



## Kierkegaard's Place in the Hermeneutic Project

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## KIERKEGAARD'S PLACE IN THE HERMENEUTIC PROJECT

Roy MARTINEZ

*RÉSUMÉ* : Cet article examine les liens entre la pensée de Kierkegaard et l'herméneutique contemporaine, particulièrement telle que celle-ci s'exprime dans le livre récent de J. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*.

*SUMMARY*: The basic theme of radical hermeneutics — the effort to restore life to its original difficulty, i.e., to take stock of life in all of its uncertainty and undecidability — draws deeply upon Kierkegaard's project as a writer. The key terms here are "restore" and "original". For if something needs to be restored to its original form or status, the implication is that it has been covered up, bastardized, or falsified. According to radical hermeneutics, the classic Western metaphysics of presence, which takes Being as an abiding permanence (*essentia, natura, eidos, ousia*) has engendered this illusion. It is for this reason that Caputo (in his recent book *Radical Hermeneutics*) endorses Heraclitus, not Parmenides; Aristotle instead of Plato; Nietzsche instead of Hegel. The religious insight that animates radical hermeneutics — its attempt to cope with the sufferings induced by the flux, and its rejection of metaphysics — brings it into a deep and genuine association with Kierkegaard's thought.

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The basic theme of radical hermeneutics — the effort to restore life to its original difficulty, i.e., to take stock of life in all of its uncertainty and undecidability, all of its vicissitudes and even sufferings — draws deeply upon Kierkegaard's project as a writer. At once, two key terms stand out: "restore" and "original." For if something needs to be restored to its original form or status, the implication is that it has somehow been covered up, bastardized, distorted or falsified. According to radical hermeneutics, the classic Western metaphysics of presence, which takes Being as an abiding permanence (*essentia, natura, eidos, ousia*) has engendered this illusion. Little wonder that Caputo elects to endorse Heraclitus over Parmenides, Aristotle over Plato, Nietzsche over Hegel. In each case, he sides with a thinker for whom the stability of pure presence is subverted by the active principle of life itself. This is a profoundly Kierkegaardian motif. For Kierkegaard, speculative philosophy or idealism — in any

version, but more specifically Platonic and Hegelian — tries to make things too easy, and fosters the egregious error that reason is coextensive with existence.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear, then, that both radical hermeneutics and Kierkegaard have a common antagonist: metaphysics. But radical hermeneutics wants to do more than that. For Kierkegaard is not only a piece of its conceptual machinery, but a vital part of its spiritual engine. This is carried out indirectly by its deployment of two major pseudonymous authors: Constantine Constantius and Johannes Climacus. The point of the present essay, therefore, is to ask: Will the motor work? Or, to put the same question in straightforward philosophical parlance: Is it legitimate for radical hermeneutics to treat the concept of repetition as coterminous with *kinesis*, and then to suggest that such convergence accords with Kierkegaard's undertaking as a writer? Does Caputo's commitment to the restoration of life as a philosophic engagement converge with Kierkegaard's project? Does Kierkegaard have a place within the "hermeneutic project?"

Underlying this question is the contention that radical hermeneutics pretends to be the "postmodern" version of Kierkegaardian repetition. Such a position is discernible in terms of the project's deconstructive approach to subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> In what follows I shall argue that radical hermeneutics' understanding of Constantinian repetition has firm support in the pseudonymous authorship, that it draws deeply upon its Kierkegaardian sources. I carry this out by showing that Caputo captures its most vital features: the futurity of its thrust, the groundlessness of its freedom, and the transcendence of its reason for being. Thus, I address two issues in the essay: (1) the place of Kierkegaardian repetition in hermeneutics, however radical and (2) the question of the ethico-religious and how it is carried out in Caputo's hermeneutic endeavor.

## I. REPETITION

As an intellectual enterprise, radical hermeneutics emerges on the scene with an impressive equipment of philosophical culture: besides Kierkegaard, it is undergirded by three other seminal minds, namely, Heidegger, Husserl, and Derrida. First, then,

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1. Climacus-Kierkegaard observes: "The Hegelian philosophy culminates in the proposition that the outward is the inward and the inward is the outward. With this Hegel virtually finishes. But this principle is essentially an aesthetic-metaphysical one, and in this way the Hegelian philosophy is happily finished, or it is fraudulently finished by lumping everything (including the ethical and the religious) indiscriminately in the aesthetic-metaphysical," Soren KIERKEGAARD, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 263n. Hereafter, CUP.
  2. The reader might want to consult Patrick BIGELOW's *The Cunning of Being: a Kierkegaardian Demonstration of the Postmodern Impllosion of Metaphysical Sense in Aristotle and the Early Heidegger* (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1990), and also Theodore KISIEL's review of this book in *Soren Kierkegaard Newsletter*, 23 (April, 1991), p. 8-9. For more on the subject in the wake of its deconstruction as a metaphysical or epistemological foundation, see G.B. MADISON, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988). Chapters Six and Ten: "Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of the Subject" and "The Hermeneutics of (Inter)Subjectivity, or: The Mind-Body Problem Deconstructed," respectively, would be of special interest to the reader. Also, Calvin O. SCHRAG'S *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), should be consulted. In this book, special attention should be paid to Part Two: "The New Horizon of Subjectivity."

comes Heidegger, and by implication, Aristotle. The point of departure is Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity," "by which he meant a reading of life which catches life at its game of taking flight and thereby restores factual existence to its original difficulty."<sup>3</sup> The inspiration to construe existence in its full dynamic structure came to Heidegger from the startling manner in which he was, as a young thinker, rereading Aristotle. It occurred to him then "to read the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a story about factual life and its difficulties and the *Metaphysics* in such a way as to read the *kinesis* back into *ousia*, to read *ousia* back down into its kinetic components, to deconstruct (*ab-bauen*) it down to (*auf*), the turbulence that meta-physics was trying to smooth over, still, arrest. And he saw Aristotle as doing both these things at once, so that Aristotle is at odds with himself."<sup>4</sup> (Husserl and Derrida, however, are not essential to what I have to say about Kierkegaard within the hermeneutic tradition).

Accordingly, since the Aristotelian *kinesis* is strategically identified with the concept of repetition as expounded by Constantine Constantius, the view is defended that everything in hermeneutics turns on the very possibility of repetition itself. In this sense "hermeneutics is always a work of retrieval (*Wiederholung*), a laying out (*auslegen*) which fetches back (*wiederholen*), an explicating which retrieves what is latent and puts it into words for the first time."<sup>5</sup> It is obvious, then, that repetition is at the central nerve of radical hermeneutics, and that it bears a conceptual affinity to Aristotle's theory of motion. How can this be?

Insofar as they collectively constitute a polemic against speculative philosophy, it is in the Kierkegaardian personae that the difficulty of life is "put into words."<sup>6</sup> Correspondingly, because existence is the central theme of Kierkegaard's enterprise, Kierkegaard employs the poetic mode in the form of polynymity. The pseudonyms

3. John D. CAPUTO, *Radical Hermeneutics. Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 1. Hereafter, RH. For more on the earlier works of Heidegger before and up to *Being and Time*, see John VAN BUREN, "The Young Heidegger and Phenomenology," *Man and World*, 23 (1990), p. 239-272; "The Young Heidegger: Rumor of a Hidden King (1919-1926)," *Philosophy Today*, 33, 2 (1989), p. 99-109, and *The Young Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 1. Calvin O. Schrag questions Derrida and Caputo on their reading of Aristotle's notions of time and motion: "Apparently, Derrida and Caputo find much in the margins of Aristotle's text that eludes the more ordinary readers. As one of these more ordinary readers, however, it is difficult for me to make sense of Aristotle's three forms of *kinesis* (qualitative alteration, quantitative change, and locomotion) without the requirement of an abiding substratum. In the qualitative alteration of a leaf as it changes its color from green to brown, the supposite of change remains identical with itself. The leaf remains a leaf. In the change of quantitative increase as a pumpkin grows from two pounds to four, Aristotle would have us believe that the pumpkin, as a proper subject of change, abides throughout the process. In the 'simple change' of locomotion, an arrow traversing a series of points, the subject remains fully intact as it simply moves from one place to another. Even in 'radical change', generation and destruction, (which Aristotle distinguishes from his three forms of *kinesis*), the substrate of prime matter remains. So whether one is talking of *kinesis* or whether one is talking of radical change, in which a particular substance is either generated or destroyed, the grammar of an abiding substratum remains in use" (*Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 20, 1 (January 1989), p. 87). It is obvious that Schrag does justice to Aristotle in regards to *Metaphysica* and *Physica*, for example. I think, however, that Caputo in his capacity as an hermeneuticist, endeavors to read the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the light of a non-substantialist conception of the moral agent as this latter is compelled to act in an ever-changing world.

6. CUP, p. 243.

take a passionate interest in existence in its dynamic structure and diverse dimensions.<sup>7</sup> In fact, this existential situation is what is being retrieved poetically in the authorship.

The significance of polynymity can be further underscored by taking into account the primacy of concrete, individual existence. Since human existence is distributed individually as *freedom*, it is impossible to subsume it under a *system* of thought, or explain it away by means of the spurious movements of logic. For this reason, Hegel's attempt to identify Christianity with speculation is not only abortive, but is a monstrous hoax as well, for while the latter is determined by necessity, ideality, and eternity as presence, the former is animated by freedom, actuality, and time as a task. Hence, in Kierkegaard's scheme of things, there is a relation between diverse types of experiences, as exemplified by the various pseudonyms, and the forms of linguistic articulation to which they correspond.

Furthermore, in his effort to rescue existence from the falsifying proclivity of metaphysics, Kierkegaard means to preserve both the integrity of the individual and the irreducibility of life. Indeed, since the ethical reality of the existing subject cannot be communicated directly to another, the best that an author can hope for in this respect is to act as a poet and forge characters to represent his or her views, thoughts, and ideals. This is Kierkegaard's justification for the pseudonymous authorship. Also, this is why he regards these poetic works as aesthetic, for they are mere mediations between thought and existence; as such, they cannot be accurate reproductions of experience. After all, authentic existence transpires only ethico-religiously, to say the least.

Quite in agreement with this principle, Vigilius Haufniensis writes: "Every human life is planned religiously."<sup>8</sup> In stating his thesis teleologically, Haufniensis means to say that everyone is compelled to look at life circumspectly — appreciate its joys, suffer its pains, endure its sorrows, act decisively — and then to cope with the consequences with unflagging resolution. In Kierkegaard's lexicon this kind of courage is called faith; and curiously, it is at this juncture that Kierkegaard once more converges with Aristotle. For the dynamic structure of life implies motion, the measure of which Aristotle regards as time; in turn, Kierkegaard considers time as the *conditio sine qua non* for the exercise of repetition. Whereas, however, Aristotle designates *phronesis* as the means with which to deal ethically with the temporal flux, the pseudonyms employ a host of terms that are meant to culminate in the Christian faith: irony, infinite resignation, humor, faith, inwardness, sin, and, of course, repetition.

In conjunction with their reference to time, these terms, like the Aristotelian *phronesis*, also bespeak the lack of a rule to which a person may revert in meeting the demands of a given situation.<sup>9</sup> Since no two situations are the same, and since

7. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

8. Soren KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 94. Hereafter, CD.

9. Apropos of *phronesis*, the following statement by Gadamer is relevant: "*Phronesis* is always the process of distinguishing and choosing what one considers to be right;" also: "As important as Heidegger and his 1923 *phronesis* interpretations were for me, I was already prepared for it on my own, above all by my earlier reading of Kierkegaard, by the Platonic Socrates, and by the powerful effect of the poet Stephen

time is irreversible and the future undisclosed, the onus is on the individual to muster enough courage in order to personalize the situation with a judgment without precedent, i.e., with decisiveness. It is this unhampered action, beset by neither habit nor fear, that is instrumental in the generation of history. But as Judge Wilhelm observes, "history is more than the product of the free actions of free individuals. The individual indeed acts, but his action passes into the order of things which sustains the whole of existence. What will be the issue of it the agent does not really know. But the higher order of things which digests, so to speak, the free actions and weaves them into its eternal law is necessity, and this necessity is the dynamic of world history."<sup>10</sup>

The Judge's statement accentuates the dual nature of existence. As freedom, it is individuated at the moment of decisive action, and this transpires in subjective solitude. Some of the consequences that ensue are never intended as such by the agent. No sooner do they eventuate, however, than they are immediately sedimented in the intersubjective community and pass over into the illusory "necessity" of history. The problem is that since history and time are intertwined, and since the latter is inscrutable especially in its forward thrust, there is a tendency in the existing subject to attempt the impossible: to evade the flux of life by camouflaging its contingencies, avoiding its irregularities, and controlling its unpredictability. Presumably this is done in the name of philosophy, which, according to the Judge, "views history under the category of necessity, not under that of freedom."<sup>11</sup>

That is how Haufniensis must be understood when he avers that "when Aristotle says that the transition from possibility to actuality is a *kinesis*, this is not to be understood logically but with reference to historical freedom."<sup>12</sup> The main point here is that time, freedom, and history are embedded in the warp and woof of human existence, and any effort to deny it is bound to be abortive. That is why caution should be exercised in dealing with Aristotle. For although he is reputed to be the father of logic, he is also a seminal writer of treatises on ethics and politics. This is clear to the author of *The Concept of Dread*. In considering the concept of *kinesis*, Haufniensis stresses the freedom that generates history, not the necessity that preoccupies logic. He is more interested in ethics because it is the region of decision-making, the site where the event of self-(trans)formation occurs. In brief, insofar as making a decision

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George on my generation," "A Letter by Professor Hans-Georg Gadamer" in Richard BERNSTEIN, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1988), p. 264-265. MacIntyre observes that the term characterizes someone who "knows how to exercise judgment in particular cases," in Alasdair MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 154. Or, consider Lyotard's view: "... I think that... a judge worthy of the name has no true model to guide his judgments, and that the true nature of the judge is to pronounce judgments, and therefore prescriptions, just so, without criteria. This is, after all, what Aristotle calls prudence. It consists in dispensing justice without models. It is not possible to produce a learned discourse upon what justice is. This is the difference between dialectics, for example, and the *episteme* or didactics in Aristotle. This is tantamount to stating... that prescriptions are not of the order of knowledge," in Jean-Francois LYOTARD and Jean-Loup THEBAUD, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 25.

10. Soren KIERKEGAARD, *Either/Or*, Vol. 2, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 178. Hereafter, E/O 2.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

12. *CD*, p. 74n.

implicates the subject existentially (the French and the German are clearer: *Je me décide*; *Ich entscheide mich*) it is the moment of utmost subjective solitude.<sup>13</sup>

This solitude reverberates in the Judge's advice to his young friend urging him to choose despair, for "one cannot despair without choosing. And when a man despairs he chooses again — and what is it he chooses? He chooses himself, not in his immediacy, not as this fortuitous individual, but he chooses himself in his eternal validity."<sup>14</sup> In different words, every choice is an instance of self-formation: it is the birth of self. Every such event carries with it the excruciating pangs of childbirth. For involved in the process is a tension between emancipation and emergence: emancipation from primitive immediacy, emergence into a new immediacy. The fortuitous individual is, in a manner of speaking, forsaken for one personally forged and upon whom, by virtue of this very act, is conferred eternal validity, i.e., an irreducible and unique sense of self-worth and personal achievement.<sup>15</sup>

Without going into further details, it should be noted that this basic tension is present throughout the pseudonymous authorship. For example, in *Fear and Trembling*, it assumes the form of the teleological suspension of the ethical: the individual is caught between the behest of private conscience and the requirements of social morality. In *The Concept of Dread*, it falls under the category of dread, which represents, according to Climacus' assessment of the book, the individual's "state of mind in the desperate emancipation from the task of realizing the ethical."<sup>16</sup> Psychologically, this can be expressed as the tension that occurs during the transition period from shut-upness (*Indesluttethed*), habit (*Vane*), i.e., the fear of acting freely, to the expansiveness of a state of mind which Haufniensis calls seriousness (*Alvor*), inwardness (*Inderslugheden*), freedom (*Friheden*), certitude (*Visheden*), and subjectivity (*Subjektiviteten*). All these terms denote the individual's willingness to do the good. Contrariwise, habit or unfreedom means the indolence of languishing in what is comfortable and familiar at the expense of risk-taking. For this reason, that is, because it dreads the good,

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13. In an analysis of decision, for example, Ricoeur writes: "...decision culminates in the determination of self by oneself: I make up my own mind (*Je me décide*), it is I who determine myself and myself whom I determine. The pronominal form of speaking underlines very well this relation at once active and reflective of the self on itself," Paul RICOEUR, "The Unity of the Voluntary and the Involuntary as a Limiting Idea," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, eds. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 5.

14. *E/O* 2, p. 215. For more on the choice of self, see Roy MARTINEZ, "Socrates and Judge Wilhelm: A Case of Kierkegaardian Ethics," *Philosophy Today*, 31 (Spring 1990), p. 39-47.

15. Referring to the Judge's advice to his young friend to choose himself "in his eternal validity," M. Holmes Hartshorne writes: "What is the meaning of this rather presumptuous-sounding phrase? When one chooses oneself in one's eternal validity, i.e., *ethically*, one chooses an existence defined by those norms that are assumed to be valid and normative for all men, without exception. One decides to live according to those eternal principles, that absolute moral law, which hold for mankind as such," *Kierkegaard, Godly Deceiver: The Nature and Meaning of His Pseudonymous Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 19. What Hartshorne emphasizes is the social context, the dimension of our belonging-together, the individual's implicit sense of solidarity with humankind, that accompanies the deliberations preceding decision-making. But there is also a sense of personal achievement, a feeling that we have accomplished something worthy of ourselves, when we make a decision. For more on this point, see Roy MARTINEZ's review of «Kierkegaard, Godly Deceiver» in *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 26 (1992), p. 449-52.

16. *CUP*, p. 240.

habit is predicated as demoniacal.<sup>17</sup> Parenthetically, this is the route taken by speculative philosophy or metaphysics. It pretends that human life can be dealt with as a structure with predictable and controllable patterns. It attempts not merely to temper but to conceal the harshest and most difficult element of existence. In *The Sickness unto Death* the tension exists in the self's delicate balancing act between each pair of terms that constitute its triadic structure: finitude-infinity, necessity-possibility, temporality-eternity. Here it is a matter of not simply recognizing but of acknowledging in the same breath the apparently opposing factors of the syntheses. Eternity, for example, cannot be viewed independently of or as being inimical to time. Rather, both must be understood in terms of each other. The self, then, does not essentially have a *telos* which is redeemable in recollecting its ontological origin (Plato's *anamnesis*), where it would *repose* in peace everlastingly. Instead, what is in store for it is the task of wrestling ceaselessly with the onslaughts of time, the latter's mockery of our deepest desire for continued existence, its erosion of our fondest dreams, its elusiveness from the sure grasp of our minds, as testified by Augustine, for example.

In brief, we must contend with time's flux and uncertainties. This is what Constantine realizes. He understands that both recollection and repetition are concerned with the transition from time to eternity, and that is why he regards them as being the same movement. Constantine writes: "...*repetition* is a decisive expression for what 'recollection' was for the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowledge is a recollection, so will modern philosophy teach that the whole of life is a repetition. ...*Repetition* and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions."<sup>18</sup>

In the context of radical hermeneutics the underlying question is: "How does the existing, temporal individual make his way from time to eternity?" Constantine notes that the Greek response is to move *backwards*, from time to eternal preexistence. Caputo explains: "... there are two things to be emphasized about this characterization. In the first place, it holds that eternity is, or has been already, present and that its

17. *CD*, 105ff.

18. Soren KIERKEGAARD, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, The Cloister Library, 1964), p. 33. In the authorship repetition is a multilayered concept. Compressed into it are different spheres of spiritual activities. For example, when it concerns the removal of "the wrath impending upon that of which" the sinner "has made himself guilty" (Niels THULSTRUP, "Commentator's Introduction," Soren KIERKEGAARD, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David Swenson and Howard Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), it is God's *atonement*. As the individual's grief over having remained in sin, i.e., the individual's willingness to change his or her thoughts and actions, it is Christian *repentance*. As rationality or immanence, it admits of varying degrees of inwardness, and as such it can ultimately culminate in religious faith. Ethico-religiously, i.e., when as rationality it recognizes "the given independence of every man, and after the measure of his ability to do all that can in truth be done to help someone preserve it" (*CUP*, p. 232), it is called *resignation*. The case of Socrates is paradigmatic. Ethically, as in the case of Judge Wilhelm, repetition is embodied in the vow of matrimony, where love transfigures into *conjugal fidelity*. Properly speaking, however, repetition begins in faith, a tenet that is propounded not only by Constantius but by Haufniensis as well. The reader might also want to consult a more general version of repetition in F.H. HEINEMANN'S "Origin and Repetition." He establishes a difference between mere beginning and origin, correlates the latter with the concept of repetition, then argues that repetition is basically a formal structure. Though he considers KIERKEGAARD'S book *Repetition*, Heinemann does not go into a detailed analysis of Kierkegaard's work. I would like to note, however, that in correlating origin and repetition, Heinemann accords, *mutatis mutandis*, with Haufniensis' view of the matter in *The Concept of Dread (The Review of Metaphysics*, 4, 2 (December 1950), p. 201-214).



presence has been lost. Eternity is in the past; it is a lost actuality. Secondly, the backward movement signifies for Constantine the attempt to extricate oneself from time, to back oneself *out* of it.”<sup>19</sup> As opposed to the Greek way, Climacus concurs with Constantius that the movement cannot be one of retreat or return, but one of advance and discovery. The former adduces the case of Socrates as a prime instance of an individual who resists “the temptation” to slip out of the flux by recollecting himself out of existence. Socrates adheres to the task, never for a moment forgetting that he is an *existing* thinker, not a speculative philosopher. When he thinks, he does so existentially. This means that Socrates acknowledges and abides by the claims made upon him by existence.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, Socrates does not draft a blueprint of what he imagines, or how he'd like, existence to be. He does not build a system and pretend that it is a faithful representation of life. For human thought does not have it within its power so to penetrate the innermost core of time, so to pervade the uttermost dimensions of temporality, as to be fully co-present with it. That is, rather, the divine prerogative, God's own domain. But since human existence is constituted of the temporal and the eternal, as Anti-Climacus maintains in *The Sickness unto Death*, it is possible to align both elements of the synthesis in such a way that the individual remains within the parameters of existence, immersed in the flux, but not submerged by it. This is the Socratic way. The paradox of Socratic ignorance is a variation of it.

Interestingly enough, the case Climacus is trying to build on behalf of Socrates has, I think, an advocate in a contemporary writer. C.D.C. Reeve contends that for Socrates the *elenchus* is the greatest good as far as human beings are concerned.<sup>21</sup> According to him, Socrates knows that virtue can never be attained in this world. The truth-value of virtue, in other words, lies in its ideality. Furthermore, what lends credence to this thesis is the belief on the part of Socrates that the *elenchus* permits of future arguments to be vitiated by the *elenchus* itself. It is for this reason that Reeve considers it apt to connect the elenctic activities of Socrates with happiness and the hereafter: “He claims, indeed, that unending elenctic examination after death would be inconceivable happiness. This would not be so — unending elenctic examination would not be inconceivable happiness — if happiness lay only at the end of an elenctic examination successfully completed.”<sup>22</sup>

This amounts to saying that the *elenchus* is not an end in itself; it serves as a means towards the attainment of *human* virtue, knowledge, and happiness. As such, the *elenchus* never loses its value, for intrinsically it guards against culpable ignorance and vice. Moreover, it is for this reason that the examined life is the best human life: such reasoned existence virtually guarantees the recognition of the partiality of every human standpoint, as well as the corrigibility of every ethical conviction. Therefore,

19. CAPUTO, “Hermeneutics as the Recovery of Man,” *Man and World* 15 (1982), p. 345.

20. *CUP*, p. 184.

21. For more on the Socratic *elenchus*, see Richard ROBINSON'S *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953).

22. C.D.C. REEVE, *Socrates in the “Apology.” An Essay on Plato's “Apology of Socrates”* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), p. 178.

thought, though not commensurate with the temporal order itself, nevertheless possesses the wherewithal to cope meaningfully with its flux. Socrates adheres to this basic agenda of life. For implied in the *elenchus* is the forward movement of existence and inscribed in it is the individual's readiness to cope with its sequential disclosures. In dealing with time and eternity, then, the solution is not to be found in *anamnesis* but in the *elenchus*; not in recollection but in repetition. As Climacus says of Socrates, "Forward he must, backward he cannot go."<sup>23</sup>

Thought is here used interchangeably with *ratio*, i.e., the individual's effort to build a secure basis where security is fundamentally absent. It seeks to establish a *fundamentum inconcussum* in the manner, for example, of Descartes' *cogito* and the rigorous science of Husserl. In brief, *ratio* is metaphysical reason, and very often, perhaps too often, it is used dogmatically.

Reason, however, need not be restricted to *ratio*. In fact, the pseudonyms are quite aware that the employment of reason or understanding (*Forstanden*) constitutes its finitude but that reason is never exhausted by its operation at any given moment. Radical hermeneutics is sympathetic with this extra-*ratio*-nal dimension that serves as a complement to historical existence: "Reason is not undone by the foundering of metaphysics but liberated, emancipated from metaphysical prejudices which tended to make of it something less than it is..."<sup>24</sup> Since this is the case, an alternative "notion of 'reason' which begins by acknowledging the uncircumventable futility involved in trying to nail things down" is in order.<sup>25</sup> If we try to invest things with an inflexible fixity in the name of reason, e.g., as a rule of law or as a principle of reason, reason itself finds it justifiable to question the legitimacy of such closure.

This postmetaphysical version of rationality, which "resist(s) the notion that the life of reason can be formalized,"<sup>26</sup> prefers to "defend the play of reason against the principle of reason."<sup>27</sup> The implication here is that unlike metaphysical reason, which craves "the stability of the ground, the solidity of presence — terra firma —" postmetaphysical rationality opts to identify itself with the flux. After all, "(t)he flux is that sphere of groundlessness which Heidegger calls *Spiel*, the play which plays without why... Indeed the play is all."<sup>28</sup> But if all is play, if every proposition is subject to scrutiny and disruption by reason itself, then where is there a guarantee that a meaningful distinction between good and evil exists? How can there be an assurance that some human actions are good and others bad? Might not there be a temptation to think that any act is permissible, especially since compelling reasons may be offered on their behalf? Is there not in reason a definitive criterion for distinguishing the moral worth of our decisions and acts? Are there not clear and decidable differences among things, or are we merely captives to the ambiguity of the flux? These ethical issues are not thematically treated by Heidegger. Radical hermeneutics, however,

23. *CUP*, p. 187.

24. *RH*, p. 209.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

attempts to wrestle strenuously with them. Accordingly, the question that it asks is, “How can there be a morals without a metaphysics of morals?”<sup>29</sup>

## II. THE ETHICO-RELIGIOUS AND SUFFERING

In Kierkegaard’s thought, the ethico-religious is meaningless without the notion of freedom. The exercise of freedom, in turn, incurs suffering. Sin, guilt, dread, and despair, key terms in the Kierkegaardian corpus, are ample indices of the correlation between freedom and suffering. To the question, then, “How can there be a morals without a metaphysics of morals,” Kierkegaard, reverting to the New Testament as the inspiration for his code of ethics, regards Christ as the paradigm of suffering on earth. The God-Man chooses to carry his cross; he doesn’t attempt to escape the difficulty of life. No metaphysician, he!

Accordingly, Kierkegaard offers him as the pattern to be followed by those who claim to believe in his promises. Christ, however, does not mean to be remembered only at the moment of his death. His *life*, too, is vitally consequential. He always considers those who suffer: the sick, the dying, the poor, the outcasts, the oppressed, the marginalized; and his effort consists in showing them how “the burden can be light,” how “courage in suffering is able to take the power away from the world and to transform derision into honor, defeat into victory.”<sup>30</sup> The crisis involved in the exercise of freedom is likewise known to radical hermeneutics. The decision that cuts into the undecidability of life, accompanied by an awareness of the possibility of error in judgment, corresponds, *mutatis mutandis*, to the ethico-religious task envisioned and undertaken by Kierkegaard. Whereas, however, Kierkegaard deals with this problem within a specifically Christian context, radical hermeneutics critically appropriates the insights of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas considers the problem of suffering as it is manifested in the incarnate existence of the Other to be the reason for being of ethical engagement. This theme — the burden of freedom — is implied in an earlier reference made to the sphere of groundlessness that is nothing other than the flux. This major metaphor of flux has its conceptual counterpart in Kierkegaard’s authorship. Haufniensis refers to it as freedom (*Friheden*), Climacus as the understanding (*Forstanden*); Constantius calls it repetition (*Gjentehelsen*), and Anti-Climacus terms it the self (*Selvet*). Now when Haufniensis writes that “Freedom is infinite and does not arise out of anything,”<sup>31</sup> and when Climacus refers to “faith’s crucifixion of the understanding” (*Troens Korsfaestelse af Forstanden*),<sup>32</sup> they are alluding to what, in radical hermeneutics, is known as postmetaphysical rationality,

29. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

30. Soren KIERKEGAARD, *The Gospel of Suffering and the Lilies of the Field*, trans. David Swenson and Lillian Swenson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1948), p. 21-43; p. 138-64. For more on the theme of suffering, see KIERKEGAARD’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 386-468. About the manner in which “world” is to be understood in Kierkegaard, see Roy MARTINEZ, “Kierkegaard’s Ideal of Inward Deepening,” *Philosophy Today*, 32 (1988), p. 110-17.

31. *CD*, p. 100.

32. *CUP*, p. 501; *SV*, X, p. 233.

the version of reason that allows for human incarnation and in the same breath acknowledges its intrinsic difference from such finite display. In addition, the argument presented by Haufniensis and supported by Constantius, Climacus and his opposite mate, is that since freedom presupposes nothing other than itself, it is through the qualitative leap, by means of self-assertiveness, i.e., through the action of the particular individual that the distinction between good and evil is posited.<sup>33</sup> This amounts to saying that the freedom in question is not a piece of abstraction; it is a case of concretion. No one, after all, lives abstractly. In the context of the pseudonyms freedom is not an object of thought. It is rather the center of one's own existence. Therefore, no sooner does an individual act than his or her life is put on the line, i.e., it may be exposed to the wolves, in the language of radical hermeneutics. Yet, if the flux is all, it means that there is nowhere else to turn; it means that its ceaseless movement, its constant instability, its lack of security, is what *demand*s our total attention, our visceral concern. We are required to cope with just that. A monumental task, this. In essence, then, directing our energies to this neverending transition, endeavoring to find meaning in this inexorable coming to be and passing away, is what Haufniensis has in mind when he asserts that "it is the supreme glory of freedom that it has only with itself to do."<sup>34</sup> Deconstructively, this becomes undecidability, namelessness.

But, as has been intimated earlier, deep within the central nerve of freedom, embedded in its innermost core, are the cognate states of dread, guilt, and remorse. Undoubtedly, they are determinants of meaning, donors of sense, factors with which the life of ethics emerges into the world. This semiotic trio also indicates, as Ricoeur would say, a rupture within the being of the agent. Freedom, in other words, implies transcendence. When, therefore, radical hermeneutics attempts to establish a morals without the foundationalism of metaphysics, it does so with the understanding that freedom, which presupposes nothing other than itself, cannot be arrested and frozen in a particular hermeneutic moment. Every exercise of freedom (ethics included) involves an hermeneutic act, i.e., it is an interpretation, and no such act is granted privileged status over another.

Whereas Kierkegaard's pseudonyms are wont to employ terms such as sin, remorse, and guilt to indicate transcendence, radical hermeneutics prefers the word "compassion." All these terms are expressions of "suffering," a word that occurs quite frequently throughout the authorship, and which plays a crucial role in the ethical undertaking that *is* radical hermeneutics. "Suffering is not merely suffering. It bursts asunder and opens us up to eternal things... (an eternally loving hand touching our lives in a mysterious manner?). It transforms itself before our eyes, metamorphoses from intrawordly and mundane event into an opening onto the whole."<sup>35</sup> The whole in question is not a circumscribable totality, a delimited enclosure which may be said to encompass us. The whole refers instead to the mystery to which we are summoned to be open. We are summoned because the mystery is integral to our being. In the language of Anti-Climacus, we are a synthesis of the finite and the infinite.

33. *CD*, p. 100.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

35. *RH*, p. 287.

Now “mystery” and “infinite” in the contexts of both the pseudonymous works and the radical hermeneutic project do not refer to an extramundane or otherworldly region that would be the object of some purely intellectual contemplation. No such abstraction or aestheticism is intended here. The mysterious-infinite is inscribed in the face of another human being, in the single individual, who is compelled to exist in the midst of all this suffering, entrapped in the whirl of the flux. When Kierkegaard insists that he is first and foremost a religious writer, he means among other things that he has nothing to do with the fraudulence of metaphysics, i.e., with the intellectual effort to overlook the life, the singular life, the irreducible existence of an individual person. Principles and laws do not suffer; institutions do not suffer; states, societies, and crowds do not suffer. They do not suffer because they have no flesh, no blood. They cannot ache; they do not bleed.

According to radical hermeneutics, the religious and suffering are inextricably interlinked. “The religious is a response to what gives itself and withdraws in suffering. Suffering presents itself to the religious mind as a fundamental moral outrage, a violence with no rights which wastes life. Thus the religious attitude arises precisely as a protest against suffering. It is essentially defiant, protesting, protestant — against a violation of life which must not go unanswered — and catholic, because it speaks on behalf of all who suffer.”<sup>36</sup>

The convergence of the religious and suffering which are essential to the two projects under discussion indicates that a transcendence inhabits human existence. Whatever it is that we as humans do among ourselves: however excruciatingly the advantaged inflict pain upon the disadvantaged; however cruelly the privileged dispossess and oppress the underprivileged; with whatever callousness or indifference a demographic majority view the injustice it administers to a minority; however heartlessly we treat those among us who are considered social outcasts, misfits, the different — those who are not like us, those who do not look like us, those who do not think like us, those who occasion fear in us — transcendence means that any such situation need not be so. It further means that all this may change. It implies that there is always hope. In fact, it suggests, paradoxically, that the situation must change. But where there is hope, faith lurks around the corner, and where faith resides, love abides. And love, as the apostle says, conquers all. The Bishop of Hippo picks up on this, and writes: *dilige, et quod vis fac* (Love, and do as you will).<sup>37</sup>

36. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

37. This phrase, plus *questio mihi factus sum*, are expressions from St. Augustine of which John Caputo is particularly fond. Although Caputo critically endorses the thoughts of Augustine and Kierkegaard, the reader should be aware that insofar as faith is concerned, Kierkegaard rejects the attitude of Augustine: “Augustine has done incalculable harm. The whole of Christian doctrine through the centuries really rests upon him—and he has confused the concept of faith.

Quite simply, Augustine resuscitated the platonian-aristotelian definition, the whole Greek philosophical pagan definition of faith...

For the Greeks faith is a concept which belongs to the sphere of the intellect (especially in Plato’s *Republic*, where the whole thing is magnificently done; Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* also deserves attention). So faith is related to the probable, and we have the ascending scale of faith and knowledge.

From the Christian point of view faith belongs to the existential: God did not appear in the character of a professor who has some doctrines which must first be believed and then understood.” Soren KIERKEGAARD,

In the language of Haufniensis hope is freedom or originality (*Oprindelighed*), in that of Constantius it is repetition, and in the parlance of Anti-climacus hope is transformed into possibility. Hope so conceived easily gives way to Anti-Climacus' oft-cited definition (an aesthetic move, be it noted) of God: "... God is that all things are possible, and that all things are possible is God."<sup>38</sup> Far from merely reducing God to a propositional form, this formula inserts Him into a vital human context, the existential sphere of those who turn to Him in a moment of need, of those who find themselves in extreme situations. The definition is not meant to invite merely logical exercises and semantic musings. The possibility under discussion, in other words, is not an object of thought. Rather, it remains a medium of existence, a way of life, a "how" of living.

The phenomenology that radical hermeneutics calls upon at this point is neither Heideggerian nor Kierkegaardian. Instead it invokes the insight of Emmanuel Levinas on the phenomenology of the human face. "The face is a shadowy place, a flickering region where we cannot always trust our eyes."<sup>39</sup> There is nothing simple or unambiguous about it. While the face unconceals, it conceals as well. It hides as much as it reveals. Indeed, while we have access to the other through the face, the face remains a constant reminder of the inaccessibility of the other's otherness, our inability to circumscribe the other's infinity, the impossibility of naming the other's transcendence. The other's alterity eludes our finite grasp. Yet, the face speaks more ardently, more faithfully, than language itself: "The cold look with which the words are calmly delivered discloses an even greater anger than angry words. The look of hurt says more than the words which say it does not matter. The look of love which says nothing at all says more than any words; routine words of love are betrayed by eyes which show that love has gone dead."<sup>40</sup>

The mystery of the face that eludes our grasp is not merely a visual appearance, a visible aspect. The other's being, the other's ontological privilege, is what truly escapes our finite calculation: "You can of course kill somebody physically; that is a tragically known fact. But you cannot, as they say in the gangster movies, 'erase' that person. Levinas explains this by attributing a certain 'infinity' and hence inextinguishability to the other person. The arm of the murderer is not long enough to reach the other, not in the other's true otherness, which is infinite, which thus exceeds everything empirical, and is thus an excess, an irreducible transcendence."<sup>41</sup> But what connection is there between the face of the other and God? How does God, defined by Anti-Climacus as the possibility of all things, relate to the mystery of the other? Our inability to fathom the mystery of the other, the hermeneutic task that the face

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*The Last Years: Journals 1853-1855*, ed. and trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: The Fontana Library, 1965), p. 99.

38. Soren KIERKEGAARD, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1954), p. 173.

39. *RH*, p. 273.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

41. John D. CAPUTO, "Radical Hermeneutics and Religious Truth: The Case of Sheehan and Schillebeeckx," in *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion*, ed. Daniel Guerriere (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 166.

of the other presents to us, disclosing thereby any number of interpretations (the fact moreover that no sooner do we reach the other than the other's otherness withdraws from us) is a constant reminder that we are always engaged in possibility. Possibility presents itself to us in our dealings with the other. But precisely because our arm is not long enough to reach the true alterity of the other, i.e., we cannot grasp the other's infinity, in just this way we cannot see the face of God. It is only in the face of our fellow human beings, co-sufferers in the flux, that we can have a glimpse of the face of God. We are reminded that even Moses only caught the back of God.

The religious insight that animates radical hermeneutics — its attempt to cope with the suffering induced by the flux and its rejection of metaphysics — brings it into a deep and genuine association with Kierkegaard's thought. Its appropriation of repetition as *the* task of human existence is spelled out both in its phenomenological method and its hermeneutic practice. For it captures the most vital features of repetition: the futurity of its thrust, the groundlessness of its freedom, and the transcendence of its reason for being.