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Egginton - The Christianization of Deconstruction - JCRT 4.1
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In his *Deconstruction of Christianity*, Jean-Luc Nancy makes this provocative claim:

Christianity is itself, essentially, the movement of its own distension, because it represents the constitution of a subject in opening and in distension from itself. Clearly then, one must then say that deconstruction, which is not possible except through this distension, is itself Christian. It is Christian because Christianity is, from its origin, deconstructive, because it relates in the first place to its own origin as to a play, to an interval, a beating, an opening in the origin.¹

If the “return of the religious” that is in evidence in such influential contemporary thinkers as Derrida, Nancy, L’vinas, and even Žižek,² is not to be chalked up to an “onslaught of obscurantism,” in Žižek’s own words, or denigrated as yet another resurgence of negative theology in deconstructive garb, we must explore Nancy’s contention that the structure of the modern era is deconstructive and that deconstruction is Christian, a contention that depends on the observation that modernity and Christianity share an internal tension or distension.³

The pursuit of this question leads inexorably to the figure of Søren Kierkegaard, who for too long has been dismissed by philosophy as, in the words of Martin Heidegger, “not a thinker but a religious writer.”⁴ Nevertheless, this dismissal, couched comfortably in a Hegelian tradition that considers religion to have been decisively outstripped by philosophy, repeats a rejection at the heart of philosophy, which Kierkegaard’s writing, considered as philosophy, reveals. That is to say, when Kierkegaard is read “religiously,” his writing affirms the positivism of an experience beyond thought and expression called faith, and hence may be dismissed by philosophy for failing fully to think through the paradoxes to which his thought leads. When read philosophically, however, he reveals on the contrary a moment of stoppage or breakdown that philosophy, in its very rejection of the religious, refuses to think through. The experience of reading Kierkegaard now may provide us

¹Jean-Luc Nancy, “La d’construction du christianisme,” *tudes philosophiques* 4(1998): 512-13, my translation.

²The literature on this topic is extensive, so I will cite only some of the most important and recent contributions: Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York/London: Routledge, 2002); Emmanuel L’vinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), and *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London/New York: Verso, 2000), and *On Belief* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002); John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London/New York, 2001), *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), and *The Religious*, ed. John D. Caputo (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), and *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard* (Fordham University Press, 2000), for example. Taylor makes the point for deconstruction’s affinity for theology, in that, despite appearing “avowedly atheistic” [’] “deconstruction reverses itself and creates a new opening for the religious imagination.” See his *Errings: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 6-11.

³L’vinas concurs with this description: “Subjectivity in this sense [of a Christian form of experience] is an existence in tension over itself [*tendue sur elle-meme*], which opens onto exteriority in an attitude of impatient expectation, but is incapable of finding fulfillment in the kind of exteriority—whether of persons or things—that could be comprehended by an impervious mode of thinking which was itself without tension. And beyond this thirst for salvation, there lies a still more archaic tension of the human soul—‘naturally Christian,’ perhaps—the tension of the soul consumed by desire. L’vinas, “Existence and Ethics,” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jonathan R’e and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 27.

⁴Quoted in R’e and Chamberlain, “Introduction,” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, 2.

with some answers as to why philosophy, after such a long and valiant history of refusal, comes back to religion almost as if it had never left.

For by positioning the religious as the inevitable fracturing point of ethical thought, Kierkegaard discloses the religious unconscious at the heart of philosophy: what philosophy must reject is the “zone of indistinction”⁵ between its own discourse and that of religion; and yet it is this very zone that inevitably reemerges as philosophy endeavors to fulfill its mandate, to think the very ground from which it thinks. This then, is another way to think of the distension billowing at the heart of modernity. Philosophy, in thinking the very ground from which it thinks, is forced again to face the primordial exclusion that produced that ground; where it seeks closure it finds opening, and the distension of this disclosure is what Kierkegaard’s writing brings to light.

For Kierkegaard, the essence of Christianity might have been captured in the questions posed by his narrator in the introduction to his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: “Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?”⁶ For this narrator, the contradiction between Christianity’s temporal and eternal axes, between “world historical” or objective being and lived or subjective existence, creates a challenge for the person of faith that will ultimately become the essence of faith itself.

In the *Philosophical Fragments*, this tension emerges as the incommensurability between the historical and the eternal, or between the mediate and the immediate. Although it may sound anti-intuitive to draw a parallel between the eternal and the immediate, the two are in Kierkegaard’s view inseparable, as both concepts rely on a negation of time or change, of mediation. The historical, then, is the realm of existence, and indeed, “everything that has come into existence is *eo ipso* historical,” since by coming into existence it has undergone the kind of change that is incompatible with necessity and hence with the eternal.⁷ But the historical, or coming into existence, is also incapable of being grasped in immediacy: “The historical cannot be given immediately to the senses, since the *elusiveness* of coming into existence is involved in it.

The immediate impression of a natural phenomenon or of an event is not the impression of the historical, for the *coming into existence* involved cannot be sensed immediately, but only the immediate presence” (100). Coming into existence is elusive, uncertain, because our knowledge of any such moment is intrinsically mediated, insofar as it must come to us via a medium, its transmission through time via language, for example. Whereas sensory perception is immediate and hence incorrigible, as Descartes noted, the moment we take the coming into existence (origin, historical truth) of an object of our sense certainty as the object of our inquiry, the certainty of our immediate perceptions falls inexorably to the uncertainty of mediation, and, *pace* Hegel, there can be no dialectical synthesis of this contradiction.

It is clear, however, that this limitation applies to more than mere historical knowledge. Since the issue with historicity is mediation, it would seem now impossible to transmit the certainty of sense perception to anything outside the ken of sense perception, and hence impossible to have *communicable* certainty about anything whatsoever. For there to be any such thing as knowledge at all,

the organ of the historical must have a structure analogous with the historical itself;
it must comprise a corresponding somewhat by which it may repeatedly negate in its

⁵Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁶Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15.

⁷*Philosophical Fragments, or a Fragment of Philosophy*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 93.

certainty the uncertainty that corresponds to the uncertainty of coming into existence'. Now faith has precisely the required character, for in the certainty of belief [Danish: *Tro*, *faith* or *belief*] there is always present a negated uncertainty, in every way corresponding to the uncertainty of coming into existence. (100-101)

The final phrase of this sentence is subject to (at least) two readings, and the choice between the two will determine radically different understandings of Kierkegaard's thought. The first 'call it onto-theological' reading emphasizes faith as the certainty in and through which the uncertainty of historical coming into being is always present as negated; the second 'call it deconstructive' reading emphasizes the certainty of faith as nothing other than the constant presence of the uncertainty of historical coming into being as negated.⁸ According to the first reading, the uncertainty of the historical is avoided by faith; according to the second, the uncertainty of the historical produces faith and, consequently, faith, as product of uncertainty, underlies all knowledge. Faith, in this second, deconstructive reading, is the aporia of knowledge, the fundamental point of indecision between certainty and uncertainty; it is the name for the knowledge that no knowledge will ever close the gap between the historical and the eternal, between the contingent and the necessary, between the mediate and the immediate.⁹

The first conclusion we might draw from this second reading is that Kierkegaard's thought leads one not to a theology, but to an atheism, insofar as the immediate or eternal can be said not to exist except as an effect of the mediate or historical—hence Sartre's claim that, in David Wood's words, becoming a Christian and becoming an atheist are structurally equivalent.¹⁰ This conclusion draws further support from Kierkegaard himself, who in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* argues that "the eternity of abstraction" is only gained at the cost of "disregarding existence" (313). Nevertheless, such a denial of the immediate as implied by atheism is also impossible, since it's logical conclusion (by mere process of elimination) would be to render certain the historical and mediate, practically a contradiction in terms. It would seem, then, that the aporetic structure of faith points to a further, more fundamental aporia between theology and atheism.

Returning to the *Fragments*, "what is this unknown something with which the Reason collides when inspired by its paradoxical passion, with the result of unsettling even man's knowledge of himself? It is the Unknown. It is not a human being, in so far as we know what man is; nor is it any other known thing. So let us call this unknown something: *the God*. It is nothing more than a name

⁸Indeed, in opting to translate the Danish *Tro* as *belief*, Swenson would seem to precipitate us toward the deconstructive reading at the cost of betraying the continuity of the word *Tro* throughout the passage upon which the passage's deconstructive force depends. That is to say, the one word *Tro* in Kierkegaard's passage serves to bridge precisely the unbridgeable chasm between the historical and the eternal, but only insofar as it maintains its undecidability with regard to whether it signifies *faith* or *belief*, the certainty of the eternal or the uncertainty of the temporal. Derrida comments on the same issue in Heidegger's use of *Glaube*, which can also be translated as *faith* or *belief*, asking how he can "at the same time affirm one of the possibilities of the 'religious,'" while "rejecting so energetically" *Glaube* as having no place in thought. The answer can only be that *Glaube* "remains therefore metaphysical in some way" for Heidegger, insofar as it signifies "taking for true something represented." This latter usage would seem to correspond to *belief* rather than *faith* in English (as in having one's belief or opinion confronted with hard fact); the crucial point here, however, is to recognize that the power of the concept of *faith* relies at least in part on a mutual haunting with *belief* and ultimately *knowledge* that the precipitation of translation can smooth over but not exorcise. See Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," in *Acts of Religion*, 40-101, 97.

⁹Hence the subtitle of Derrida's confrontation with Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, "Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)," chapter 3 of *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), reprinted in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, 151-174.

¹⁰See David Wood, "Thinking God in the Wake of Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, 62; and Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Matthews (London: NLB, 1974), 141-69, 168.

we assign to it.”¹¹ The god, then, is what we may call the unknown’not, let us add the unknown as a something positively unknowable, but rather the unknown as the beyond of a constitutive and internal barrier to knowing itself’, and faith is what we call the knowledge, the certainty, that no knowledge will ever bridge the gap, pierce the barrier, and render the unknowable transparent.

Given this argument, which resembles a negative theology,¹² it would appear that the question of faith is relegated to a purely epistemological status, a necessary offshoot of the inherent limitations of the human mind. To draw such a conclusion, however, would be to miss entirely the point of Kierkegaard’s irreducible importance for contemporary thought, an importance that derives from his status as an ethical thinker of the highest order. This claim might seem disingenuous, given that perhaps Kierkegaard’s greatest claim to fame is his demotion of the ethical way of life (and before it the aesthetic) in the face of a third, religious mode. But it is precisely in the qualities he attributes to the religious in distinction to the ethical that we can make out the emergence, not of a new ethics, but of another new way of thinking about the ethical and its relation to the epochal soul of the Judeo-Christian West.

To begin to trace the emergence of this notion, I will refer to the reading of Genesis with which Kierkegaard begins his study *The Concept of Dread*. What attracts Kierkegaard to this founding text of the Judeo-Christian tradition are the clues it might hold concerning the origin of sin and evil, and the nature of temptation; and what he finds there is a profound paradox lying at the heart of western ethics.

To pick up the story where it most concerns us, God had only just made man and woman. They were fresh, innocent, and like the beasts they knew no shame. And yet they were not, entirely, like beasts. Unlike the beasts, Adam and Eve could speak. And insofar as they could speak, there were also rules to follow. Or, at least, there was one rule. The first time we hear of the existence of a rule, it is in the words of the serpent, as it asks of Eve, “Did God say, ‘You shall eat of any tree in the garden?’” Her reply: “God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”¹³

The story of how Eve is tempted to break this rule, cedes to temptation, and convinces Adam to do the same is supposed to account for how a creature’ mankind’ created by a perfect and good being, arrived at its present situation, so far from all that is perfect and good. This demotion is supposed to have occurred at one fell moment, when one individual was given a choice, and chose poorly. Thus was born sin, thus was born death, thus was born suffering. But let us reflect upon the moment of that choice. A choice is determined as moral by its situation within a moral framework according to which a limit is inscribed within the range of possible options. Those choices falling within the limit are morally permissible; those falling outside it are not. Eve’s moral framework was provided by the one rule, the prohibition to eat from the tree located at the center of the garden. But is there not another element necessary for making a moral choice? Is it not supposed that one understand the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil?

Indeed, in American jurisprudence, while ignorance of the law is not sufficient to exonerate its violator, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong is a necessary condition for even the consideration of guilt and innocence. But for Eve, this fundamental knowledge is only available by way of transgression. For it is only the tree, as the serpent tells her, that will give her the knowledge

¹¹ *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy* by Johannes Climacus, trans. David Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 49; see David Wood, “Thinking God in the Wake of Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, 53-74, 70, for a commentary of the same passage as translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

¹² On the relation of deconstruction to negative theology, see the volume *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

¹³ Genesis 3.

of good and evil, and indeed God later corroborates his testimony. This then is the paradox of the fall: To have fallen, mankind must have been morally responsible, meaning it must have had knowledge of good and evil; and yet to have such knowledge, to really know what evil is and how it differs from good, mankind must already have fallen.¹⁴

How are we to make commensurate the text of Genesis with the traditional belief that, insofar as the fall is what brings distance between man and God, far from lacking knowledge of good and evil, prelapsarian humans must have had a perfect and all-encompassing knowledge? It is crucial, however, to see that there is in fact no contradiction between these two points, since knowledge of good and evil is knowledge that depends on a distinction between perfection and some deprivation of perfection. Therefore the knowledge “gained” by eating of the tree is not an addition to human knowledge but rather a fundamental subtraction: prior to the fall human being was characterized by perfect transparency; after the fall, by knowledge of good *and* evil, hence opacity, distinction, choice, and desire. Nevertheless, it is clear that the seeds of this knowledge preceded the capture of the knowledge itself, since an Eve inhabiting a perfectly transparent world would not have had any choice to make.

While the founding text of Judeo-Christian culture may nominally account for the presence of evil in God’s creation, we cannot fail to note that it is equally and at the same time a parable concerning the nature of desire. Here, among the first written words of a nascent western culture, desire is described not as a natural striving or instinctual extension of human being, but as a dark, conflicted, perhaps even perverse drive, entangled in a troubled relationship with knowledge and prohibition. For without knowledge, Eve could not have been tempted, and could not have sinned. But is it not, then, the knowledge itself and its founding distinction between good and evil that brings with it the desire to transgress in the first place? Is there not, in other words, coterminous with the knowledge of what is good, of what is good even for one’s self, of what is desirable, a drive to contravene, undo, and transgress that very good?

If this is the case, it certainly presents a problem for the philosophical tradition of ethics, a tradition that has been characterized largely by what we might call a kind of ethical realism. Thinkers are first compelled to divine an intrinsic nature to mankind, and then on the basis of this nature they proceed to derive an ultimate good, and a series of prescriptions concerning the attainment of this good. If human nature were also inhabited by a drive to contravene its own sovereign good, this would constitute the breakdown of ethical systems per se, for systems organized around the attainment of the good would ultimately founder on the paradoxical contradiction of their own ends. Such, in short, is the paradox that Kierkegaard discovers at the heart of Genesis, the paradox, in fact, inherent in the genesis of institutions, insofar as institutionalization presupposes the establishment of a system of prohibitions that is coterminous with the system of knowledge necessary for recognizing those prohibitions. If it is a paradox for a particular religio-ethical order, in other words, it would seem just as much to be a universal paradox of human sociality.

Kierkegaard’s approach to the problem is not to attempt to undo the paradox, but rather to disclose what the paradox bears witness to, which is, in the first place, the need to question a fundamental presupposition concerning the original nature of the human, namely, the *innocence* that was lost in the fall: “Innocence is ignorance. This is by no means the pure being of immediacy, but it is ignorance. The fact that ignorance regarded from without seems as though designed to become knowledge is entirely irrelevant to ignorance.”¹⁵ Innocence, in other words, is ignorance experienced from inside, ignorance ignorant of the knowledge of which it is ignorant, but which nevertheless must exist for there to be ignorance of it.

¹⁴Cf. Rüdiger Safranski, *Das Böse oder das Drama der Freiheit* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 23.

¹⁵*The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 34.

Our mistake is to take for the beginning, the origin, a moment of immediacy or “a perfection one ought to wish to recover” (34), and to think the original innocence in terms of this immediacy. But when we think, on the contrary, innocence as ignorance, we see that it is only conceivable within the context of a preceding knowledge that determines it with regard to that knowledge as something unknown. Innocence is the illusion of immediacy that carries within it the kernel of its constitutive mediation; Eve can only be innocent of transgressing the law insofar as her ignorance implies a more fundamental knowledge of good and evil that determines her desires unbeknownst to her.

The result of this redefinition of innocence as ignorance is that the bliss we might proverbially associate with the latter must be replaced by another experience, namely, dread or anxiety (*angst*). Because the ignorance of innocence is always an ignorance of a more fundamental knowledge against which it is defined, the innocent, insofar as her existence is concerned, exists in a state of anxiety or apprehensiveness,¹⁶ an openness to apprehending what is not yet or not necessarily present, in other words an attunement to the ever-present *possibility* that at any given moment something else than what is the case may now arise. This anxiety is an apprehensiveness about everything, or indeed about nothing: “But what effect does nothing produce? It begets dread. This is the profound secret of innocence, that at the same time it is dread. Dreamingly the spirit projects its own reality, but this reality is nothing, but this innocence constantly sees nothing outside of it” (*Dread* 38, translation modified).

The possibility of its own actuality being something other than what it is, a possibility due directly to its ignorance, translates for spirit into a distinction, and hence a knowledge, between actual being and its endless alternatives, a knowledge ‘inherent in and inseparable from innocence’ that is the ground, not the consequence, of sin. The original sinner, in other words, “is none other than innocence itself,”¹⁷ insofar as it is not immediacy but the ignorance of constitutive mediation. As regards Genesis, what this reasoning suggests is that the source of the absurd prohibition could not have been external to humankind, could not, in other words, have issued from a God “out there”; possibility, rather, and the sin to which it gives birth have their origin in language. For “the imperfection of the account, the doubt how it could have occurred to anyone to say to Adam what he cannot understand, is eliminated when one reflects that the speaker is language, and that hence it is Adam himself who speaks” (*Dread* 43).¹⁸

But if the ground of sin is ultimately the anxiety that emerges from the knowledge of endless possibility, how is it that sin manifests itself as temptation, as attraction, and not merely as repulsion? “The nature of original sin has often been considered,” Kierkegaard writes in his journal, “and yet the principle category has been missing—it is *dread*, that is what really determines it; for dread is a desire for what one fears, a sympathetic antipathy.”¹⁹ Anxiety is a desire for what one fears because the infinite possibility that is its source threatens the sinner with the eradication of his or her being, at the same time that the sinner sees, in the specter of possibility, the possibility of a knowledge not

¹⁶Chamberlain and R’e, *The Kierkegaard Reader*, 178.

¹⁷Chamberlain and R’e, 178.

¹⁸A compatible interpretation comes to us from Spinoza, who distinguishes between law and eternal truth, arguing that, unlike an eternal truth, a law depends “solely on the will and absolute power of some potentate, so that the revelation in question was solely in relation to Adam, and solely through his lack of knowledge a law” What is at stake here is precisely that Adam’s innocence is nothing other than a necessary ignorance of a knowledge that, like the language he learns to speak, pre-exists his entry into it, and in that way is revealed to him in such a way that deprivation, and hence evil, is integral to that very revelation. God is not caught up in contradiction because contradiction emerges necessarily, as is implied by Spinoza’s emphasis on the word “solely,” the moment the universality of God’s eternal truth is particularized in the understanding of an individual. *A Theologico-Political Treatise/A Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), 63.

¹⁹*The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (London/New York/Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1938), 105.

subject to mediation, knowledge of the eternal, the true, the immobile mark determining forever the contours of good and evil.

The suggestion that sin derives from possibility, which in turn derives from language, presents us with the specter of a sin, and hence a guilt, that is not only original but is also inescapable, infinite. An ethical theory based on such a notion could apparently only produce a concept of responsibility impoverished in its radicalism; for if one's responsibility is infinite and infinitely distributed, the impulse to act in any given singular situation runs the risk of being severely diminished. In claiming, for example, that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son illustrates "the most common and everyday experience of responsibility,"²⁰ Derrida derives from another of Kierkegaard's biblical encounters a similar conclusion, namely, that our responsibility for others is infinite:

The simple concepts of alterity and of singularity constitute the concept of duty as much as that of responsibility. As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned *apriori* to paradox, scandal, and aporia'. As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me also to respond in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. (162-3)

The point of Kierkegaard's reading of Genesis 22 is that when Abraham raises his knife to kill Isaac he is leaving behind the ethical way of life—the order of social ties, familial relations, and interpersonal, universal responsibility—and entering the religious mode, in which one disregards all ethical commands in favor of one's obedience to the absolute other in its incomprehensible absurdity. Derrida's strategy here is to argue that the sacrifice of the ethical is inherent in the very notion of ethical responsibility, since following our responsibility to a given other in one instance necessarily implies neglecting the same responsibility we have to an infinite number of others. The religious, the moment of faith over and above ethical duty, is the aporia of duty in that it marks that point at which the ethical, as the field in which action finds its justification, runs inexorably into the vanishing point of all justification: your acts will all involve a choice; you will try to justify your choices; yet you will eventually act in such a way that there will be no justification for having chosen one way rather than another. "Abraham's hyper ethical sacrifice" bears witness to the underlying moment of unjustifiability in ethics' desire to ground all action in justification.

It is likely, as David Wood argues, that Derrida overstates his point. "If I am walking down the street and interrupt my daily round to help someone bleeding in a ditch I am not 'sacrificing' any other" (Wood 66). The fact that I am on this street and not any other is simply a fact of contingency, Wood goes on to say. But it is precisely here that we must stress an aspect crucial to both Derrida's and Kierkegaard's demotion of the ethical: what Wood calls contingency, "an essential condition of any life," is the fact of possibility, the fact, as Kierkegaard says in the *Fragments*, "of the suffering of actuality, in which possibilities are shown to be nothing the moment they become actual, since possibilities are *annihilated* by actuality" (*Fragments* 162). Were the ethical to be properly thought in the exclusive terms of universal, communicable, justificatory practices, the fact of infinite possibility (hence contingency) would constitute a paralytic stumbling block for the system. What Kierkegaard, and through him Derrida, demonstrates is that the very insertion into an ethical system—that is, a system of universally communicable, institutionalized rules of behavior—produces an excess, a noncommunicable, unjustifiable pure act.²¹

For Kierkegaard, the marker of this pure act is faith: "the man who is educated by possibility knows no finite evasion by which he might escape. Now the dread of possibility holds him as its

²⁰Derrida, "Whom to Give," 162.

²¹See Taylor's fascinating commentary on Kierkegaard's Abraham-critique and its relation to Derrida's thought in *Notes* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 78-84.

prey, until, it can deliver him saved into the hands of faith. In no other place does he find repose, for every other point of rest is mere chatter, even though in men's eyes it is shrewdness" (*Dread* 141, translation modified).²² Faith is presented here as a salvation from the anxiety of possibility, but it is clear that it has a specific character, for it is held up over against other resting places, places that provide no rest, no evasion insofar as they are "finite," and "mere chatter." What this negative description of those other places tells us is that faith as a resting place from the anxiety of possibility is, first, non-finite, and second, not mere chatter, by which I think we must understand the following: our tendency is to evade the paralysis of infinite responsibility, the anxiety of possibility, by searching for a finite duty within the bounds of the ethical, that is, within the realm of what can be communicated as duty. This means that we intrinsically believe that doing what we ought to do, when such duty is communicable in terms of justificatory practices, saves us from the abyss of anxiety. What Kierkegaard suggests, on the contrary, is that doing so will do absolutely nothing to free us from our self-imposed paralysis because it absolutely fails to confront the radical source of existential anxiety, namely, the fathomless unjustifiability and noncommunicability of our desire.

It is here that Abraham's sacrifice enters the picture. Abraham is not, for Kierkegaard, a model for how we should act; indeed, he could not be such a model, for insofar as we, with the clarity of hindsight from the pedestal of dogma, look back on his action and make of it a model, we deprive the act of the very absurdity and unjustifiability that make of it a unique act in the first place: "We leave out the distress, the anxiety, the paradox"²³ that Abraham was faced with when making his choice. What Abraham shows under Kierkegaard's treatment is that the aporetic structure of the particular individual's existence within the universal, hence within the ethical realm, "cannot be mediated, for all mediation takes place only by virtue of the universal; it is and remains for all eternity a paradox, impervious to thought. And yet faith is this paradox, or else'faith has never existed simply because it has always existed, or else Abraham is lost" (56).

The repetition of this final phrase throughout the essay asks us to pause and consider its importance. Abraham only is, only exists for us, because faith is this paradox. The alternative is that faith is not this paradox and is therefore something else, namely, something subject to mediation by the universal, in which case it has always existed (been communicated, made an example of) and hence has, in fact, never *existed*, that is, come into being as a pure act in its noncommunicability and unjustifiability. What is crucial about Abraham's act is not the horrible nature of God's command but, as Derrida has also stressed, that it cannot be put into words, cannot be explained, either to Abraham's family or to us, else faith has never existed and Abraham is lost. The act is so horrible precisely so that it remains incomprehensible, so that an ethical thinker like Kant is forced to say, when faced with it, that the only thing one can be certain of is that the apparition is not God, "for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion."²⁴

But what, then, in ethical terms, is the status of this act? If it is an illustration of another mode of being, one that outstrips the ethical, is it not then *de facto* an example to be followed? Is there not an implicit ethics in this "hyper-ethical" act? To address this question it may be of use to place

²²For Kierkegaard's original *Snak*, "chatter" is preferred over "nonsense" in the 1980 translation by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); although "nonsense" is always listed, most entries engage with the semantic field of speech, and hence support the notion that what faith as a resting place [*Hvilepunkt*] offers is something that precisely resists transmission through mere talk. The original passage can be found in *Begrebet Angest* (Borgen: Danske Klassikere, 1991), 143.

²³*Fear and Trembling/Repetition. Kierkegaard's Writings, VI*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 65.

²⁴Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 115.

Kierkegaard's notion of the religious way of being along side the Kantian notion of the ethical: are the two in radical opposition, as Kierkegaard might seem to imply through his terminology; or do they share a similar fundamental structure? It is certainly not unreasonable to claim to discern profound similarities at work in Kant's and Kierkegaard's thought. As Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, not only can Kierkegaard be convincingly classified within the post-Hegelian "return to Kant" of post-1840 Germany, a more crucial resonance emerges from the fact that "the philosophical function of 'paradox' in Kierkegaard is closely parallel to that of 'limits' in Kant."²⁵

Indeed, as far as the Kantian ethical and the Kierkegaardian religious are concerned, the similarity would lie in the notion that the source of the impulse to act (in an ethical or religious way) comes from beyond a limit that functions as a kind of absolute in relation to normal action. Normal or nonethical action for Kant consists of actions that one undertakes according to one's inclinations, which are pathological in that the will is passively determined and therefore not free. For an action to be free, and hence unconditioned, its source of motivation must come from beyond the realm of inclination. But the individual's knowledge that his or her actions are truly unconditioned remains at all times a negative knowledge: only when our actions contradict our desires do we have evidence that we are acting out of duty. But even then Kant gives us to understand that we cannot be entirely sure that we are acting out of duty as opposed to merely in conformity with it.²⁶ At the very least, the source of our motivation must remain veiled in secrecy to others if not also to ourselves, for were we to act in an ethical way while communicating as much to others, the possibility would clearly arise that our real motivation was the desire to be admired for our actions, an obviously pathological motivation.

It would seem, then, that in the case of Kant's ethical theory, the source of truly ethical motivation is marked by an epistemological limit. Which makes sense, since the freedom that must be the source of ethical action is precisely what lies beyond the ken of human knowledge, which is limited to the phenomenal realm in which freedom is only felt as an effect.²⁷ But in a similar vein we can note that Kierkegaard's notion of the religious departure from the ethical has precisely this character of relation to an epistemological limit. What ultimately sets Abraham's action apart from any possible reconciliation with the realm of ethical, and hence universal, justification, is that Abraham cannot speak. "The relief provided by speaking is that it translates me into the universal" (*Fear* 113) says Kierkegaard, and that is precisely what Abraham cannot do. For Abraham's act to be properly religious, an act of faith, a "hyper-ethical" act, it must remain noncommunicable and unjustifiable.

In this way, Kierkegaard's religious and Kant's ethical can be said to be structural analogues: for both define the source of the highest form of action as emerging from beyond an absolute limit, a limit marked only by the inaccessibility of it to human knowledge. This argument, of course, overlooks a fundamental distinction, one that both philosophers would instantly point out: if, as Derrida points out, "Kant explains that to act morally is to act 'out of duty' and not 'by conforming to duty'" Kierkegaard sees acting 'out of duty', in the universalizable sense of the law, as a dereliction of one's absolute duty" (159).

The key to this distinction is Kant's own insistence on the universality of reason. His assumption that humans share in common an identical core of reason allows him to argue that the renunciation

²⁵Ricoeur, "Philosophy After Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, 9-25, 16.

²⁶"It is, in fact, absolutely impossible by experience to discern with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action, however much it might conform to duty, rested solely on moral grounds and on the conception of one's duty." *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 2nd ed., trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1990), 23.

²⁷I.e., as "respect," a "singular feeling which cannot be compared to any pathological feeling," and hence a paradoxical feeling that is at the same time not a feeling. *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. T. K. Abbott (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 97.

of self-serving interests translates automatically into actions that are in conformity with reason as that universal attribute of humankind. Kierkegaard's implicit critique is that insofar as duty is determined as a function of universality, then "the ethical is the temptation" (*Fear* 115, qtd. in Derrida 157), an inclination, namely, to turn away in horror from the utterly incommunicable nature of the real ethical, now termed religious, impulse. Kant, in other words, gets it right when he figures the ethical as an impulse emerging from beyond the limits of knowledge; he fails when he falls short of realizing the implications of this insight, and tries, impossibly, to make this impulse into an index of universality.

If such a characterization is accurate, then it would seem to open Kierkegaard to a series of attacks from a politico-ethical perspective. Richard Rorty, for example, has included Kierkegaard along with Nietzsche and Heidegger as thinkers who are fine for reading in the privacy of one's home, but are recipes for disaster once applied to social situations.²⁸ L'vinas finds that the sort of existence advanced by Kierkegaard, one "whose inwardness exceeds exteriority and cannot be contained by it" participates in the violence of the modern world, with its cult of Passion and Fury" (*"Existence"* 30). Indeed, Hannah Arendt famously criticized Eichmann's misappropriation of Kantian ethics by saying, "Many Germans and many Nazi's, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted *not* to murder, *not* to rob, *not* to let their neighbors go off to their doom' and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation."²⁹ Is it then not at least as pertinent to say of Kierkegaard 'who here seems to find praiseworthy the turning of one's back on all ties of family and society in order to commit the most atrocious act of violence' is it not as pertinent to say of him that his is a philosophy of the most irresponsible sort?

In the case of Kant, as Arendt makes clear, Eichmann misreads him egregiously, placing at the source of the will not, as Kant insists, pure universality condensed into the formula of the categorical imperative, but rather the entirely pathological inclination of one man, the F'hrer. In a similar way, the politico-ethical critique of Kierkegaard introduces a term that is that is anathema to Kierkegaard's purpose and, indeed, exactly the issue he is trying to exclude: to say that Kierkegaard is *justifying* the worst excesses of human violence is to forget that what Kierkegaard underlines in his analysis of Abraham is precisely that nothing can justify his action. On the contrary, what Kierkegaard can be seen as presenting here is precisely an intensification of Arendt's critique. Arendt, as it were, let Kant off the hook: she has Eichmann misreading Kant by putting the F'hrer in the place of the will. But according to Kierkegaard, that will always be a potentiality, not to say a necessity, as long as the ethical order is thought of as being universal, and hence communicable; the religious, and hence the true ethical, is radically incommunicable, and will always be perceived as horror from the universal or the social.

To the extent that Kierkegaard, can be correctly read as condoning Abraham's act from the comfort of hindsight, he is guilty of precisely the same error. Thus, when he says of Abraham, "And yet what did he achieve? He remained true to his love. But anyone who loves God needs no tears, no admiration; he forgets the suffering in the love. Indeed, so completely has he forgotten it that there would not be the slightest trace of his suffering left if God himself did not remember it, for he sees in secret, and recognizes distress and counts the tears and forgets nothing" (120)'when he says this of Abraham, the secret is out, and Abraham is justified; but then Kierkegaard is lost. So we must hold Kierkegaard to a much more difficult truth, to which he himself attests: "The tragic hero, who is the favorite of ethics, is the purely human; him I can understand, and all his undertakings

²⁸Talk given at Stanford University on February 5, 1997, as part of the speaker series discourse@networks.2000, on the Epistemology of Information Technology.

²⁹Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 150.

are out in the open. If I go further, I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic, for silence is both" (88).

Within the depth of his mistrust, L'vinas' greatest praise for Kierkegaard is reserved for his perception of "an impossibility within the very *capacity to speak* that was the achievement of totalizing thought" (28). By betraying this impossibility and speaking of Abraham's act as though to justify it before the court of posterity, Kierkegaard contradicts his own insight and repeats the fundamental error of Kantian ethics, painting over the highest moment of human pathological ecstasy with the speech of universal reason. It is only a reading that ignores this contradiction that will, in the end, embrace the onto-theological interpretation of faith and thus dismiss Kierkegaard as a merely religious thinker, a dismissal that seems, in such contradictory moments, to be in harmony with Kierkegaard's own understanding of his work.³⁰

What we learn if we stay attuned to the driving force of Kierkegaard's thought, on the contrary, is that, in Paul Ricoeur's words, "singularity is constantly regenerated at the margins of discourse" (21), and this singularity, which is the heart of existence, is the "indivisible remainder"³¹ of the paradox that the paradox of mediation "cannot be mediated" (*Fear* 56). Singularity'and here we have to assimilate this term to its current use by thinkers such as Jean-Luc Nancy³²'is just this: that existence is mediation; that mediation cannot be thought outside of a relation with the immediate; and that this paradoxical relation itself is incapable of mediation, hence universalization, into communicable, justificatory practices. In David Wood's words, "If the self is a relation that relates itself to itself through the medium of its relation to the infinite [immediate], then this self-relation will never cease to be problematic" (72).

If the problematic nature of this singularity is, as I have implicitly been arguing, at the heart of the distension that is simultaneously deconstructive and Christian, to find the same problematic inscribed at the heart of another of modernity's prototypical discourses, namely, psychoanalysis, might point in the direction of another epochal reconciliation. If, in other words, with the return of the religious in philosophy we are standing at the brink of the zone of indistinction between philosophy and religion, is it not also the case that the Christianization of deconstruction discloses the outline of yet another zone of indistinction, namely, that bridging the long-embattled discourses of deconstruction and psychoanalysis?

The details of a convergence between the present-day discourses of deconstruction and psychoanalysis are the subject of another essay;³³ what is of interest in the present context is that the very deconstructive insight that animates the philosophical reading of Kierkegaard's text cannot fail to find there, in the very resistance to mediation that the paradox of mediation poses, the aporetic grounding of the distinction each discipline holds dear. For, to put it in simple terms, if deconstruction has always emphasized the unlimited nature of mediation, its endless dissemination, and reproached psychoanalysis for the pretension with which it authorizes certain endpoints to this cascade;³⁴ and if psychoanalysis has insisted on the inexorability of the signifying cut, of the

³⁰Kierkegaard's insistence on attributing his writings to pseudonyms attests to a suspicion toward the capacity of speech to universalize without a destructive remainder, to be, in other words, the revelatory instrument of perfect subjective truth and hence close the gap between the universal and the particular. Nevertheless, it is precisely when he ceases to write within the confines of this self-imposed distance to self, when he writes toward the end of his life on the topic of *My Work as an Author*, that he succumbs to what might be called ethical temptation, and writes as if his own words sprang from the authority of the divine. See, for example, *The Kierkegaard Reader*, 321-22 especially.

³¹Zizek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (London: Verso, 1996).

³²See, for example, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

³³I make this argument with regard to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy in "The Sacred Heart of Dissent," forthcoming, *CR: The New Centennial Review* (2002).

³⁴See the texts collected in *The Purloined Poe*, ed. John Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press 1988), as well as Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's critique in *The Title of the Letter*, trans.

real as that which always returns to the same place, all the while shrugging off deconstruction as being lost in flights of fantasy;³⁵ Kierkegaard's refrain, that the paradox of mediation cannot be mediated, discloses that in their very opposition each discourse displays the truth of the other. For the paradox of mediation is precisely that it is endless, pure dissemination; and yet it is precisely this paradox that is the ultimately endpoint, the grounding cut, the abyss that cannot, under any circumstances, be mediated.

This is why we should not be surprised by the curious digressions Kierkegaard presents in the context of Johannes de Silencio's various attempts to reconstruct Abraham's experience in way that makes sense, or could be communicable. In each case a brief paragraph is inserted, in which the narrator implicitly compares that attempt to a different strategy for weaning a child from the breast. Thus the Abraham who claims to Isaac, in the very act of slaying him, that this is his own desire and not God's, for "it is better that he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you," is juxtaposed to the mother who blackens her breast, to which the narrator adds, "How fortunate the one who did not need more terrible means to wean the child" (11). And thus the refrain continues, after each example, leaving no doubt but that what is at issue is nothing other than the fundamental inadequacy of each method of weaning to fully account for, cover up, justify, or universalize what for the child is an incomprehensibly terrible experience of loss. In the same way, Johannes de Silencio's various versions of Abraham can never entirely account for and hence communicate the reason for his act.

But is it not precisely here where the deconstructivist critic will pounce, triumphantly pointing to the reductive tendencies of the psychoanalytically inclined, who will always, no matter the particularities of the case at hand, locate the origin of the drive for meaning in the mother's body or in some part, such as the original lost object, the breast.³⁶ But here the crucial move is precisely the opposite one: the impossibility of completely weaning the child, the persistence of a traumatic remainder to any process of separation, etc., is not the *meaning* of Johannes de Silencio's text, nor it is the answer or explanation to the impossibility of communicating Abraham's speech. For the child is a victim not of "nature" but of *deconstruction*. It is not the breast or the mother's body he or she misses, but rather the assurance of an ultimate explanation, the solidity of signification, an answer that will ground his or her endless quest for self knowledge. The traumatic kernel at the heart of our fantasy constructions, the impossible real that always returns, all of these psychoanalytic formulations that make deconstructivists apoplectic are nothing other than further failed attempts to signify the traumatic truth that is nothing other than deconstruction itself, that truth that Kierkegaard found at the heart of Christianity, the truth around which modernity is distended to the point of breaking, the truth, namely, that the paradox of mediation can never be mediated.

If deconstruction's calling is to endlessly submit to its own deconstruction, the encounter with religion was in some sense destined; but the same must be said for psychoanalysis, and that encounter is only just underway.

Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

³⁵That the real is "something that always returns to the same place," see Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Volume VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York/London: Norton, 1992), 75; for Zizek's earliest critiques of deconstruction see, for example, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 153-155. Some of Derrida's more recent readings of psychoanalytic texts are collected in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Among new critical voices suggesting affinities and convergences between the two discourses, the most recent and forceful is Wolfram Bergande, *Lacans Psychanalyse und die Dekonstruktion* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2002).

³⁶And the critical voices need not be limited to the strict deconstructivists; as Deleuze and Guattari say, for psychoanalysis it always comes back to "playing mommy and daddy." *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 7.

Notes

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