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GIVING UP THE GOOD: ADORNO, KIERKEGAARD, AND THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL CULTURE

> We older representatives of what the name "Frankfurt School" has come to designate have recently and eagerly been accused of resignation … The objection, effortlessly rattled off, runs along these lines: the person who at this hour doubts the possibility of radical change in society and who therefore neither participates in spectacular, violent actions nor recommends them has resigned. What he has in mind he thinks cannot be realized; actually he doesn't even want to realize it. By leaving the conditions untouched, he condones them without admitting it.
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> —Theodor Adorno, from "Resignation"

TO THE CARICATURES OF CULTURAL ARROGANCE AND POLITICAL PASSIVITY (his "semi-feudal, middle class manners"), now add the appropriation of Adorno as a patriarch of the "religious turn."[1] The last overlooks the secular modernism that distinguished Adorno from others with whom he was close, e.g., those with ties to the Free House of Jewish Learning led by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber in Frankfurt, and others that Adorno read and identified with, some of whom he would develop friendships with, such as Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Leo Löwenthal, Eric Fromm, and Ernst Bloch. In the post-WWI intellectual climate of social theory, Christian and Jewish theological traditions provided an alternative to the cold rationalism that came to be associated with scientific trajectories of Marxism and Kantianism. But much of the tension that characterized Adorno's relationships with these people derived from the fact that he did not make this theological turn. Instead, Adorno cultivated agonistic attachments to the priests of Enlightenment.

Foremost among them was Kant. Kant presented Adorno with a paradigm of

[1] The description is Kurt Mautz's, in *Der Urfreund* (Paderborn, 1996), 44, quoted in Lorenz Jäger, *Adorno: A Political Biography* (New Haven: Yale, 2004), 74.

unresolved contradiction, not only through his epistemological or political writings, but also through his aesthetic theory. Aesthetic autonomy was for Kant a form of pleasure derived neither morally (conceptually, formally) nor sensuously (empirically); autonomy in art engenders "free" (non-conceptual, non-sensual) pleasure. Above all in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno leaned heavily on Kant's approach to aesthetic truth as a form of negativity inasmuch as the autonomous work of art was constituted *as* the impossibility of a reconciliation that it continues nevertheless to anticipate[2]. Within the Enlightenment's own sacred texts, particularly Kant's, Adorno became alert to the unsettling, self-critical features of rationality, viewing it as a necessary predicament rather than an already achieved state of affairs. This predicament is impossible to reduce to something one either believes in and undertakes or disbelieves and renounces. Rationality codified a historical problem for Adorno; Kant's "antinomies of reason" staged social and historical contradictions. Theoretically, aesthetically, and politically, Adorno found in Kant's rationalism a paradigm for secular modernism grounded not in positive science or humanitarian progress but in a task of reconciliation which clings assiduously to the not-yetness of its completion.

I maintain that because Adorno's thought was incompatible with the "religious turn" then, it is also unsuitable for appropriation by the current "religious turn." However, against the backdrop of this conclusion I take up the question of Adorno's relation to Søren Kierkegaard. What was Kierkegaard's place in the texts and lectures of Adorno? My thesis is that the religious turn is incompatible with Adorno not *in spite of* his relation to Kierkegaard but rather because of the way Adorno interpreted Kierkegaard's significance to the critique of political culture. In Adorno's view, Western political culture since the eighteenth century limited the application of concepts like justice and the Good to formal constructions of law, right, and universal moral codes on the one hand (formal constitutions), and to historical constructions of culture, cultivation, and ethical norms on the other hand (empirical constitutions). Within the context of tendencies to reduce the political to this misleading and uncomplicated choice (which for Marxists easily became the distinction between "mere theory" and active praxis), the mood and desire of Adorno's "resignation" was less to *give up* on *the Good* than to *give up the Good*, i.e., to work against the restriction of its concept to these two dominant but narrow definitions. As such, Adorno's trademark question concerning the possibility of living the Good within the bad overlaps with an urgent question we now face: will the disintegration of grand narratives of progress and right consign politics to the proliferation of pure

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[2] See Christopher Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (Cambridge: MIT, 2004).

particulars, in which concepts like justice and equality no longer enjoin disparate cultures? Or will strategies emerge to restage those concepts at the limits of both formalist and historicist constructions of the political?[3]

The initial obstacle to such an analysis is a methodological one. How should one set about to show that even in the absence of explicit citations, Kierkegaardian themes proved irrepressible, surfacing time and again at the limits of a troubled Hegelian-Marxism? According to one of its interpretations, to be Hegelian in one's outlook on history and truth is to feel that things go as planned, even if what is true by design has not yet germinated but exists negatively. But when resistance to the idea that the rational is made real persists, as it did for Adorno, how will one analyze that resistance? What sort of evidentiary discourse can one employ to demonstrate the role of negations, avoidances, and refusals? The purpose of this essay is not to offer direct evidence but, in a literary fashion, to explore allusions to Kierkegaard performed by the concept of resignation. I shall examine the meaning of resignation by attending to what Adorno *did not say*, regarding this silence as constitutive of what he did say.

To analyze an author in this way is to write in the spirit of Adorno, because *he* read philosophers in this way. He read Marx in this way, speculating on the fate of youthful reproaches, interrogating their traces in the history of his work as so many processes of repression and recovery: a sort of symptomatics of critical consciousness. Consider the following remark, also from "Resignation:"

> In Marx there lies concealed a wound. He may have presented the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach so authoritatively because he knew he wasn't entirely sure about it. In his youth he had demanded the "ruthless criticism of everything existing." Now he was mocking criticism. (1998:290)[4]

This image of a concealed wound contrasts with the oft-cited introduction to *Negative Dialectics* (also a place where Adorno criticized the eleventh thesis) because it lacks the latter's severity.[5] It is less a eulogy of praxis than a defense of theory. In the letter of 1843 to which Adorno referred, Marx asserted theory's essential forcefulness, because theory consists in that which is not yet solidified by the present into an inevitable outcome; theory is the negative truth of

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[3] This question forms the basis of Ernesto Laclau's excellent *Emancipation(s)* (New York: Verso, 1996).

[4] Theodor Adorno, "Resignation" in *Critical Models: Catchwords and Interventions* (New York: Columbia, 1998), 290.

[5] "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarried." From Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 3.

contingency falsely posing as necessity. In contrast to the "dogmatic abstraction" of actually existing communism preached by writers like Etienne Cabet, Marx asserted the need for a more "ruthless criticism" to concern itself with theoretical matters such as religion, science and politics. The justification for this turn to theory, this concealed wound of resignation, was formulated according to an analytic strategy of criticism which at this time he closely identified with Feuerbach:[6] rather than shouting new slogans of truth, change consisted in waking the world from its dream about itself and "explaining to it the meaning of its own actions."[7] This early anti-dogmatism in Marx took shape as a method—what he called the "work" of his time—of analyzing a culture's unconscious and enabling it to clarify the meaning of its desires to itself.[8] Adorno regards this letter, usually overlooked as a precursor to Marx's later criticisms of non-revolutionary socialisms,[9] as a significant statement of the indispensability of *Kritik* to the renewal of existing social and political conditions.

One striking quality of Adorno's thought is the degree to which he questioned the *act*. Action, activity, and actuality preoccupied Adorno. His pursuit of stricter applications of dialectical critique to the theory/practice relation is particularly apparent in remarks about the significance of Aristotle to Hegel. It is important to recall Adorno's evaluation of the Idea's constitution through its implementations because this evaluation sets the stage for the appearance of a Kierkegaardian thematic. Adorno imagined that the best response to the question of whether the Good is possible within damaged life is the one that refuses above all to resolve its *paradoxical* quality. In Adorno's view both Hegel and Aristotle failed to fully embrace their respective conclusions by moving too swiftly from contradiction to reconciliation. Adorno committed a series of lectures to the relation of the idea to the act in order to show that the theory/practice distinction relies on a Platonizing premise rejected by the dialectical tradition.[10] Plato's hard boundary between idea and matter, and his regard for the former as "more real" than the latter, was taken up by Aristotle in a nuanced way. The method of this engagement was to "critique and salvage." Although he is commonly called a realist for protesting that the Idea never exists apart from manifestations, Aristotle did not rid sensible matter of the notion of substance or essence (as Hume would). He only recovered the essential in the actual.

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6 "Our whole task can consist only in putting religious and political questions into self-conscious human form—as is also the case in Feuerbach's criticism of religion." From "On the Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 15.

7 Tucker, "On the Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing," 15.

8 Ibid.

9 See section III of Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*.

10 Theodor Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems* (Stanford, 2001); see especially lectures 4, 25 May 1965, through 13, 13 July 1965).

Adorno made the case that Aristotle's importance to the history of the metaphysical tradition comes first of all from his attention to the relation of the idea to the empirical setting of its realization (Aristotle refuses Plato's assumption that the idea exists all on its own in the same way Hegel would). His importance comes secondly from the fact that he did not reject a notion of essence, but instead defined the task of metaphysics as the recognition of essence in the actual, in processes, events and practices. Finally, Aristotle's mark on philosophy, particularly modern philosophy, comes from the manner in which he could not and did not resolve the contradiction of his theses. For this reason Adorno made the very uncommon and controversial claim that Kant bears a much closer relation to Aristotle than to Plato, because he too systematized rather than resolved the "antinomy" of the relation of the idea to its actualization. Adorno viewed the *Critique of Practical Reason*, for example, as a neo-Aristotelian text since in it Kant addressed the question of the relation of the idea of the Good to its actual implementations, and in doing so refused to reconcile the conflict between them; instead, the contradiction itself became a necessary condition for the possibility of the Good.

Aristotle, Hegel, and Marx set the stage for an understanding of the meaning of resignation for Adorno. They were, he argued, the *true* dialecticians, and it is only due to a misconception that "resignation" was characterized as impotent and reactionary. Adorno interpreted Aristotle's emphasis on the relation of ideas to the sensible, Hegel's agreement with Aristotle that the real is ideal, and Marx's early defense of analytic and theoretical models of criticism, as representative of this more precise dialectical thinking, a thinking which elevated *Kritik* to the status of a force in history. "Critique", Adorno argued in an essay by that title, is essential to all democracy, while its counterpart, "actionism," fits smoothly into society's prevailing trend of a compulsion for positivity[11]. This was the sense in which Adorno contrasted Marx's lesser known "ruthless criticism" to the sloganized eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. It was not that Adorno did not identify with the concerns and commitments of Hegelian-Marxism, but that he recognized its urgency as well as its contradictions.

Indeed, much of Adorno's later work tests the limits of that tradition, rethinking its core insights. This is apparent in the extensive amount of interest he shows in Kant's philosophy. Adorno was clearly *not* preoccupied with the liberal Kant of popular political philosophy, but instead with the Kant who was also obsessed with contradiction, antinomy and paradox, and who, in Adorno's estimate, earned his greatness from the fact that he did not rush to resolve the

[11] Theodor Adorno, "Critique" in *Critical Models: Catchwords and Interventions* (New York: Columbia, 1998), 281-288.

contradictions he encountered. While it is reasonable to characterize this period as suggestive of a "Kantian turn" in Adorno's thinking, his obvious interest in Kant during this period also demonstrates a turn to paradoxes and a reaction against the tendency of the dialectical tradition to base its ideas on the imminent reconciliation of contradictions in society. Adorno sought to take the experience of contradiction and impossibility much more seriously, and for this reason his pursuit of an ethic of aporia returned him to an entirely Kierkegaardian line of questioning: what lies beyond the logic of moral and ethical reason?

Hegel and Marx said many times that, dialectically speaking, one cannot discriminate thought from action. Blind action, as if just to act *somehow*, in *some way*, is enough, i.e., commitment to an ethic of industriousness concealed as praxis, seemed dangerously ideological. But the proximity of Kierkegaard to the thematic of resignation exposes the incompleteness of this initial Hegelian/Marxist explanation. If, after all, the recuperation of early Marx's anti-vulgarism and Hegel's commentary on Aristotle sufficed to redress the theory/practice problem, why did Adorno also frame the problem in terms of this trope of "resignation"? Why did Adorno characterize the compulsion to act for the sake of acting as symptomatic of an existential crisis ("The repressive intolerance to thought that is not immediately accompanied by instructions for action is founded on anxiety")?[12] Had he not, in any case, shown surprising degrees of sympathy toward Kierkegaard as a young scholar? In yet another example of the hermeneutic of "analysis," Adorno claimed that historical truths undeniably surfaced in Kierkegaard's writing, albeit in an unconscious form—"Kierkegaard's philosophical intention encounters, without any effort on his part, objective, historical contents in those of the interieur."[13] Are we to infer from these brushes with Kierkegaard a "turn to religion", regression into the interior life, or disclosure of some of the other bourgeois tendencies cultural theorists often suspect in Adorno?

Kierkegaardian subtexts in Adorno's references to resignation *do not* reflect conservative or reactionary tendencies. They instead signify his effort to re-imagine political culture beyond the limits of abstractly and empirically derived rationalities. Adorno's dual-sided resistance paralleled Kierkegaard's, and without requiring any direct relation between them a correlation may nevertheless be made. Not unlike Kierkegaard, Adorno had sought over the course of decades and in a variety of ways an alternative to the reduction of politics to the frameworks of Law and culture. Moral reason, or the reason of Law, consists in the liberal tradition of Kantian moral philosophy and is

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[12] Adorno, "Resignation," 290.
[13] Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (St. Paul: Minnesota, 1989), 42.

grounded in the concepts of rights originating in the universal subject. Ethical reason, or the reason of habits and norms, consists in the tradition of Hegelian historicism, grounded in the concepts of culture, cultivation, and the historically shaped subject. It is well-known that in his attempt to reflect on changing conditions for a critical theory of society, Adorno did not go the way of neo-Kantians like Jurgen Habermas and affirm the efficacy of rational norms and communicative structures. On the other hand, he not only failed to put his faith entirely in what others regarded as the unfulfilled but durable promises of rational liberalism; he also proved increasingly uneasy with positivist, historicist, and imminence-oriented definitions of the Good.

In short, Adorno shared these two fronts of resistance with Kierkegaard. Even if he did not publicly recognize the parallels between the directions of his own thought, on the one hand, and the philosophical significance of Kierkegaard (in relation to Kant and Hegel especially) on the other hand, their proximity is enough to raise questions about the implications of their relationship for contemporary critical reflection. Although Adorno publicly opposed existentialism, and there is no attempt here to read him in that light, negative dialectics mirrored Kierkegaard's philosophy inasmuch as it sought to escape the confines of moral-formalistic (Kantian) and ethical-historicist (Hegelian) accounts of the relation of the Good, Truth, and Justice to the existing world.

Notwithstanding the controversy surrounding it, the thesis of Kierkegaard which clarifies the meaning of resignation in Adorno is this: radical realizations of justice overextend the reach of universal concepts, and therefore justice is not sufficiently accommodated by the logic of the universal. Kierkegaard summarized this argument by saying somewhat enigmatically that "the singular is higher than the universal". Kierkegaard's argument for the singularity of the decision, and Adorno's adoption of analogous themes in his work, are best understood within the context of the moral philosophies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Roughly speaking, these philosophies demonstrated a common desire to emancipate modern subjects from blind and arbitrary forces (deities, nature, etc.) and to re-assert a secular foundation for morality in the absence of sovereign or divine authority. Moral discourse since Kant achieved this by linking the question of the Good to a concept of the universal, although Kant and Hegel gave contrasting accounts of the substance and derivation of universality.

Kant's philosophy pointed toward the universal moral law, formulated as the categorical imperative and conceived as an indispensable, trans-cultural standard of conduct. One is moral when one has a will conformed to duty, the

subjective expression of moral objectivity.[14] Charles Taylor has described Kant's alternative to previous reductions of humanity to blind forces (e.g., tradition, the state of nature, religious dogma) as one which sought to radically separate the individual from the contingencies of both nature and society.[15] Kant's moral agent acted independently of instinct and of social norms; this was a *self-legislating* subject. By contrast, through literature, music, religion and philosophy, Romanticism responded to Kant by seeking to supplant a view of the individual as alienated from itself and its world (i.e., Kant's autonomous, sovereign subject) with one of harmony between the subject and the substance of the world. Romantic harmony took several forms, including nationalism in Herder, religious experientialism in Schleiermacher, and the radical subjective idealism of Fichte and Schelling. They each indicted rationality for the fragmentation of experience into incommensurable spheres of life, mirroring as well as perpetuating modern society's alienating effects.

An implicit object of Kierkegaard's scorn in *Fear and Trembling*, Hegel's alternative to both Kant and the Romantics began with a critique of formalism: in contrast to the moral obligation of the will's conformity to an abstract moral law, Hegel proposed the notion of "ethical society" (*Sittlichkeit*) as the set of norms specific to a given community.[16] By acting in accordance with the norms of society, agents not only exercised private morality; they concretely realized the Good. "For there is no room in living reality," Hegel wrote, "for empty notions like that of pursuing goodness for its own sake. If someone intends to act, it is not enough for him simply to pursue the good; he must also know whether this or that specific thing is good."[17] If Kantian duty viewed justice as an unattainable regulative ideal, Hegel argued that an act performed in the context of the normative constructions of an actual and rational community unified particular expressions of the Good with their universal idea. To posit unrealizable aims without the mediation of determinate content errs in Kant's direction, resulting in an empty moral idealism. On the other hand, to assert the pure particularity of the norm as self-sufficient errs in the direction of Hobbes and the empiricists, affirming rather than renouncing the reduction of modern man to exogenous forces.

Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* cut a path between these errors (empiricism's "state of nature", formalism's abstract moral Law, Romanticism's simple unity) by positing the identity of history and universality, content and form. In that sense, Hegel redefined universality in much the way Aristotle had done, through his

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[14] `Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Hackett, 1981).
[15] Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge, 1979).
[16] See especially Part III, "Ethical System," of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (Prometheus, 1996).
[17] Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on World History* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 80.

insistence that the defining feature of the universal is the unity of itself with external reality. This, as Taylor has also discussed, is the meaning of the "rational necessity" of *Geist*; according to its own essential limitation it cannot exist apart from history, only in and through it.[18] The inseparability of the universal from its actualization contrasted with the abstractness of Kantian universality; for Hegel, categorical notions are abstract and therefore meaningless apart from actually existing communities and their concrete definitions of the Good.

What was the nature of Kierkegaard's engagement with Kantian and Hegelian conceptions of morality, ethics, and the universal? *Fear and Trembling* challenged Kant's formalistic, moral reason (where the Good equals the Law) as well as Hegel's historicist, ethical reason (where the Good equals given norms), and its intervention was idiosyncratic, to say the least. Kierkegaard revisited the Abrahamic sacrifice narrative, writing speculatively about Abraham's internal process and the insuperable paradox structuring this image of faith. Kierkegaard wondered how decisions that conform either to given laws or to given norms can be meaningfully called "responsible." In what sense has one responded when one consults exogenous prescriptions and conforms to them? Could such a decision not have been performed by anyone, irrespective of the decider, as long as similar maxims or cultural commitments get fulfilled? For Kierkegaard, Abraham is called the "father of faith" for the following reason: although the other's call contradicted legal and ethical interdictions on fathers murdering their sons, the decision to obey was not subordinate to the universality of an appeal to something like "rightness." Abraham may have been complicit with violence, but his decision to obey was "his and only his." Abraham's responsibility to the other's request did not take the form of petitioning a justification from the universality of the law, nor from the universal realized in society's norms; his response was the response of *faith* because the singularity of an individual relation to the absolutely other transcended the prescriptive reach of the universal.

Kierkegaard closely analyzed the possibilities of Abraham's interior process. The birth of Isaac despite Sarah's barrenness seemed to fulfill God's promise that he would father nations. It might have been that the decision to murder Isaac was executed with certainty that, as before, things would work out. Not much faith would have been required for that. And in that instant when the knife was raised and the angel called him back, Abraham might have intended to communicate to Isaac with his look that the whole thing was his father's idea, not God's, in hopes of sparing Isaac a final moment of doubt and apostasy. Had either of these scenarios occurred, Abraham would have obeyed but his decision would have

[18] *Hegel and Modern Society*, 332-37.

fallen short of faith. Faith knows the impossibility of what is hoped for and turns to nothing to guarantee its results. Recourse to reason, necessity, logic, common sense, or cultural consensus runs contrary to the requirements of faith, because one can only perform faith as an individual response to the other. This, for Kierkegaard, distinguished religious from moral and ethical models of the Good: where moral and ethical reason dilute the decision into the logic of the law or of the social whole—absolving the particular within the totality of the universal—the decision of faith preserves the integrity of the agent, and thus enables the possibility of a response to the other's call.

Kierkegaard criticized Hegel's ethics. They were too easy, too calculable, too programmatic and passionless to possess any value. The idea that the ethical is synonymous with the general will of a national or political community comes easily,

> without it causing me any mental strain. But when I have to think about Abraham I am virtually annihilated. I am all the time aware of that monstrous paradox that is the content of Abraham's life. I am constantly repulsed, and my thought, for all its passion, is unable to enter into it.[19]

If for Hegel what is demanded of the ethical is the incorporation of the singular decision into the rational totality of the community, for Kierkegaard "faith" resists the ethical's temptation to renounce the call of the other as a singular actor confronted by radical alterity. The *singularity* of the act and the *alterity* of the call are respectively sublimated by the reconciliation of the particular with the universal. Kierkegaard famously described this barring of the totalizing will of the universal as a "teleological suspension of the ethical."[20] Did Kierkegaard promote, as such, faith's complicity with monstrous acts in the name of an absolute other (e.g., in the name of God)? That is debatable. Still, the meaning of "faith" in the context of *Fear and Trembling*'s critique of ethical reason targets conservative implications of Hegel's affirmations that "the actual is rational" and "the real is ideal."[21] Kierkegaard questioned dialectical reasoning by insisting that the value of Abraham's decision consisted in the fact that it was unpredictable, singular, and irreducible to the status quo of that which already exists.

If Kierkegaard situated faith at the limits of the logic of the universal inscribed within moral and ethical rationalities, he assigned this limit condition the figure of the paradox. From the standpoints of the law and the community—from the

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[19] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 62.
[20] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 88.
[21] Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*.

perspectives of the universal—the instant of the decision will always appear as madness. This is because faith by definition hopes for an impossible object, something for which there are no grounds and no conditions; like insanity, faith is foundationless. The promise that Abraham would father many nations, for example, had been a suitable object of faith because of Sarah's barrenness. For that same reason, God's unthinkable request to sacrifice Isaac logically prohibited the fulfillment of the promise and therefore demanded faith. Faith's objects are impossible, irreconcilable, and unthinkable, inconceivable to calculable estimations of rational moral or ethical value.

The centrality of the paradox to Kierkegaard's alternative to moral and ethical rationalities also serves as a point of fine contrast for two closely related "moments" of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. The figures of the "knight of faith" and the "knight of infinite resignation" are introduced by Kierkegaard as sharing a single presupposition: the thing, event, or state of affairs for which one hopes cannot come about because it is logically impossible. In that sense, the moments of resignation and of faith are not opposed; their differences are measured along a continuum of faith. In fact, together they signal the farthest extreme of the faith continuum, an extreme which few ever attain. But a subtle distinction can be drawn between them. If those mental scenarios imagined by Kierkegaard had been true, if, for example, Abraham chose to obey God's request but in his mind lamented the loss of the promise, or if he had obeyed but tried to defend God from the son's disillusion, then Abraham, while obedient, would have resigned to the promise's failure. Resignation asserts the impossibility of the object of its desire, believes in it and anticipates it, but renounces the imminence of its realization. The greatness of Abraham, however, consisted not in his renunciation of the promise, but in the fact that although he recognized the rational impossibility of its realization as he raised the knife, he nevertheless believed (as Kierkegaard puts it) "on the strength of the absurd"[22] in the fulfillment of the unthinkable. Resignation and faith each presuppose the incompatibility of what they hope for with existing conditions of possibility; within the context of this contradiction between what is and what is hoped for, resignation renounces the event of reconciliation, while faith rests assured that an as yet unimaginable redemption of damaged life is somehow in the works.

Although the faith of Abraham was the clear object of admiration in *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard praised the knight of infinite resignation at length, and on several occasions identified personally with such an inability to act as Abraham did.[23] The question to which we now turn concerns whether and in

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[22] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 65.
[23] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 63, 66, 80.

what ways Adorno's identification with "resignation" can be interpreted as analogous to Kierkegaard's identification with the "knight of infinite resignation" in *Fear and Trembling*. How can we trace a relationship between (1) the centrality of a contradiction between what is and what is hoped for and (2) the renunciation of the image of their reconciliation to the negative dialectic of Adorno's late work? How did Kierkegaard's attempt to problematize the relation of the idea to the actual, with which Adorno had been incomparably familiar, inform directions of the latter's research, pedagogy, and publication, in spite of the absence of direct citation?

Adorno's critical theory was formed in the tradition of Hegelian dialectical materialism. In her excellent study of Adorno in *The Philosophy of the Limit*, Drucilla Cornell wedded his thinking to Hegel's disparagement of Kant's Sadean-like moral system, in which the agent is internally motivated to subject itself to the rigorous demands of a duty-based legal framework. Cornell stressed that Adorno similarly criticized the Kantian moral subject as a locus of internalized subjection and regarded one of the goals of critical theory to be that of reclaiming subjugated nature, both in external forms (concerning society's material modes of production) and in internal forms (concerning things like repressed desire). Depicted in this way, Adorno is an opponent of Kant because he claimed that the latter's moral philosophy mirrored the need which modern society and the bourgeoisie had for self-governed subjects. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno spurned such bourgeois sentiments. In "Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality,"[24] for example, Horkheimer and Adorno linked rationalization to social administration and control. Moreover, they linked the calculated domination of Enlightenment reasoning to an unacknowledged form of pleasure. Understanding guided by reason, they wrote, "means no more than that it organizes the individual data of cognition into a system."[25] Reason's role consists ambiguously in the idea of individual liberties, but it also entails functions of utilitarian calculation which "make it the material of subjugation."[26] Substituting brute force and religious dogma as moral grounds for society, reason's derivation of freedom from mutual respect for universal codes of conduct epitomized the bourgeois desire to "give oneself the law," transforming tutelage into self-tutelage.[27]

Adorno's agreements with Hegel extend beyond their criticisms of Kant. They include arguments that identities are not simply given and static (they are

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[24] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1944), 81-119.
[25] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 81.
[26] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 83-84.
[27] Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 86.

instead dynamically shaped through constitutive relations to otherness) and that history is structured by contradictions. But Adorno's Kantian sympathies and the "creeping formalism" that critics saw in his negative dialectics also reflect serious questions about dialectical doxa. Adorno worried that Hegel's treatment of otherness betrayed elements of subjective idealism, and he respected Kant for *preserving* rather than reconciling contradiction in the way Hegel did. Even if Adorno noted affinities between Kant and de Sade (as have others, such as Jacques Lacan), he worried most about an "ethical life" closed to the prospect of, as Adorno put it, something new under the sun.

Kant's transcendental philosophy at least had the merit of foreclosing the collapse of justice into the claims of a narrowly specific community of interest. If Adorno wrote explicitly in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* against Kant's quasi-Sadist reflection of bourgeois compulsions toward self-subjugation, he wrote and spoke with equal fervor about the corrective role Kant's thought could play in Hegelian constructions of ethical, cultural and political life. The following remarks are clear on this:

> Kant's seemingly formalistic ethics ends up being far more radically critical than the content-based ethics of Hegel, even though Hegel does engage with society and is critical of particular social phenomena. This is because Kant's principle of universality elevates his ethics above every determinate configuration of the world that confronts it, above society and existing conditions, and it also makes him more critical of limited and finite moral categories.[28]

How should one evaluate this transcendental turn in Adorno's attitudes toward things like art, morality, and the political? I want to be clear in describing Adorno's relationship to the transcendental. I do not think the implications of this direction in his thinking are adequately represented by even the most post-theistic concept of religion. Not unlike the way Jacques Derrida borrowed the term "quasi-transcendental" to suggest the image of a vanishing limit, Adorno's transcendental turn is irreducible to either traditional interpretations of the "regulative ideal" or to postmodern theological idioms. The specificity of the transcendental in Adorno is best illustrated first through his re-interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason, and secondly through his aesthetic theory.

According to a widely shared belief, Kant divested knowledge of its objectivity and reduced it to a function of consciousness. Adorno, however, introduced his lectures on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason by suggesting that it is more helpful to look at it another way. Although Kant asserted the indispensable role of consciousness, a turn to the subject had already occurred in modern philosophy

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[28] Theodor Adorno, *Moral Philosophy* (Stanford, 2001), 165.

in the form of empiricism. Kant's argument therefore differed by suggesting that knowledge is never merely subjective and that what is experienced as subjective is in fact structured by categories of cognition. Adorno claimed that Kant's transcendental "solution" eludes the traditional categories of formalism and empiricism. It cannot be a purely formal logic, since as a form of synthetic judgment it is required to relate to experience. But neither can it be a merely empirical operation, since it does not presuppose the contents it makes judgments about; it only seeks to bring them in relation to the understanding. , Adorno continued to say that the realm of the transcendental in Kant is "a speculative realm where the need somehow or other to reconcile two otherwise irreconcilable concepts leads to intellectual constructs that cannot refer to any immediately given, positive realities."29

The implications of these non-positive realities for critical theory preoccupied Adorno, finding expression in his writing as vigilance for the non-identical. In Aesthetic Theory, Adorno employed the metaphor of a "ban on graven images," which he also used in the context of other cultural, theoretical, and political analyses. This prohibition on the image or representation of the absolute was first of all analogous for him to Kant's prohibition on the representation of the thing in itself. Furthermore, for Adorno, the ban on images allegorized a general disposition of intellectual and political life, one in which the condition of possibility for experiencing the Good lies in renouncing the claims made on behalf of the whole that reconciliation was either already achieved or imminently in the works. In art as in other spheres the hope of redemption (to borrow from Adorno's language in the final paragraphs of Minima Moralia) can only be defined negatively as the renunciation of anything which, claiming closure to the contradictions of damaged life, brings to an end the anticipation of redemption.

In this way Adorno made failure, subversion, and contradiction essential to, rather than inhibitive of, the experience of justice. Art's force derives from the manner in which it embodies this paradox. Like Walter Benjamin, Adorno identified the birth of modern art with the abolition of its cultic function and the transformation of art into something meant to be exhibited, even enjoyed. Kant's philosophy mirrored this new attitude when it argued that beauty cannot be a function of instrumentation or use value. Art's "secularization" therefore had nothing to do with a concept of its progress or newness, but with a state in which cultural production embodies the contradictions of a historical moment. Baudelaire's poetry emblematized this. Adorno did not regard Baudelaire as the modernist poet par excellence because his work expressed a drive to innovate, abandoned tradition, or retreated from the reifying effects of the new capitalist

[29] Theodor Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Stanford, 2001), 32.

city. Rather, "Baudelaire neither rallied against nor portrayed reification … the power of his work is that it syncopates the overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character."30

Art cannot escape this necessary reification because it is its essence. This means that art is divided between its form and its content, its aspiration and its realization. If this disjunction, essential to art's existence, produces in it a spectral quality, one which Adorno described variously as its shudder, its vibration, its autonomy, and so forth, this is not to say that art is "spiritual." In fact, this implies the exact opposite of Hegel's regard for art as spiritual. In his lectures on aesthetics, Hegel treated art's spiritual function as the result of its convergence of form and matter, of Spirit and existence. But Adorno invested value in art only to the extent that it manifested an irresolvable antinomy; art's internal conflict meant that its recourse is not to the reconciliation of the contradictions that produced it but to the persistence and primacy of those contradictions. As long as art renounces this expectation to serve a purpose, to make sense and meaning, to send a message, art retains its negativity as a critical expression of an unreconciled state.

In this way, art embraces and transcends its thingness. "If it is essential to artworks that they be things," Adorno wrote, "it is no less essential that they negate their own statuses as things, and thus art turns against art." Hegel was wrong: modern society did not bring art into a harmonious state with itself. Rather, art, as Baudelaire knew, must embrace negativity as its only truth. For these reasons, Adorno believed that incomprehensibility and discordance in modernist music, painting and literature reflect the truth of modern society in the most truthful way. In modernism, "the antagonisms of society are nevertheless preserved in it. Art is true insofar as what speaks out of it—indeed it itself—is conflicting and unrecognized."31 Baudelaire's poetry obeyed this "prohibition on graven images" by refusing to contain a message, and in discussions of everything from art to ethics, philosophy and politics, Adorno reiterated this interdiction against closure and the requirement to rest, so to speak, in the paradox.

Is not Kierkegaard close at hand? Is not resignation a form of renouncing premature redemption in the same way that a ban on images renounces representations of the event and the thing itself? Is not Kierkegaard's desire for an experience which inhabits the limits of reason, of the universal, and of ethical sensibilities implicit in the way Adorno re-interpreted Kant's transcendental

[30] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (St. Paul: Minnesota, 1997), 21.
[31] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 168.

solution as something which exceeds conventional categories of form and content? Is this desire for what is beyond moral and ethical reason not implied in the enormous personal and political investment which Adorno gave to the aesthetic, for reasons just described? In short, Kierkegaardian resignation and the Kantian ban on images both "secularize" the figure of redemption by refusing anything which claims to be the redeemer.

Cornell described Adorno as a utopian thinker because, like Derrida, he sought an impossible experience of the Good. Recalling that "utopia" literally means "no place," is this not what the utopian imagination performs, i.e., an objectless desire? If so, what relevance can we assign to utopic political imaginings which presuppose the elusiveness of their goal? If the ideal cannot be made real, has our thinking not become an exercise in the admission of defeat or impotence? I want to conclude these investigations by making some observations about the way both Adorno and Kierkegaard have enjoyed a moderate resurgence within the margins of Left critique, and about how the thematic of resignation, as it has been described here, mobilizes a new terrain of critical engagement by pointing towards the possibility of moving beyond the impasse of law- and rights-based political participation on the one hand, and beyond particularistic identity-based models of engagement on the other hand. I believe criticism's efficacy can be gauged not in terms of the visibility of its activity but by the extent to which it re-organizes the structural conditions in which the political gets defined and proscribed, in which subjects and socialities take shape in the first place. Criticism "acts" even when its activities inhabit realms of sociality that do not yet exist; they exceed and trouble current constructions of the real, of the subject, of the Law, and of history. In this "no place" where moral and ethical reason lose their grip, political culture requires new idioms of engagement.

Although largely silent on the relevance of Kierkegaard (much less anything having to do with religion) to contemporary criticism, Frederic Jameson has most explicitly and intentionally sustained currents of Adorno's thought which criticized totality and privileged art as an experience of non-identity. It may be, however, that certain Kierkegaardian undercurrents implicit in those reflections surface in Jameson's recent manner of expressing the relevance of utopian imaginings to the political present as a "suspension of the political,"32 and in saying that "utopias are non-fictional, even if they are non-existent." Like Kierkegaard's "suspension of the ethical," Jameson suggested that whereas traditional utopias presuppose the end of politics and of history, what is required is a way of restaging utopia that reflects the situation in which political institutions confront us as seemingly unchangeable. As Kierkegaard and Adorno

[32] Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia" in *New Left Review* (Jan/Feb 2004), 45.

each did in their respective moments, Jameson responds to a social climate in which the apparent permanence of liberalism—e.g., barely constrained free-market capitalism—calls for the articulation of political idioms that allow us to take "unimaginable mental liberties with structures whose actual modification or abolition scarcely seem on the cards."33 It is no surprise then to find in the same essay Jameson's re-description of the mode of dialectical thought required of utopian fantasies as a "negative dialectic,"34 in which each term is not sublimated by a third, reconciling term, but persists in its negation. Jameson asks, "Is this to say that we can form no substantive or positive picture of utopia?"35 To insist that this question is an unanswerable one is to insist that the efficacy of utopian thought lies somewhere between the realm of the idea and of the real. It has the value of fantasy insofar as it is something not realized and not realizable; "utopias are non-fictional, even though they are non-existent."36

Political philosopher Ernesto Laclau also writes in the tradition of late Marxism and receptive to an Adorno-esque negative transcendence. He borrows from the lexicon of Kierkegaard when he accounts for the emergence of the subject in the "jump" from experience to the spontaneity of the act. He does so to suggest that the subject is made possible by the structure's failure to exhaust it, to completely contain the subject within its objectivity. The decision, the subject, and justice only come into being by way of this structurally unbridgeable distance between the claims of society and the actual achievements of society. If society consisted of the fullness of its claims, if it were not constituted by the distance between the real and imaginary effects of the structure, there would be no possibility for the subject to emerge because the moment of decision would be subsumed by the prior determination of the social context and would therefore no longer decide anything in its singularity. Laclau sees the impossibility of reconciling the gap between violence and singularity as the paradoxical condition of possibility for that negotiation of violence called politics, which is indispensable, he thinks, to any democratic polity. "These internal ambiguities of the relation of representation," Laclau writes, "the undecidability between the various movements that are possible within it, transition it into the hegemonic battlefield between a plurality of possible decisions … the result can only be what I do not hesitate to call a widening of the transcendental horizon of politics."37

By far the most deliberate and comprehensive integration of Kierkegaard into

[33] Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," 45.
[34] Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," 50.
[35] Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," 51.
[36] Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," 52.
[37] Ernesto Laclau, from *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* with Simon Critchley, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty (New York: Routledge, 1996), 50.

contemporary dilemmas of theory (picking up where Adorno left off, in some ways) was performed by Jacques Derrida. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida sees value in Kierkegaard's desire to think about a possibility of a justice which prohibits the representation of a fully exhausted and exhaustible justice, i.e., the event or arrival of justice. In particular, he asks how the necessary incompletion of justice informs the relation of Europe to its others. Derrida attended to the two instances in Fear and Trembling when Kierkegaard tied the Hebraic narrative to Christianity; first in the title, which cites Paul's admonition to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling," and secondly in the epilogue's allusion to the gospel of Matthew, ("your father who sees in secret shall reward you"). Derrida interpreted the references to Christianity as metaphors for a religious mode of engagement, i.e., salvation oriented towards an event that never takes place. Paul, for example, described salvation as a relation that has to be negotiated in the absence of the savior/master, and Matthew's remarks on justice re-conceive the economy of giving as one that must take place apart from the economy of exchange and retribution.

The logics of exchange and of utilitarian calculability conceal their monstrosity beneath their banality. In other words, the obvious monstrosity of the Abrahamic "instant of madness" has routine and systematic counterparts in modern liberal societies. While the story of Abraham is disturbing, Derrida asked, "Isn't this also the most common thing?"[38] In the final chapter of *The Gift of Death*, for example, Derrida, recognizing the criminal and unforgivable character of Abraham's decision, asks, "Is it not true that the spectacle of this murder … is at the same time the most common event in the world? Is it not inscribed in the structure of our existence to the extent of no longer constituting an event?"[39] While it is widely assumed that Abaraham's sacrifice could never be repeated today because it would be harshly judged by the standards of any civilized society, Derrida thinks there is a sacrificial quality inherent to the "smooth functioning" of liberal societies, in "the monotonous complacency of its discourses on morality, politics, and the law."[40] Through laws of the market, the mechanics of debt, the exercise of rights, free trade, and so on, society not only permits but actively organizes millions of deaths on a daily basis without ever coming under the suspicion of operating in anything other than just and responsible ways. "The smooth functioning of its economic, political, and legal affairs, the smooth functioning of its moral discourse and good conscience presupposes the permanent operation of this sacrifice."[41]

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[38] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago, 1995), 68.
[39] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 85.
[40] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 86.
[41] *Ibid*.

Through an analysis of the economy of exchange and the look implicit in the gospel's assurance that "your father who sees in secret will reward you," Derrida accounted for the radical character of ethical singularity, a singularity more radical than Hegel's ethical society. Within the order of the gaze in which one's secret is seen by the radically other, there is first and foremost an absolute dissymmetry. These are echoes of an earlier critique of the "face to face" in which Derrida criticized Levinas for staying "within the game—the play of difference and analogy—between the face of God and the face of my neighbor, between the infinitely other as God and the infinitely other as human."[42] The gospel gives an account of justice alluded to in Fear and Trembling and founded on an unequal and irreducibly dissymmetrical relation. Derrida writes:

> God sees me, he looks into me in secret, but I don't see him, I don't see him looking at me ... And it is on the basis of this gaze that singles me out (*ce regarde qui me regarde*) that my responsibility comes into being.[43]

One misconception about "the gaze that sees me without me seeing it looking at me" is that the secret in me which is visible to the other is a secret that I know, that is 'mine,' that has a content that I keep to myself in order to establish and preserve my autonomy. But what is instead suggested by the logic of "God who sees in secret" is something in me that is revealed to the other but which I myself cannot know. The secret is that in me which is other than me and which is also, for that reason, the "origination" of me. The economy of the secret is unanswerable to the logic of possession and exchange because the secret is instead inscribed within the dissymmetry of looks that cannot be exchanged.

For Derrida, this economy of irreversibility is the essence of responsibility. If God programmed obedience in Abraham, there would be no decision and thus no responsibility. The 'secret' that God saw in Abraham was not the content of a foreseeable knowledge of how he would respond; rather, the secret God saw was the unforeseeable decision that alone could constitute Abraham as responsible to God. In the moment when Abraham gave the sign of absolute sacrifice by raising the knife, the sign of the gift of death that renounced all opportunity to turn back or take back the decision, only in that moment did responsibility begin. The Abrahamic narrative of responsibility is one of renouncing the calculability of justice, a construction of responsibility contingent upon the refusal to add up and function smoothly. While the metaphors of dialecticism presuppose the fullness of society upon which the decision is dissolved into the complete success of the structure, the request that is made to Abraham is to give without knowing,

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[42] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 83-84. For Derrida's critique of Levinas see also "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1972).

[43] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 91.

calculating, reckoning, or counting on anything. And Derrida has argued that the suspension of ethical universality which signals a break with exchange and reciprocity opposes forms of circulation founded on reprisal, vengeance, and settling scores,[44] on self-redemption implicit in calculable forms of giving,[45] and on the logic of giving in exchange for payment.[46]

Abraham's "gift of death" did not rely on a calculability of justice, because death, like justice, cannot be calculated. The moment it is given death no longer is, no longer has a being to have been given. Thus, to give one's death or to give death is to give what it is impossible to give, and therefore its gesture is something which can only constitute its meaning on this side of the limit. Is this not also the paradox of salvation formulated by the gospel as well as *Fear and Trembling*, that one must lose or give up one's life in order to save it? Salvation is only constituted in this aporetic way, where the other side of what is can only be approached and brought to bear on the here and now as an impossible experience. This does not mean that the impossibility of salvation damns us; in fact it means the opposite. As long as salvation retains the figuration of an unattained limit rather than that of a positive, realized condition, we who labor on the side of the here and now can seize the image of a not yet known justice. This impossible justice is only "gained" when "given," i.e., "given up" (though not "given up on"); it is a justice whose incomprehensibility enables it to exceed and exhaust existing frameworks of the Good.

What is the use of this kind of abstraction? Adorno concluded his address of the question of the possibilities for living the Good within the bad by saying that new political cultures are called for that can

> displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light; this alone is the task of thought, but it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence.[47]

With Kierkegaard's help, the meaning of resignation in Adorno is shown not to be cynicism or satisfaction with the status quo. It is instead a recommendation for criticism to inhabit spaces of interrogation that see beyond the impasse of moral and ethical reason, of formalism and historicism. It will be objected that such a recommendation is groundless because it appeals to something which has

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[44] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 102.
[45] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 107.
[46] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 112.
[47] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (New York: Verso, 1974), 247.

no basis in reality. Our response: "besides the demand thus placed on thought, the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters" (Adorno).[48]

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[48] *Ibid*.