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Crockett - Taking Shape: On the Current Constellation - JCRT 3.3
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In assessing the status of contemporary religious thought, many scholars and theologians would focus solely on idealities of discourse and ignore the no less crucial material conditions of thinking. I am not interested in positing a dualism here, nor do I wish to reduce the former to the latter, but rather I would like to reflect on the space of religious thinking, which at its limit calls into question the very opposition between material and ideal. At present, two situations over-determine the shape of academic religious or theological discourse in a critical manner: a new variety of positivism, which expresses in part a conservative entrenchment responding to financial and ideological threats to the modern university; and a no less problematic politics of representation, which deploys a positivistic logic in order to promote self-interested agendas that are understood to completely coincide with intellectual exploration, without remainder.

3. After reflecting briefly on the specific context of contemporary religious thought, I will briefly outline these two broader developments within the academy, in hopes that a fuller understanding enables scholars and thinkers to better grapple with their own problems and agendas in light of broader academic and cultural realities. Finally, I will consider the threatened place of theory, which has been under attack both intellectually and institutionally. In contemporary religious (although not only in the field of religion) discourse, theory is subsumed into ethics, with both negative and positive implications.

Transforming Religious Thought

4. One of the intellectual shifts this journal marks is a transition from philosophical theology to cultural religious theory, which follows the development of cultural studies within the academy. Nonetheless, we require a translation or transformation of more classical models of philosophical theology into new configurations, rather than a simplistic abandonment of them. Utilizing the thought of Kant and Tillich as synecdoches for philosophy and theology, respectively, and then applying them to contemporary academic issues, provides a model for gaining insight into the overall project of philosophical theology, including its present viability.
5. If philosophical theology has struggled as a coherent movement within the discipline of religious studies, a major reason is the domination of American academic theology by the Protestant seminary model, with the institutional result that if theology (or religious thought) is taught at all, it is taught in a confessional Christian manner, and nearly every Ph.D. program in theology in the United States is associated with a school of divinity. As a result, departments that have abandoned a seminary model and embraced a comparative world-religions curriculum almost universally ignore or denigrate theology. The result is that there is no place within the two competing models of academic instruction (secular and confessional) for critical and theoretical religious thought. For a brief period of time, philosophy of religion occupied such a role, but its dominance by analytical philosophy, and its disconnection from religious experience, led to its increasing irrelevance.
6. This is an example of how the historical and social formations of a discipline pressure how it is studied, and work to favor or exclude certain methodologies and orientations, and this

is true within the academy as a whole. The situation of religion shares some problems with the rest of the liberal arts, while of course possessing its own unique challenges. In the wake of Tillich's correlation of theology with culture, if theology is to be or become academically viable, it must interface with the academic study of religion, and engage in theoretical and methodological debates without presuming to sublate them or imperialistically pronounce its own conclusions and agenda. Despite the fact that many of Tillich's conclusions seem incredible or obsolete, his manner of opening theology up to other disciplines and ways of thinking provide a model for theology. Tillich's theology, however, is more specific to the discipline of religious studies, whereas Kant's philosophy is relevant to the entire academic enterprise.

The New Positivism ¹

7. Kant's conclusions concerning the conditions of possibility of knowledge of an object, while no longer credible in their stated form, provide a useful tool to reflect upon material conditions for thinking, or what Julia Kristeva calls hidden "protodoxic modalities" that shape discourse.² In a broad social and economic sense, we can perceive a shift of resources away from higher education, at least by federal and state governments, and this pattern has persisted through times of both recession and recovery over the last thirty years.³ This rationing of resources has gone hand in hand with critical examinations and calls for justification of the value and the costs of higher education, in both cultural and financial terms. One result is a privileging of professional programs and curricula over less immediately economically useful and allegedly less practical liberal arts programs and knowledge. At the same time, in conformity with the development of a business model for colleges and universities, students become customers, and knowledge is expected to be delivered in more easily digestible and entertaining ways. Another result, coincident with a defense of liberal arts and humanities values and functions, has been a retrenchment in traditional and classical disciplines and methodologies that are easier to justify and defend, at the expense of more radical and experimental structures and forms of thought. Ultimately, a logic is established both externally and internally to disciplines which resorts to empirical and quantitative data as the only form of knowledge which can be perceived, counted and taught. Because the results of education must be able to be assessed, and because politically and economically the only viable measurements of educational value are statistical and quantitative, even so-called qualitative forms of knowledge must provide an account of themselves in quantitative terms.
8. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant discusses the conditions of possibility of knowledge of an object. Ultimately, understanding works only in the realm of phenomenal appearance, leaving off access to things as they are in themselves. Understanding of objects by means of categories and concepts, however, does provide objective philosophical and scientific knowledge of such phenomenal objects. Kant secures the objectivity of phenomenal knowledge by cutting off access to things in themselves, which become unknowable. Subsequent Neo-Kantian

¹I owe this phrase, and much inspiration for the essay in general, to conversations with Gregg Lambert. See his book on the current situation of the academy, also expressed partly in Kantian terms, *Report to the Academy (Re: The New Conflict of the Faculties)* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishers, 2001). Back

²Kristeva discusses protodoxic modalities in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.35. This reference results from Charles E. Winquist's invaluable teaching, which is deeply missed. Back

³See the article by David Breneman, Dean of UVA's Curry School of Education: "For Colleges, This is Not Just Another Recession," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 14, 2002, pp.B7-B9. Back

epistemology, sometimes allied with British utilitarianism, allows for values to shape our manipulations of objects, but basically accepts Kant's conclusions about scientifically valid knowledge of objects. Continental philosophy from Heidegger to contemporary forms of postmodernism, on the other hand, emphasizes the unknowability of objects in themselves, and the essential mystery of our knowing. Kant's critical philosophy deals with the question of representation, but there is a bifurcation between the determinate representations of objects and the source or process of representing objects. Again, the former are seen as unproblematic, while the latter is inscrutable and inherently inaccessible to conceptual understanding.

9. According to the new positivism that reigns in the contemporary academic world, knowledge must be quantitatively objectified, empirically and statistically, in order to count as knowledge. This logic is subtle and insidious, even if theoretically we know better. Since the source of knowledge is inaccessible, it does not count and cannot be counted. In accord with Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, the source of knowing and representing is understood in ethical terms, and human beings are seen as entities of moral value, as ends in themselves from a noumenal standpoint, although of course for practical purposes they must be treated as phenomenal means. Although for Kant reason was universal and singular, the individualism of Romanticism combined with Nietzsche's perspectivalism leads to a subjectivization and relativization of humans as the source of moral value. This double logic works, in a schizophrenic fashion, because it allows us to function both as moral agents and as objects of representation. We always know that we are more or other than our representation(s), and to a great extent the term 'other' has replaced 'object' in many intellectual discourses, but what is crucial is that these representations continue to function and be counted in order to count as knowledge. The act of representing, although technically inaccessible, ceases to trouble us, despite the shadowy link Kant traces between the results of knowledge and the act of knowing that goes by the name of the schematism of the pure concepts of the understanding, or alternatively, the transcendental imagination.⁴

The Politics of Representation

10. Kantian thought provides a key to understanding our contemporary cultural and academic situation. The Kantian problematic of representation remains, even though its context and significance have altered. Instead of the representation of objects, theoretical human and social sciences grapple with the nature and stakes of the representation of people. This paradigm shift entails recognition of and reflection upon the otherness of human beings, and more literally *other* persons and *other* cultures. Although one motivation for the shift from object to other is the ethical impulse that people are not objects (one example that could be mentioned is Martin Buber's *I and Thou*), ironically the moral impulse to obey the Kantian categorical imperative and treat people (now understood primarily as feeling beings rather than rational agents) as ends rather than means, results in a politics of representation that ends up classifying people like empirical objects. The reason that the classical Enlightenment scheme of determinate representation still works, despite Kant's complication of it, is that

⁴See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Charles E. Winquist's inscription of the transcendental imagination into theology in his first book, *The Transcendental Imagination*, is a work which has still not been fully understood or assimilated: See "The Transcendental Imagination" Part One of Charles E. Winquist, *The Surface of the Deep* (Aurora, Co: Davies Group Publishers, 2002). My book, *A Theology of the Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2001), represents in many respects a reconsideration of the transcendental imagination from the standpoint of Kant's Third Critique. Back

humans must still be quantified and counted for instrumental reasons, at the same time that they are affirmed as uncountable in their essence.

11. The politics of representation allows specific persons to represent determinate areas of knowledge for the sake of departmental and institutional accounting. In interpersonal terms, specific individuals represent broader groups, and may engage in a political struggle for collective power. This struggle over affirmative action is at once political, cultural and intellectual. On the one hand, the consideration and promotion of members of under-represented groups allows new forms of thinking and value to emerge by encouraging participation in the generation and transformation of knowledge by different people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. On the other hand, if people are treated solely as objects of representation promoted in order to achieve specific numerical ends, then their identities are viewed as largely predetermined, and the possibilities of their theoretical contributions are truncated. If academics fail to raise critical questions about the functions and limits of the logic of representation, then we refuse to think, and humans become pawns in games which are simply understood and defined beforehand. What does it mean to be known as a representative of a group, in ethnic or gender (or other) terms? What kinds of power relationships are operative in such affirmations of identity? To what extent can a person's representation of her or his social status be determined, and to what extent is it determinative of the quality or kind of scholarship he or she undertakes? Is there an essentially minority thinking? Can it only be represented or thought by minorities? Where does this category come from, what is its history, and how is it deployed?
12. The issue that I really want to raise, which is more subtle and in many ways more problematic, is the way in which not only people but determinate areas of knowledge come to be represented, and the politics that surround these negotiations and struggles, the results of which are assumed as already given. The issue is not which side one is on, but rather the fact that if knowledge must be visibly represented in determinate ways in order to count, then we are swamped by a positivism that exceeds us and in the face of which we have no argument or defense. This is the critical situation of religious thought, and of theory more generally. In order for an area of knowledge to be legitimized, people must be hired to teach and represent it. In an era of crude empiricism, where knowledge must be quantified statistically in order to exist (for economic purposes), the area of knowledge must be identified primarily in terms of content.
13. Investigations of the form of knowledge, or the source of representing, or the conditions that make representation possible, whether epistemological or cultural or both, cannot be simply or easily represented, and are therefore marginalized. In terms of a world-religions curriculum, faculty represent specific and determinate religious traditions, e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, etc., but any methodological or theoretical reflection is secondary to the area of knowledge the faculty member represents (to the department, to students, to the university, to the general public, etc.). Despite this institutional marginalization, and despite a cultural and ideological backlash against theory which at its most extreme threatens to take the form of a refusal to think, both socially and academically, religious thought is vital to the health and survival of religion as an academic discipline. Religion is inarguably important in understanding the contemporary world, but the study of religion ceases to possess any intrinsic viability unless it generates new ways of understanding religious phenomena. Otherwise religious data can be processed and analyzed just as well by historians, sociologists, political scientists and anthropologists.

Ethics and the Place of Theory

14. Just as Kant posited a gap between theoretical and practical reason (which he later tried to overcome via the *Critique of Judgment*), our contemporary Neo-Kantian approach to thinking bifurcates ethics and phenomenal knowledge. Here ethics is detached from any rationality, and associated with a pure feeling which is then understood as relative and subjective. Ethics becomes transparent, and subject to a logic of business management, when the only question is the practical one of how to achieve predetermined moral ends. To translate Kantian ethics into the language of desire (and despite the insights of Nietzsche and Freud), we presuppose immediate and simple access to our own (and by extension others') desire, whether for liberation, representation, freedom or justice. Despite the fact that we know that we cannot *know* the essence of desire in theoretical, representational and phenomenal terms, only its empirical manifestations in entities or beings, we posit a desire in its purity that could then be instantiated through political struggle and the manipulations of objective phenomenal representations.
15. There is an underlying bond between a positivistic empiricism and a shallow humanistic multiculturalism, despite slogans of the so-called culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Theory disappears; it is the "vanishing mediator" (to use Frederic Jameson's term) between an ethics of unproblematic desire and an objective field of phenomenal knowledge or data. Kant's philosophy is relevant not only because it underlies this split, but also because a more sophisticated reading of Kant can grapple with the theoretical nature and stakes of the transcendental imagination, the process or act of knowing at the core of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The concepts of the understanding are already implicated in ethical desire because the transcendental imagination *generates* the categories of phenomenal knowledge which are then regulated by a pure practical reason. To read Kant in this way is to call attention to the theoretical link between the source and objects of representation, and to recognize that this process is saturated with ethical desire.
16. Contemporary postmodern ethics, associated primarily with Emmanuel Levinas but also with Jacques Derrida, understands the complicity of ethics and rationality at the heart of modernity, and they represent important interventions into that relationship. Levinas reads ethics as first philosophy, and develops a rigorous phenomenology that never loses sight of the complicity of thinking and desire. For example, in an essay in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Levinas argues that "ethics is before ontology. It is more ontological than ontology; more *sublime* than ontology."⁵ Ethics is not a separate value-system "laid on top of ontology," where the prior ontological determination of beings are then confronted with ethical principles. Levinas' philosophy is a reversal of Heidegger, and reflects a more profound Kantianism than most readers recognize: "it is thus a transcendentalism that begins with ethics."⁶
17. Derrida's deconstructive readings, it has become more and more evident, are informed and motivated by ethical ideas. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida explores the aporia of responsibility, which both fulfils and ruins a universal (Kantian) morality. On the one hand, "saying that a responsible decision must be taken on the basis of knowledge seems to define the condition of

⁵Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.90. Back

⁶Ibid., p.90. Back

possibility of responsibility” because otherwise there is no rational basis for decision. On the other hand, phenomenal or empirical knowledge also “defines the condition of impossibility of this same responsibility,” or else it is merely “the technical deployment of a cognitive apparatus, the simple mechanistic deployment of a theorem.”⁷ Derrida holds onto the tension between these two positions as he reads Kierkegaard’s meditation on Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, and he universalizes Abraham’s singular situation by claiming that every response to an ethical obligation is at the same time a betrayal or sacrifice of all of the other ethical claims laid on me by others, with equal imperative and weight.⁸

18. Both Derrida and Levinas read Kant through Heidegger, but nonetheless are profoundly related to the Kantian problematic even though they do not accept Kant’s philosophy as it stands or leave it untroubled. Ethics cannot be segregated from philosophical theory or empirical objects of conceptual representation. In fact, Derrida claims that in Levinas’ thought, he “is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human. His ethics is already a religious one.”⁹ To attend to the transformations and translations of ethics and reason as they are developed through Derrida and Levinas provides powerful resources for thinking contemporary culture and religion.
19. Unfortunately, however, some commentators naively deploy the notion of “the ethics of the other” as if we already know what that means and entails, as if we have unproblematic access to the demand for liberation, justice or salvation that the other desires.¹⁰ A weak misreading of Levinas and Derrida may easily conform to the Neo-Kantian situation I have described, because even if knowledge is theoretically undecidable in itself (although not in objectified, phenomenal terms), ethics is fully decidable in the sense that we know what we should do, sufficiently and practically, and this ought implies can, to invoke Kant again. Here ethics is laid on top of ontology, which is what Levinas critiques, because ethics is instrumentally applied to a given theoretical situation which may be indeterminate in an absolute sense, but is practically determinate for the sake of ethical decision. Some varieties of postmodern ethics therefore reproduce the split between phenomenal and practical reason, even if practical reason has no rationality because it simply coincides with a moral impulse or feeling.
20. We believe that we know what we want to achieve, and this is the most duplicitous aspect of the entire situation: if desire ceases to reflexively interrogate itself as it elaborates its manifestations as phenomena, then truly the question of desire, which is also the question of thinking, is foreclosed. Thinking must hold onto the tension between its objects and its own form; if restricted solely to its form, thinking becomes empty, arid and ultimately meaningless. From the standpoint of scholars immersed in quantitative methodologies, postmodern thinkers appear lost in the abstractions of reflexive thinking, although this is a serious misunderstanding of philosophers like Derrida and Levinas. If thinking ceases to fold back upon itself in order to question its very process and form, at the same time as it reflects upon phenomena, then there is no alternative to positivism.

⁷Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.24. Back

⁸See *Ibid.*, pp.68-69. Back

⁹*Ibid.*, p.84. Back

¹⁰A crucial question here is the relationship of the Levinasian other (which has been invoked often by Derrida as his work has become more explicitly ethical, political and religious), which disrupts a determinate economy of reciprocal exchange in a manner associated with transcendence, and has been assimilated to understandings of divinity by some postmodern theologians, to the Lacanian Other, which functions as the symbolic representational social order. That is, epistemologically, how do I determine if the call of the other is the voice of symbolic representation or that which is excluded by such representation, whose call causes the symbolic order to tremble? Back

21. Thinking itself is an ethical process, rather than a value-neutral operation. At the same time, however, ethics must be profoundly theoretical rather than calculating, even if the value of thinking is itself an open question and despite the fact that no type of thinking or theory safeguards common-sense ethical principles. The place of theory resides in the place of ethics, in the sense that every theoretical thinking is saturated with ethical desire, but that should not eclipse or eliminate theoretical thinking. The demand for thinking is a quasi-religious demand in that it does not conform to a logic of representation, even as it grapples with the problem or process of representation, that is, how knowledge comes to count as knowledge, without losing sight of empirical forms and objects. This is not to say that religion is essentially equivalent to philosophy, but that theory (or ethics) harbors an element of the *mysterium tremendum* within itself, even if this is what Derrida calls a "religion without religion."¹¹
22. The new positivism, which is inherently Neo-Kantian, implies that knowledge is already determined and determinate, and the only task left to scholars is to manipulate empirical information under the pressure of ethical concerns, whether acknowledged or not. Pragmatically, to sketch out the current place of theory in terms of its pressures, demands and constraints, allows scholars to better understand and affect this situation politically and theoretically. Description and prescription are conjoined, and tracing theory's present space also allows an alternative thinking to take shape. Serious thinkers know that a truly powerful thinking creatively generates the objects of thought and frames the questions that matter as opposed to simply reacting to them, and this is both an intellectual and a political struggle. To the extent that questions of political representation force scholars to sacrifice deep and profound intellectual questioning and probing, theory is lost. And that is something of value, if we value thinking.

Notes

Clayton Crockett is the author of *A Theology of the Sublime*, editor of *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought*, and editor of the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*. He teaches Religion and Philosophy at Wesley College in Dover, Delaware.

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¹¹See Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p.49. Back