ERNST: Oh yes indeed!

FALK: And why should the Freemasons not have been allowed to make use here of a commonplace ruse? Carrying out a part of one’s secret intentions quite openly to mislead the suspicion which always presumes something entirely different than what it sees.

ERNST: Why not?

FALK: Why shouldn’t the artist who can make silver deal in old silver fragments, so that people will all the less suspect that he can make it?

ERNST: Why not?

FALK: Ernst! Don’t you hear me? You’re answering as if in a dream, it seems.

ERNST: No, my friend. But I have enough. Enough for this night. Tomorrow, at first light, I am returning to the city.

FALK: Already? And why so soon?

ERNST: You know me so well and ask that? How much longer does your water cure last?

FALK: I just started it day before yesterday.

ERNST: Well then, I’ll see you again before you have finished it. Farewell! Good night!

FALK: Good night! Farewell!

Postscript

The spark ignited the fire. Ernst departed and became a Freemason. What he found there at the outset is the material of a fourth and fifth conversation, with which—the path divides.

Fourth Conversation

FALK: Ernst! Welcome! Back again at last! I’m long since finished with my water cure.

ERNST: And feel the better for it? Glad to hear it.

FALK: What’s that? Never has a “glad to hear it” been expressed with more irritation.
ERNST: And I am irritated too, and it wouldn’t take much for me to be angry at you as well.

FALK: At me?

ERNST: You’ve lured me into taking a foolish step. Look here. Give me your hand. What do you say now?* Shrugging your shoulders? That’s all I need.

FALK: Lured you?

ERNST: It can well be, without intending to do so.

FALK: Yet nevertheless I am to blame.

ERNST: The man of God speaks to the people of a land where milk and honey flow and the people are not to yearn for it? And not to grumble about the man of God when, instead of leading them to the promised land, he leads them into a barren desert?

FALK: Now, now! The damage can’t be as great as all that! Furthermore, I see that you have already been at work at the graves of our forefathers.

ERNST: But they were not surrounded with flames, but rather with smoke.†

FALK: Well then, wait until the smoke passes and the flame will light and warm you.

ERNST: The smoke will suffocate me before the flame casts any light for me, and I can clearly see that others who can better endure the smoke will be the ones warmed by it.

FALK: I do hope you’re not speaking of people who gladly put up with acrid smoke, as long as it’s the smoke from someone else’s fine and juicy kitchen?

ERNST: I see you do know that sort.

FALK: I’ve heard of them.

ERNST: All the more then, whatever could induce you to lead me out onto this ice? And then to dazzle me with things whose groundlessness you knew only too well?

FALK: Your irritation is making you far too unjust. Am I supposed to have talked with you about the Freemasons, without having made it clear in more than just one way how useless it is for every honorable man to become a Freemason? How useless? Why, as a matter of fact, how harmful.

ERNST: That may well be.

*Ernst has offered his friend the secret handshake of Freemasonry.
†“Graves of our forefathers,” “flames”: accessories of Masonic rituals, usually accorded only to “Masters.”
FALK: I suppose I didn’t tell you that one could fulfill the highest obligations of Masonry without being called a Freemason?
ERNST: On the contrary, I recall that very point. But you know quite well, when that imagination of mine spreads out its wings, and begins to beat them—can I hold it down? I reproach you with nothing except that you offered it such a lure.
FALK: Which you have also very quickly become weary of reaching. And why did you not tell me a word about your intention?
ERNST: Would you have advised me against it?
FALK: Certainly! Who would want to convince an impetuous child to take up the walker again, just because he still falls now and then? I am not making you any compliment there; you were already too far along to start all over again from that point. At the same time there was no making an exception of you. Everyone must tread that path.
ERNST: I would not regret having trodden it if I could but promise myself more from the path still ahead. But one empty promise after another, and not a thing but empty promises!
FALK: If it really is empty promises you’ve been getting! What sort of things are they promising you?
ERNST: You know perfectly well, all about the Scottish Rite, the Scottish knights.*
FALK: Ah yes, quite right. But what is the Scottish knight supposed to be a promise of?
ERNST: Who knows that!
FALK: And your fellows, the other novices of the order, don’t they know anything either?
ERNST: Oh them! They know so much! They expect so much! One of them wants to make gold, another is looking to conjure up spirits, and the third wants to reorganize the [Knights Templars].† You’re smiling? That’s all you’re doing? Just smiling?
FALK: What else am I to do?
ERNST: Show some irritation against such dunderheads!
FALK: If there were not one thing which reconciles me to them again.
ERNST: And what would that be?
FALK: That I recognize in all of these fanciful dreams a striving towards truth that from all of these paths of error the direction of the true path can be ascertained.

*Scottish Rite: a branch of Freemasonry.
†Originally *** in first editions. Johann Georg Hamann, the philosopher and literary contemporary of Lessing, who after the author’s death republished Ernst und Falk in the Königberger Zeitung in May 1781, interpreted these to mean the Order of Knights Templars.
ERNST: Even from the gold-making business?*
FALK: Even from the gold making. Whether gold can really be made or
cannot be made doesn't make the slightest difference to me. But I am
very absolutely certain that rational persons would only wish to be
able to make it with Freemasonry in mind. Furthermore, the very
first person who comes along into whose hands the philosopher's
stone falls will in that very same instant become a Freemason. And it
really is an astonishing thing, that is proven by all the accounts
regarding real or alleged alchemy, that the world is constantly in a
dither about.
ERNST: And the conjurors of spirits?
FALK: More or less the same can be said of them. It is impossible that
the spirits can pay heed to the voice of any other person except a
Freemason.
ERNST: How seriously you are able to say such things!
FALK: By all that's holy, no more seriously than they are.
ERNST: Would that were so! But finally, those rejuvenated [Knights
Templars], if God's willing?
FALK: Those most completely!
ERNST: You see! You don't know what to say about the likes of them.
After all [Knights Templars] really did exist at one time. But gold
makers or conjurors of spirits perhaps never existed. And obviously
it is easier to tell how the Freemasons relate to such imaginary beings
than to real ones.
FALK: It's true indeed, here I can express myself only in an paradox.
Either or . . .
ERNST: That's fine too. If one at least knows that one of two proposi-
tions is true. Well then! Either those "would be [Knights Templars]. . . ."
FALK: Ernst! Before you finish saying one more mocking remark! On
my word! These—these very individuals are either on the right path
for sure, or so far from it that not even a shred of hope is left for them
ever to find it.
ERNST: I've got to listen to the likes of that as well. For to ask you for a
more precise explanation . . .
FALK: Why not? Private matters have been made into the great mystery
long enough.
ERNST: What do you mean by that?

*Gold making: tricksters and mountebanks such as Cagliostro maintained in the eight-
enteenth century that they had penetrated the secrets of the Freemasons and were able to
make gold as a result.
FALK: The mystery of Freemasonry, as I've already told you, is that very thing which the Freemason cannot let pass his lips, even if it were possible he wanted to do so. But private matters are things which can no doubt be expressed and which people have concealed, at certain times only, and in certain lands, in part because of envy, suppressed in part because of fear, or in part avoided saying out of prudence.

ERNST: For example?

FALK: For example! Something like this relationship between [Knights Templars] and Freemasons. It can well be that at one time it was necessary and expedient not to reveal it. But now—now on the contrary, it can be exceedingly harmful if a mystery is made of this relationship any longer. Rather it ought to be loudly proclaimed and merely the proper point ascertained in which the [Knights Templars] were the Freemasons of their time.

ERNST: May I know it, this point?

FALK: Read the history of the [Knights Templars] with care! You must guess it. And you will guess it for certain, and it was precisely that reason why you ought not to have become a Freemason.

ERNST: O, that I am not sitting among my books at this moment! And if I guess it, will you acknowledge to me that I have guessed it?

FALK: You will discover at the same time that you don't need such an acknowledgment. But to return to my paradox! It is this very point alone from which the decision can be derived—If all Freemasons who are now full of the [Knights Templars], perceive and feel this point, well be unto them! Well be to the world! A blessing on all they seek to do! A blessing on all they leave undone! If, however, they do not perceive or feel it, this point, if a mere consonance has seduced them, if the Freemason who works in the [Temple], has led them to the [Templars], if they have merely fallen in love with the [Templars] on the——, if they are only really looking to distribute lucrative——, or juicy sinecures among themselves and their friends—well then, may heaven above send us a goodly portion of compassion, so that we can control our laughter.*

ERNST: Just look at that! It seems that you can still get impassioned and bitter.

FALK: Unfortunately! I thank you for that remark of yours, and am once more as cold as ice.

*An obscure passage that Hamann interpreted to read, "If the Freemason who works in the Temple has led them to the Templars; if they have merely fallen in love with the red cross on the white cloaks, if they are only really looking to distribute the order's lucrative estates, juicy sinecures . . ."
ERNST: And what in your opinion of these two cases is probably that of these gentlemen?

FALK: I fear it is the latter. Would that I were deceiving myself! For if it were the former, how could they have such a peculiar scheme?—to reconstitute the [Knights Templars]? That great point in which the [Knights Templars] were Freemasons no longer exists. At least, Europe is long since beyond it and needs no further extraordinary assistance in the matter. What in the world is it they are after? Do they too wish to become a sponge full of water which the powerful someday squeeze dry?* But who am I asking this question of? Against whom is it directed? Did you tell me—were you able to tell me that any others except the neophytes of the order were dragging themselves down with caprices of this sort, such as alchemy, spirit conjuring, [the Knights Templars]? Any others besides children, or people who have no reservation in misusing children? But children become men! Just let them alone! It suffices, as I have already said, that already in the toy I see that weapon which someday these men will bear with a sure and certain hand.

ERNST: When you get right down to it, my friend, it is not these childish things which make me indignant. Without even suspecting that something of a serious nature could be behind them, I simply looked right past them. Barrels, thought I, thrown out to distract the young whales.† But what gnaws at me is that everywhere I see nothing, hear nothing but these childish things. That not a soul wishes even to hear of those things which you led me to expect. I may hum this tune as often as I want, to whomsoever I please, no one cares to join in, always and everywhere, nothing but the deepest silence.

FALK: You mean to say . . .

ERNST: That equality which you declared to me to be the basic principle of the order, that equality which filled my entire soul with such an unexpected hope of at last being able to breathe it in the company of men, who understand how to think beyond any sort of social differences, without transgressing against one individual to the disadvantage of another.

FALK: Well then?

*Sponge: at the insistence of Philip IV of France, the Pope disbanded the Knights Templars. All their extensive properties then fell to the crown in France, Spain, and England.

†Barrels: an old seaman's custom.
ERNST: Does it still exist? If ever it did exist! Just let some enlightened Jew come along and present himself! "Oh yes," they say. "A Jew? Of course, a Freemason has to be at the very least a Christian." Except that it doesn't make the slightest difference, what kind of Christian. Without discrimination in regard to religion really means: without discrimination in regard to the three religions publicly tolerated in the Holy Roman Empire.* Do you agree as well?

FALK: I can't really say I do.

ERNST: Just let some honest shoemaker, who has leisure enough to have a few good ideas while at his last, even if he were a Jacob Böhme or a Hans Sachs.† Just let him come along and present himself! "Oh yes," they say, "a shoemaker. Why of course, a shoemaker." Just let some loyal, highly experienced, well-tested servant come along and present himself. "Yes indeed," they say, "of course, that sort of people don't themselves get to choose the color of their coat—and after all amongst ourselves we are such a select society."

FALK: And just how select a society are they really?

ERNST: Dear me! Why naturally there's not a thing I could find any other fault with there, except that it is just select society of which the whole world is so weary. Princes, counts, Herr von this or Herr von that, officers, councillors of every stripe, merchants, artists—all of the sort who prattle on enthusiastically amongst themselves in the lodge, without, you can be sure, taking any cognizance of class difference—but the fact of the matter is, they all really belong only to one class, and that unfortunately is . . .

FALK: It was, I daresay, not like that in my day. But then, perhaps! I don't know. I can only guess. I've been too long a time without any sort of connection with lodges of whatever sort they might be.‡ Not to be permitted to enter a lodge just right now, for the time being, and to be excluded from Freemasonry, are nevertheless still two very different things.

ERNST: How so?

FALK: Because a lodge is related to Freemasonry as the church is to faith. From the visible well-being of a church one can draw no conclusions, none at all, about the faith of its members. Indeed,
there is a certain external well-being of the latter of which it would be
a miracle if it were capable of existing along with true faith. Moreover, they never got along well with one another. Instead, one of them
has always destroyed the other, as history itself teaches us. And so
too, I fear, I fear . . .

ERNST: What?

FALK: To put it briefly! I simply cannot get the way I hear lodges are
being run today into my head. Having a treasury, acquiring capital,
investing this capital, seeking to place it for the best return, wanting
to acquire property, looking for privileges from kings and princes,
using the esteem and power of the latter for the suppression of other
brothers of a different rite than the one which they so enthusi-
astically desire to make into the primary thing—if that goes on for
some length of time! How glad I will be to have prophesied falsely!

ERNST: Good grief! What's to happen then? That's not the way the state
is run nowadays. And besides, even among the persons who make or
enforce its laws there are already too many Freemasons—

FALK: Fine! If therefore they also have nothing to fear from the state,
what kind of influence do you think such a form of government is
likely to have upon them? Will they not obviously arrive once more
at exactly the point they wanted to tear themselves away from? Will
they not cease to be what they desire to be? I'm not sure if you
completely understand me—

ERNST: Just go on talking!

FALK: Of course!—yes, it is true—nothing lasts forever—Perhaps this is
supposed to be the very way that Providence has chosen to put an end
to the present scheme of Freemasonry—

ERNST: Scheme of Freemasonry? What do you mean by scheme?

FALK: Well! Scheme, exterior, visible appearance.

ERNST: I still don't know—

FALK: You surely do not believe that Freemasonry has always played at
Freemasonry?

ERNST: Now what is that supposed to mean? Freemasonry has not
always played at Freemasonry?

FALK: In other words, do you really think that that which Freemasonry
is, has always been called Freemasonry? But look there. Past noon
already! There come my guests already! You are, of course, going to
stay?

ERNST: I did not want to, but now I'll probably have to. It looks like a
double enrichment awaits me.

FALK: But at table, please, not a word.
Ernst and Falk Conversations for the Freemasons  •  303

Fifth Conversation

ERNST: At last they're gone. Oh those jabberers! And did you notice, by the way, or did you not want to notice, that the one with a wart on his chin—whatever his name is—is a Freemason? He banged on his glass about it often enough.

FALK: Indeed I heard him quite well. I even noticed in his comments, something which probably did not catch your attention, he is one of those who do their fighting for America over here in Europe.*

ERNST: That's probably not the worst thing about him.

FALK: And he's got the bizarre idea that the Congress is a lodge and that with weapons in hand, the Freemasons are finally founding their empire over there.

ERNST: Are there actually dreamers like that?

FALK: There must actually be.

ERNST: And how did you get that little worm out of him?

FALK: From a trait which you will also one day get to know somewhat better.

ERNST: Good God, if only I had known that I was deceiving myself so terribly in these Freemasons!

FALK: Don't worry. A Freemason calmly awaits the rising of the sun and lets the candles burn as long as they want or can. Putting candles out and when they are out, finally recognizing that the stumps have got to be lit again or maybe even new ones set up, that's nothing for a Freemason.

ERNST: That's what I think too. Anything that costs blood is certainly not worth blood.†

FALK: Splendid!—now ask what you will. I've got to answer.

ERNST: That means there will be no end to my questions.

FALK: Only you can't find a starting point.

ERNST: Did I understand you correctly, or did I misunderstand you when we were interrupted? Did you contradict yourself or did you not? Because, as a matter of fact, when you told me that time Freemasonry had always existed, I understood it to mean that not only its essence, but its present mode of being also derives from time immemorial.

FALK: If it were only the same thing for both of them! In its essence, Freemasonry is just as old as civil society. Both could not do other-

*Referring to the contemporaneous American War for Independence, i.e., far from the scene of battle.

†An expression of Benjamin Franklin.
wise except to orginate together. Why, it may even be that civil society is just an offshoot of Freemasonry. After all, even at its burning point the flame is also an offshoot of the sun.

ERNST: Something like that shimmers before my mind’s eye as well.
FALK: Be they mother and daughter or sister and sister, the fate of both has always been interwoven. In whatever condition civil society found itself, Freemasonry everywhere has also found itself and vice versa. It has always been the surest characteristic of a healthy and strong form of state government, that it allowed Freemasonry to flower alongside it, just as it is now the infallible indication of a weak, timid state, if it will not openly tolerate what it nevertheless must tolerate covertly, whether it wishes to or not.

ERNST: By which is meant, Freemasonry!
FALK: Surely! For it is based not in external unions, which ever so easily degenerate into civil organizations, but instead in the mutual feelings of like-thinking minds.

ERNST: And who takes it upon himself to oversee the latter?
FALK: All along, of course, it has been necessary for Freemasonry at every time and place to adapt or shape itself according to civil society, for the latter was always the stronger. As varied as civic society has been, Freemasonry has not been able to refrain from assuming just as many varied forms; except that every new form had its new name, as is only natural. How could you ever think that the term Freemasonry might be older than that prevailing manner of political thought according to which it has been precisely evaluated?

ERNST: And what is this prevailing manner of thought?
FALK: That I’ll leave to your own study and research. It’s enough for me to tell you that the term Freemason, used to indicate a member of our secret brotherhood, was never heard before the beginning of this century. You can be reliably certain that before this time it never appeared in any printed book and I’d like to see the fellow, who thinks he can show it to me in just one older handwritten document.

ERNST: You mean the German term.
FALK: By no means! I mean the original English term Free-Mason, as well as every other translation derived from it, in whatever language you choose.

ERNST: That can’t be! Just think about it for a moment. Not in one single printed book before the beginning of the present century? Not a single one?
FALK: Not a one.
ERNST: Nevertheless, I myself . . .
FALK: You did? Has some of that dust that people are still haven’t stopped around gotten into your eyes too?
ERNST: But certainly the passage in . . .
FALK: In Londinopolis?* Am I right?—Dust!
ERNST: And the Acts of Parliament under Henry VI?†
FALK: Dust!
ERNST: And the privileges which Charles XI, king of Sweden granted the Lodge of Gothenburg?‡
FALK: Dust!
ERNST: And Locke?
FALK: What sort of lock?
ERNST: The philosopher. His letter to the duke of Pembroke, his notes about an interrogation written by Henry VI in his own hand.§
FALK: That must be a brand-new discovery. That’s one I don’t know. But Henry VI again? Dust and nothing more than dust!
ERNST: It can’t be!
FALK: Do you know a more genteel term for distorted words, or forged documents?
ERNST: And they could be able to get away with that for so long in the eyes of the world without being punished?
FALK: Why not? There are far too few intelligent folk to be able to contradict every single inanity as soon as it appears. It’s sufficient that no statute of limitations takes effect in such cases. Of course, it would certainly be better if people didn’t undertake any sort of inanity whatsoever before the eyes of the public. Because precisely the most disgraceful of them, so disgraceful, that is, for the very reason that no one takes the trouble to oppose them, can in the course of time attain the appearance of very solemn and sacred things. Then a thousand years later everybody says, “Would anyone have been capable of just going off and writing something like that if it had not been true? Nobody contradicted those trustworthy gentlemen back in those days, and you want to contradict them now?”
ERNST: Oh history! history! What art thou! […]

*Londinopolis, by James Howell, London, 1657. He speaks only about the professional organization of Masons.
†Henry VI (1442–71): Parliamentary documents of the era also mention only illegal meetings and organizations of Masons, i.e., handworkers.
‡Charles XI (1660–97): the so-called privileges proved to be counterfeits of the eighteenth century, by means of which the Swedish Masonic lodges sought to protect themselves by claiming long-standing legitimacy.
§Both the letter attributed to Locke and the royal proceedings proved to be falsifications.
Postlude

A sixth conversation which took place between these friends cannot be reconstructed in this way. But the essential matter thereof is intended to be critical comments on the fifth conversation, which are at present still being withheld.

Translated by William L. Zwiebel