

The Ethical Paradox in Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*

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Anxiety in the world is the only proof of our heterogeneity.

Johann Georg Hamann

It is Kierkegaard who gives the truth.

Jacques Lacan

It is no doubt well known that a certain passage from *The Concept of Anxiety* has left an enigmatic impression on the various editors' and readers' responses to what is considered Kierkegaard's most difficult work.¹ While discussing the concept of innocence and its difference from immediacy, Kierkegaard states: "Innocence is a quality, it is a *state* that may very well endure, and therefore the logical haste to have it annulled is meaningless, whereas in logic it should try to hurry a little more, for in logic it always comes too late, even when it hurries" (37). As might already be apparent, the focused-on ambiguity or indeterminacy in this passage revolves precisely around the referential role of the *it*.² Ironically, the editor's attending footnote to this passage, while seeming to clarify matters somewhat, only adds superfluous ambiguity. He starts out by noting that the general editors of Kierkegaard's work have proposed that *it* refers to "immediacy" rather than "innocence," only to resort to yet another external source in pointing out the error of their logic. The presumptive clarification, at best, makes

things more confusing. However, rather than attempting to clarify or remedy Kierkegaard's enigmatic pronouncement, perhaps one should anxiously heed such an ambiguity as a textual marker of Kierkegaard's conception. In other words, the enigmatic quality of the *it* as such may be more telling for a reading of Kierkegaard's text than the concealing-effect produced by any attempt to avoid textual uncertainty. For, if we attempt to unpack any uncertainty by making *it* refer to something, whether it be "immediacy," "innocence," or any other signified, we might, in the end, wind up avoiding the anxiety and the possibility that the enigmatic offers by providing the guarantee that conceptualization provides, a privileging that Kierkegaard's text implicitly warns against.

Kierkegaard is not the only theoretician of anxiety who recognizes the necessary ignorance inherent in any analysis of anxiety. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Sigmund Freud admits that the study of anxiety is fraught with indeterminacy: "What we clearly want is to find something that will tell us what anxiety really is, some criterion that will enable us to distinguish true statements about it from false ones. But this is not easy to get. Anxiety is not so simple a matter."³ Likewise, on the first day of *Seminar X*, Jacques Lacan warns his audience ahead of time that conceptualizing anxiety is no easy matter: "If you know then how to come to terms with anxiety, it will already make us advance to try to see how, and moreover, I myself would not be able to introduce it without coming to terms with it in some way or other – and that is the danger perhaps: I must not come to terms with it too quickly."⁴ Coming to terms with anxiety is tantamount to conceptualizing anxiety, to making it more symbolic than real. Even though Lacan felt somewhat at odds with Kierkegaard's desire to conceptualize anxiety in this manner, it can be argued that Kierkegaard himself at least implicitly argues that anxiety hovers at the very limit of conceptualization. This is precisely where Lacan and Kierkegaard share their slightly anti-Hegelian attitude. But because anxiety seems by nature fraught with the enigmatic, Kierkegaard's title *The Concept of Anxiety* remains paradoxical. For, in order to conceive of anxiety conceptually, one needs to alleviate it of its enigmatic nature by removing ambiguity. Or, in Lacanian terms, anxiety has to be removed from the real and made to conform to symbolic parameters; that is, it is made reducible to the signifier.⁵ Without the uncertainty of the enigmatic, one loses anxiety and gains an empty concept. However, if we take seriously Peter Fenves' marginal claim that *The Concept of Anxiety* should be considered "Kierkegaard's contribution to the 'origin of language' debate made famous through Herder's prize essay,"⁶ and introduce some psychoanalytic insights, we can see clearly the central role anxiety plays in Kierkegaard's paradoxical ethics, an ethics that demands a strug-

gle with the enigmatic.⁷

As will be noticed from Kierkegaard's subtitle, his text is a deliberation on hereditary sin. With what might be incorrectly viewed as a logical deduction, Kierkegaard begins with the first sin, that of Adam. Just as Oedipus is the only person in history to have never had an Oedipus complex (for he never had either the desire to kill his father or marry his mother – this desire being retroactively posited), Adam is the only character in history in whom hereditary sin is not found.⁸ Hereditary sin, much like the Oedipus complex, is the sin of the first father. The first sin (Adam's and Oedipus', if we can characterize the latter that way) is a sin that is, in a sense, resurrected in and through every particular sin throughout history, making history possible. Kierkegaard states it like this:

That the *first* sin signifies something different from a sin (i.e., a sin like many others), something different from *one* sin (i.e., no. 1 in relation to no. 2), is quite obvious. The first sin constitutes the nature of the quality: the first sin is the sin. (30)

A particular sin, that of Adam, is elevated to the level of the universal and consequently retroactively determines the quality and importance of all other sins. To throw in a Lacanian twist (and anxiety was no small matter for Lacan), sin represents the sinner for another sin. One's ontological consistency relies on being split between the relation of one's first sin and that of Adam's. This, in short, is the logic of hereditary sin. The crucial point not to be missed in this logic, which Kierkegaard never tires of maintaining, is that sinfulness is in the world only insofar as it comes into the world by sin. Sin, in a sense, presupposes itself. How does this work?

There is an obvious paradox in this logic of hereditary sin outlined by Kierkegaard: one is sinful not because one has inherited sin but because one freely chooses sin. Since the first sin, Adam's, only constitutes the nature of the quality of sin, that sin is freely chosen. Kierkegaard remains adamant that Adam's sin is prototypical and not causative.⁹ He further maintains that what is essential to human existence is that "man is...simultaneously himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race" (28).¹⁰ At every moment, the individual is both himself and the race. And what this amounts to is the split in the subject that is hereditary sin. Something of oneself has to be given up in order to gain access and acceptance into the race and history. The paradox revolves around the choice of the individual who must give up a pre-sinful existence in order to enter the community of hereditary sin. The paradox is precisely that this choice is forced. In other words, the individual who chooses between this pre-sinful

existence and the sin of heredity does not pre-exist this choice. In order to become the individual who makes the choice of being sinful or not, the subject needs the choice to have already been made. Hereditary sin is constitutive of this very individual. As an individual, I have the freedom of choice only because the choice preceded me. It is this choice that, according to Kierkegaard, "always comes too late, even when it hurries" (37). So even though every individual is determined by hereditary sin, this determination is freely chosen as "no individual begins at the same place as another, but every individual begins anew, and in the same moment he is at the place where he should begin in history" (34-5). Because of Kierkegaard's paradoxical rendering of hereditary sin, existence is rooted in a certain guilt that is constitutive of the individual as such. Original sin, as embodied in the myth of Adam, is the condition of possibility for any individual. To refer to the language of psychoanalysis, the individual is guilty in his or her very subordination to the authority of the Name of the Father (Adam, embodiment of hereditary sin), a subordination that is a necessary condition of one's existence, even if it originates from a free choice.

From the preceding analysis, it is obvious that, for Kierkegaard, innocence is what is given up by sin. Ordinarily the concepts of immediacy and innocence are seen as identical, but, for Kierkegaard, "the concept of immediacy belongs in logic; the concept of innocence, on the other hand, belongs in ethics" (35). Indeed, it is logically necessary that immediacy be annulled, as with Hegel, but for Kierkegaard, it is unethical to say that innocence must be annulled, "for even if it were annulled at the moment that this is uttered, ethics forbids us to forget that it is annulled only by guilt" (35). In various oblique ways throughout his text, Kierkegaard maintains that positing innocence as lost once and for all by Adam's first sin is itself a sin. It is a sin that displaces guilt onto a single act of sinfulness. But this type of displacement, which for Kierkegaard is a sin, discloses precisely one's own guilt. This is what happens whenever one ponders the question of what would be if Adam had never sinned. For only a guilty person, an already alienated person could ask such a question. As Kierkegaard claims, "It would never occur to the innocent person to ask such a question, and when the guilty asks it, he sins, for in his esthetic curiosity he ignores that he himself brought guiltiness into the world and that he himself lost innocence by guilt" (37). The more one attempts to transfer guilt elsewhere by avoiding one's own guilt, the more guilty one becomes for attempting to annul one's own freedom.

Perhaps one of the most insightful passages of this text follows on the cusp of this argumentative deterrence against conflating immediacy with innocence, logic with ethics:

Innocence, unlike immediacy, is not something that must be annulled, something whose quality is to be annulled, something that properly does not exist, but rather, when it is annulled, and as a result of being annulled, it for the first time comes into existence as that which it was before being annulled and which is now annulled. (36-7)

The ramifications of this citation toward any ethics of the enigmatic within the role and function of anxiety are immeasurable. Unlike the common-sense reading that nostalgically posits innocence prior to sin, in a primordial realm of paradisiacal purity, attainable through hard labor, Kierkegaard's perspective situates innocence as never preceding its loss. In other words, and this is fundamental in following Kierkegaard's path of thought, innocence, as it reads in this passage, is less a state that was lost via the fall into sin than the effect of the fall. If I am reading Kierkegaard correctly here, rather than sin functioning as an obstacle or hindrance to some lost state of innocence, sin is the condition of possibility for any idea, Kierkegaardian or not, of innocence in the first place. Ridding ourselves of sin is tantamount to ridding ourselves of the whole state of innocence. Perhaps the most sophisticated philosophic move at this juncture in Kierkegaard's text is his imperative to think innocence through sin as its correlate.

In this sense, Kierkegaard's logic is anything but linear. Rather than the loss of innocence being attributed to sin, we get a metaleptic inversion where sin as a barrier to innocence metamorphoses into innocence's positive condition. And likewise, innocence becomes that lost object, that something which every individual in the human race has always already given up by way of choosing (a choice that is paradoxically forced) the sinful human community. It is precisely this lost object – which is really "nothing" – that, for Kierkegaard, is the object of anxiety. This is precisely how innocence differs from immediacy. Kierkegaard maintains that when immediacy is cancelled out in Hegelian dialectics by mediation, this movement is immanent to immediacy itself. But when innocence is canceled by transcendence, "something entirely different comes out of it" (37). Rather than being usurped as an inherent aspect of sin, innocence, in its cancellation, goes through a sort of transubstantiation in which it functions as a "nothing" that sin itself articulates. When read in this manner, innocence becomes more than just a logical problematic – it marks the limit of logic, which Kierkegaard aptly names the ethical.

Following from this insight, Kierkegaard maintains that innocence is not a perfection that one should wish to regain, for in that very wish it is lost and one has only re-marked guilt. Innocence is always sufficient unto itself. Therefore, one never really has any control over losing it, except in the only

way in which it is ever always already lost – that is, by guilt. It is sufficient to remember that innocence itself never precedes its loss; it only exists as lost. The collective guilt on which the human community is rooted in and by is precisely this choice of sin over innocence. And, as we know from the preceding narrative, this choice has to be assumed as freely chosen.

Before proceeding into his reading of the concept of the fall, Kierkegaard pauses to draw a correlation between innocence and ignorance, which is crucial for understanding the role of anxiety in his ethics. By referring to the narrative of Genesis for the correct explanation of innocence – innocence in excess of logical parameters, Kierkegaard states, "Innocence is ignorance" (37). Here, Kierkegaard is not concerned with what we normally think of when we use the term ignorance. He is quick to point out the fact that the typical understanding of ignorance as defined as a lack of knowledge is really of no concern to his use of ignorance. Kierkegaard is concerned with a notion of ignorance that is nothing less than the structural limit of conceptualization itself. This limit becomes crucial as Kierkegaard attempts to move beyond the ethical forced choice of good and evil and the guilt of the fall.

The history of the human race is rooted in its sinfulness, brought about by the loss of innocence in what Kierkegaard calls the qualitative leap of every individual, figured as nothing other than one's sinful forced choice. Although Kierkegaard allows people to say with profound earnestness that they were born in misery and that their mother conceived them in sin, he defers to the more profound truth that one can sorrow over this only if one brought guilt into the world and brought all this upon oneself. Otherwise one is merely caught up in aesthetic existence. In other words, sin is precisely the precondition of any such aesthetic existence. With the sole exception of Christ, no one can sorrow innocently. Sorrowing in this manner is always already determined in and by guilt. While Kierkegaard will connect this notion of innocence with anxiety, it is important to follow his reading of the fall before delving directly into his overt analysis of anxiety. For it is here where his analysis maintains its strongest affinity with what he calls psychology, the science on which all previous sciences falter. Following up on the argument that it was the prohibition itself not to eat from the tree of knowledge that gave birth to the sin of Adam, Kierkegaard hits on the profound insight that if "the prohibition is regarded as conditioning the fall, it is also regarded as conditioning inordinate desire" (40). Introduced by guilt and sin, this inordinate, excessive, immoderate desire cannot, in turn, be reduced to them. Although Kierkegaard maintains that it is impossible to discern how the prohibition awakens this inordinate desire, he does concede, "man's desire is for the forbidden" (40). What is this "forbidden" if not

that which was lost, the lost choice itself which determines the individual as fundamentally and primordially split between his individualism and his race? It would seem, then, for Kierkegaard, that desire is rooted always in and around that lost place, that place that never was, that "nothing" which awakens fundamental anxiety. This "new" science of psychology, set off from its so-called predecessors, differing from the latter's attempt to focus attention on grasping the character of things, primarily pays heed to this "nothing" discovered in anxiety.

In the supposed state of innocence, there may indeed be peace and repose, but, for Kierkegaard, there is indeed something else that is not reducible to contention and strife: namely, nothing. Kierkegaard asks, "But what effect does nothing have? It begets anxiety. This is the profound secret of innocence, that it is at the same time anxiety" (41). In this view, as with his notion of inordinate desire, one is never anxious over anything, over some this or that, but rather, over nothing, over the very nothing that one gives up in the fall into sin. The sinful symbolic human community is maintained by a leap that splits reality into itself and a sort of cryptic excess of "nothing." As we shall see, each time this nothing distorts our everyday sinful reality, we become riddled in and by anxiety.¹¹

Kierkegaard follows his introductory analysis of anxiety with a speculation on the effects of anxiety on children. For some reason or other, and maybe not so obvious a one, Kierkegaard decides the best perspective to glimpse the connection between innocence and anxiety is, at least allegorically, in this very examination. In the observation of children, he insists, one will see disclosed anxiety's intimacy with a particular quest for the adventurous, the monstrous, and the enigmatic. Anxiety, it seems, belongs so essentially to the child that he cannot do without it.¹² The allegorical move of Kierkegaard's observation occurs when he insists that this childish affinity with anxiety is preserved at the cultural level. Essentially analogous to melancholy, anxiety reaches the level of freedom, "when freedom, having passed through the imperfect forms of its history, in the profoundest sense will come to itself" (42-3). So in Kierkegaard's distinction between fear and anxiety, where the former concept is based on a reference to something definite, we can now see why the latter is characterized as freedom – the possibility of possibility.¹³ Freedom as the possibility of possibility actualized in and by anxiety opens us up to an originary becoming not unlike that of Adam's originary sin. Anxiety, therefore, opens up a possibility of the repetition of the originary forced choice prior to its actualization. As Kierkegaard will say elsewhere, the possible can never be actual, for then it is no longer possible. This may be precisely why it is anxiety-producing.

In the end, Kierkegaard's paradox is that guilt both brings about a loss

of innocence and furnishes the only possible access to innocence. Replayed in the observation of the child, the entry into the human race is paid for by the loss of innocence that exists only traumatically as anxiety. But, for Kierkegaard, this loss of innocence is recouped by guilt's own ability to retroactively posit innocence as lost sometime back there, in some long lost past, thereby incurring additional guilt. Kierkegaard's rendering of ignorance attempts to rethink this "loss" as an always already inherent condition of existence.

Peter Fenves has argued that Kierkegaard's treatise rejects what he calls those "clever" theories which sustain that the fall into sin is itself instigated by the very prohibition, "for the simple reason that this prohibition would have to suppose a prior cleverness."¹⁴ This, of course, is the crux of Kierkegaard's argument. Kierkegaard claims that Adam is faced with a choice between a good or an evil act that itself requires a prior act (namely, eating from the tree that will give him the necessary knowledge) in order to acquire the knowledge of knowing which act is good and which evil:

When it is stated in Genesis that God said to Adam, "Only from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat," it follows as a matter of course that Adam has really not understood this word, for how could he understand the difference between good and evil when this distinction would follow as a consequence of the enjoyment of the fruit? (44)

What we get here is an allegorical miniature of the "forced choice" narrative. Kierkegaard wishes to argue that rather than the prohibition inducing in Adam the desire to do good or evil (for it does not give him this knowledge, only the fruit can), it actually casts Adam into a realm of anxiety more akin to a form of ignorance conceived as asymmetrical to knowledge. This ignorance of anxiety is based less on a loss of knowledge (for this type of ignorance would still be a quantitative lack that could be filled with knowledge) than on an ignorance of nothing. For Kierkegaard, those "clever" theories that posit the prohibition as awakening the desire for knowledge err by presupposing a prior knowledge of freedom. Rather, the prohibition induces in Adam anxiety, awakening in him only freedom's possibility:

What passed by innocence as the nothing of anxiety has now entered into Adam, and here again it is a nothing – the anxious possibility of being able. He has no conception of what he is able to do; otherwise – and this is what usually happens – that which comes later, the difference between good and evil, would have to be presupposed. Only the possibility of being able is present as a higher form of ignorance, as a higher expression of anxiety, because in a

higher sense it both is and is not, because in a higher sense he both loves it and flees from it. (44-5, italics in original)

Kierkegaard insists that anxiety is a state in which one is both fascinated and repulsed. The prohibition emanating from God, having as yet no direct meaning for Adam in his pre-knowledge state, opens a sort of impasse in Adam's being where innocence coincides with an indeterminate guilt. This coincidence takes place in a timeless place, which Kierkegaard throughout his work calls the "instant" (sometimes referred to as the "now"). This "instant" is a pre-subjective, pre-symbolic, nothing of anxiety where one is at best in a state of unsustainable anxious possibility, disavowed by taking refuge in the collective guilt of the human race. This state of anxiety, according to Freud, proceeds from nothing and is that which nothing precedes. But anxiety does precede repression, for it is precisely repression that saves us from the danger signaled by anxiety. By accepting his mandate in the human race, an acceptance that is forced, anxiety disappears, and Adam is able to master the situation by recognizing himself the subject of God's infinite mastery. This maneuver, achieved only at the price of giving something up, is marked by a non-locatable guilt of existence/finitude.

The prohibition can be viewed yet another way. Much like the prohibition of incest, it is a prohibition of an already established impossibility. Marked in God's prohibition is a forbidden place – the place of beatitude, of omnipotence, of the divine, and of innocence – which is only a symbolically mutated impossibility. The impossible – ignorance in the form of what we do not know we do not know, the void around which knowledge is structured – has, by the prohibition, been transformed into a forbidden place not accessible by knowledge. In a word, knowledge's own internal limit has become externalized and made a product of knowledge. What Kierkegaard has in mind when he claims that in ignorance there is no knowledge of good and evil is that the whole actuality of knowledge projects itself in anxiety as the enormous nothingness of ignorance. Kierkegaard's notion of ignorance, pitted against the variety sustained in an oppositional relation to knowledge, as knowledge's other, should be viewed less as different from knowledge than as knowledge's difference from itself.¹⁵ Kierkegaard claims that in anxiety innocence remains latent, but only a word is required and ignorance is concentrated. "Innocence naturally cannot understand this word, but at that moment anxiety has, as it were, caught its first prey. Instead of nothing, it now has an enigmatic word"(44). Enigmatically described here is the movement from nothing to something. This movement is captured in a word that not only marks the nothing of the object, but a nothing made word. The something we receive from the nothing appears to be nothing other than the *word*. With the prohibition, Adam is exposed to the nothing of

anxiety, the nothing inherent in the word/world. Fenves maintains that the deitic "thou" of the prohibitive judgment opens up a fundamental space of ambiguity in reference (80). The "thou" relates to both a subject existing supposedly prior to the prohibition and one who can only come into existence through the very transgression of the prohibition. Anxiety is here thought as nothing other than the nothing to which Adam is supposedly exposed. Only in and through the word "thou" is ignorance constituted, has anxiety caught its first prey. According to Kierkegaard, "Adam does not know what it means to die ... because Adam has not understood what was spoken, there is nothing but the ambiguity of anxiety" (45).

The "no" marking God's prohibition is an enigmatic word precisely because, as Kierkegaard insists, Adam has no idea what it means; it is ambiguous. God's enigmatic word creates anxiety because it functions not as a demand to commit any specific act, but as a demand just to act. It functions as a primordial demand that awakens Adam to the fact that he is no longer determined by nature, yet Adam can understand the enigmatic demand as a demand because his ignorance is qualified by spirit.¹⁶ The primordial demand arouses an anxiety that is not found in beasts and that marks the latent spirit found in Adam in his natural state. God's "no," just like every subsequent father's no in Freud's Oedipal drama, separates Adam from his natural state, figured in Freud as one's symbiotic relation to the mother. Therefore, to translate into Lacanian terms, God's prohibition marks the emergence of the signifier as the enigmatic word that throws Adam, and every subsequent individual, out of nature towards culture, towards the human race. In psychoanalysis this move is figured in every individual as the move from the anal phase to the phallic phase of psychic development. For instance, an infant basically defecates at will, not yet possessing the ability to check its instincts. But toilet training teaches the infant to elevate its instinct to the level of a social demand: "You can no longer defecate whenever and wherever you wish; you must only defecate in the appropriately recognized place – the toilet." The success of toilet training forces the infant's natural instincts to conform to the socially recognizable signifier that designates the proper place where the child will give his little gift when obeying the social demand. So, whereas natural instinct denotes a mythical animalistic need, drive, as a humanized function, is basically seen as an instinct that is no longer purely biological precisely because it conforms to the signifier of the Other's demand, a demand that is more social than anything else. This is essentially the logic that makes Kierkegaard insist that every human is both an individual and part of the race because this fall also correlates to the acquisition of language and the entry into the symbolic order for every human subject.

God's enigmatic signifier initially appears ambiguous to Adam not only because Adam, in his innocent state, remains ignorant of the difference between good and evil, but also because God's signifier emanates from the realm of the infinite and remains without a signified. It acquires a signified only when Adam, and every subsequent individual, makes the qualitative leap and freely chooses the finite signified over the ambiguous, enigmatic signifier. At first the enigmatic signifier appears as pure possibility, causing anxiety, and then Adam chooses to have the signifier signify something to be feared as a way out of the pressure of anxiety. The choice to give up the possibility signaled by anxiety leaves Adam as a split subject divorced between the natural and the infinite realms. The choice is paradoxical precisely because in Kierkegaard's ethics it structurally has to precede the positing of the consciousness that makes the choice. In Kierkegaard's existential ethics Adam, and every subsequent individual, paradoxically chooses what has been imposed upon him. According to George Stack, only after the fall is "the individual ... able to bear responsibility for what he does with these inherited dispositions, these psychological tendencies or characteristics."¹⁷ In his *Journals and Papers*, Kierkegaard even admits "psychologically speaking, the first sin always takes place in impotence; therefore, it apparently lacks, in a certain sense, accountability" (quoted in *Concept* 188). This is why he further claims that the anxiety that spawns the leap, the forced choice, is really an "entangled freedom" (49). This analysis of the fall leads to two temporally different anxieties. The anxiety that led to every individual's qualitative leap into sin, into the symbolic order of finite signifieds, is characterized by Kierkegaard as objective anxiety, as the presupposition of hereditary sin. But Kierkegaard characterizes all anxiety that appears after the first sin as subjective.¹⁸ This latter form of anxiety appears only after the subject has fallen into sin and is therefore felt as a demand that forces the subject this time to either consciously choose the safety and the guarantee of the finite symbolic order or to give up on the desire of the Other and risk entering a different dimension.¹⁹

How God's primordial enigmatic signifier is reduced to a finite signified by Adam is explained through Kierkegaard's analysis of ignorance embedded in the narrative of Genesis:

Adam was created; he had given names to the animals (here there is language, though in an imperfect way similar to that of children who learn by identifying animals on an A B C board) but had not found company for himself. Eve was created, formed from his rib. She stood in as intimate of a relation to him as possible, yet it was still an external relation. Adam and Eve are merely a numerical repetition. In this respect, a thousand Adams signify no more than one.

So much with regard to the descent of the race from one pair. Nature does not favor a meaningless superfluity. Therefore, if we assume that the race descended from several pairs, there would be a moment when nature had a meaningless superfluity. As soon as the relationship of generation is posited, no man is superfluous, because every individual is himself and the race. (46)

With the creation of Adam, there is an imperfect language not accidentally associated by Kierkegaard with children's memorization practices, in which the materiality of the letter signals an inarticulate cry prior to any unambiguous articulate announcement. As Kierkegaard affirms earlier, it does not necessarily follow that Adam has understood the word. Adam is faced with various numerical repetitions, up to and including Eve. Adam's relation to Eve is only an imaginary dyadic object-to-object relation that becomes a symbolic triadic relation-to-relation relation once generation is posited. Allegorically, then, this chain of disconcerted metonymies, existing on the same plane, only leap into the realm of the meaningful with and by the vertical movement of generation.

One of the letters of this imperfect language rises to the level of generation mutating all existing objects or letters into a hierarchy of meaning. One of these letters sutures the whole, conferring upon all the others a generating relation to each other. This, of course, is the letter S, standing for "Serpent," as the instigator of sin. Kierkegaard finds himself in an immeasurable difficulty attempting to connect a definite thought with the serpent. With the seduction of the serpent, a primordial difference is instituted, and the serpent becomes the figure of sin to be feared through the reduction of anxiety to fear. This difference is not, however, the difference of one letter or object to another, but rather the difference in each to itself marked in and by its relation to the serpent, which Kierkegaard, in a deleted sentence, conceives as a symbol of language itself (235). The Fall, as the succumbing to the seduction of the serpent, is not a fall from innocence, from a state prior to sin, rather it is the gap or opening of difference itself, conceived less as the origin than as the condition for the possibility of generation and history.

Without the fall there would be no way of sustaining any difference to make sense of the prohibition. This difference opened up by the prohibition both inaugurates the symbolic order of human understanding and produces the nothing of anxiety as a constitutive leftover. Difference frees the subject from anxiety by providing possible signifieds for the primordially enigmatic signifier. When Kierkegaard explains that "the imperfection in the narrative – how it could have occurred to anyone to say to Adam what he essentially could not understand – is eliminated if we bear in mind that the speaker is

language, and also that it is Adam himself who speaks," it seems that language cannot speak without a figure who speaks (Adam) or without a figure of speech (language personified as a speaker) (47). Since it cannot speak on its own, language cannot close off the "nothing" of anxiety because its figurative nature points to the limits of symbolization. In Kierkegaard's journal entry concerning the serpent as a figure for language he adds: "If any one wishing to instruct me should say, 'consistent with the preceding you of course, could say, "It [the serpent] is language," ' I would reply, 'I did not say that' (quoted in *Concept* 185).²⁰ Perhaps, "I" could not say "it," because both "I" and "it" speak anytime language takes place. This "it" in the speaker more than the speaker is precisely what the "I" has to give up as the condition to speak. But every time "I" speak "I" am confronted with this uncanny excessive "nothing" of anxiety, this little remainder of what was given up upon entry into the symbolic realm and the assumption of subjectivity. This is precisely what is construed in a sentence from one of Kierkegaard's drafts: "To use an expression for what has been said, anxiety is really the ambiguity of subjectivity" (quoted in *Concept* 197).

When Adam is confronted with the prohibition he is not riddled with anxiety because he does not understand the meaning of the interdiction; rather, he is confronted by an utter lack of this lack of understanding. Kierkegaard's denial that he said "It is language" should be viewed as a fleeing from the terror it inaugurates. By saying "*it* is language," one would be elevating a particular part of language, *it*, to the level of the universal, which then emerges as an incarnation of the totality itself. "It" is a piece of language, one among many, which remains excessive of what it is a part of. That little piece of us, innocence, which was sacrificed in the forced-choice into language, has now itself been lost in the "it" that signals the indeterminacy of language. That lost object that was the condition of language has now reemerged in language. This over-proximity of the object, this loss of the lost object, confronts us with the "nothing" of our existence. What, in the end, the "it" symbolizes is language's own failure to symbolize. The lack, or loss of innocence, that is produced by difference, by the emergence of language, is itself lacking when the subject is confronted by anxiety. The symbolic order not only separates us from our natural innocent state and the infinite realm, but it also mediates our relation to both of these. Subjective anxiety, therefore, emerges when this mediation fails and when the subject is affected by the return of that which was given up upon entry into the symbolic order – the lack that the symbolic order is organized around itself becomes lacking.²¹

Here language points to a nothing inaccessible to knowledge. It points to a fundamental ignorance as its own lack of foundation. The "individual

both loves and fears" this anxiety as affect, because it both exposes the individual to the freedom from the constraint of the given symbolic mandate and does away with any guarantee of ontological and symbolic consistency. Again, this is why Kierkegaard claims, "Anxiety is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled freedom" (49). In this instance, "it" is the word marking the "nothing" through the positivization of the word's failure to say the "nothing." As we saw from the opening quote of this essay, the "it" marks a fundamental enigma demarcating Kierkegaardian ignorance. According to Kierkegaard:

In each subsequent individual, anxiety is more reflective. This may be expressed by saying that the nothing that is the object of anxiety becomes, as it were, more and more a something. We do not say that it actually becomes a something or that it actually signifies something; we do not say that instead of a nothing we shall now substitute sin or something else, for what holds true of the innocence of the subsequent individual also holds true of Adam. All of this is only for freedom, and it is only as the single individual himself posits sin by the qualitative leap. Here the nothing of anxiety is a complex of presentiments, which, reflecting themselves in themselves, come nearer and nearer to the individual, even though again, when viewed essentially in anxiety, they signify a nothing – yet, mark well, not a nothing with which the individual has nothing to do, but a nothing that communicates vigorously with the ignorance of innocence. (61-2, italics in original)

The "nothing" of anxiety is felt as an affect because it is caused by something in the Other that is not the signifier. Its turning more and more into a something is a consequence of the qualitative leap of the individual into sin and guilt – a leap that is strictly forced due to the fact that no one has ever been given the privilege of starting from the beginning in an external sense. On the contrary, each individual begins in a historical nexus rooted in hereditary sin. The consequence of the relationship of generation in the individual constitutes what Kierkegaard calls the "more" that every subsequent individual has in relation to Adam. This "more" is strictly correlative to the something that the nothing of anxiety may signify in the individual subsequent to the fall. Keeping in mind that, for Kierkegaard, there is no individual prior to the fall and the forced choice of hereditary sin, one can recognize the importance of this something for psychological deliberation. Since this something is similar to the "it" from above as the excess of the individual which is lost in the forced choice of guilt, it marks the historical guilt of the individual; the "nothing" of anxiety exposes the subject in a negative

manner to the originality (the singularity) of the individual that is manifestly excluded from something like the general will. This is not to say that there is an original individual out there, somewhere to be re-found, because from all that has preceded, we know this is an impossibility. Our qualitative leap into hereditary sin may exclude the individual's attachment to what language cannot say, to that Kierkegaardian ignorance that is the indestructible support of our freedom, but it also leaves what cannot be symbolized as an enigmatic leftover that is felt through anxiety.

Freud believed that anxiety was caused by separation from the mother, separation from our original intimacy with nature. For Freud, the emergence of the Father, as the one who separates the subject from nature, creates anxiety because of a certain independence that is demanded by the father. Kierkegaard suggests a similar view when he claims that God's enigmatic word causes anxiety because it likewise separates the subject from nature. Despite this superficial similarity, Kierkegaard seems closer to Lacan since Lacan's understanding of anxiety derives from injecting Freudian thought with a dose of Kierkegaardian existentialism in the same way he injects Freudian thought with a dose of Saussurian structural linguistics. Contrary to Freud's claim that separation causes anxiety, Lacan argues that anxiety is produced from a lack of separation. Separation from the mother saves the subject from the terror of anxiety precisely because the Name-of-the-Father, as a figure for the symbolic order that the subject receives as compensation for what is given up, buffets the subject from the oppressive weight of the mother. As Sylviane Agacinski elliptically notes in her analysis of Kierkegaard, "Castration saves."²²

In Kierkegaard, it is not the separation from nature that causes anxiety, but it is actually the emergence of spirit as conditioned by the separation that causes anxiety. Spirit is enigmatic because spirit is the subject's connection to the infinite. Kierkegaard's claim only seems like a precursor to Freud's claim that anxiety, unlike fear, was without a proper object. Freud felt that the subject might fear this object or that – horses, wolves, or buttons – but anxiety is more terrifying precisely because the subject cannot locate the object of terror. However, Kierkegaard, like Lacan, explicitly designates the object of anxiety: "If we ask more particularly what the object of anxiety is, then the answer, here as elsewhere, must be that it is nothing" (96). To say that it is "nothing" is not the same thing as saying there is no object.²³ It is tantamount to indicating that the object of anxiety is what cannot be signified and, therefore, appears as nothing. The object nothing is produced retroactively by original sin but is not mediated and can only be encountered directly as affect. Lacan makes a similar claim when he maintains that anxiety "is not without an object."²⁴ The object of anxiety

is, for Lacan and Kierkegaard, a different sort of object – one that cannot be symbolized in any ordinary way. In Lacan, the object of anxiety is the *objet a*, the object cause of desire that marks within the symbolic order that lost primordial enigmatic demand that was avoided through the entry into the symbolic order.²⁵ Similarly, anxiety, in Kierkegaardian ethics, signals the latency of spirit as the leftover of that primordial enigmatic demand to act without any prescribed direction.

If we view spirit as the Kierkegaardian correlate to the more secularized Lacanian notion of drive as that which is inconsistent with the finite symbolic order, we can begin to see what type of ethical act leads to the religious stage in Kierkegaard's ethics. In Lacan, the *objet a* functions as surplus enjoyment (*jouissance*) attached to the symbolic order, as an enigmatic reminder the mother leaves behind. When natural instincts are elevated to the level of the signifier upon the entry into the symbolic order, the drive is all the subject has of his pre-symbolic existence. The symbiotic relation the subject once had with nature, or the mother, in the state of innocence may only exist as lost, but it also exerts a pressure, "an enigmatic, primordial demand."²⁶ This force is then felt whenever the subject suffers from anxiety. In Kierkegaard this force is precisely the pressure of spirit, and it creates the Kierkegaardian fear not over our mortality, not over the fear of death, but over the fear of our immortality, over the fact that the subject is not reducible to his biological or natural inclinations. Since anxiety points out that our sinfulness has nothing to do with any sensuous propensity which the subject cannot help, but, rather, that it has everything to do with the subject's free transgression, the qualitative leap constitutes an ethical act if it is a choice that prefers the lack of a signifier over the guarantee of the symbolic order. To act in a way that is not already guaranteed by the Other, by the symbolic pact of the subject's historical condition, is to act in a way that not only acknowledges the inconsistency of the Other, but may even change the very coordinates of the symbolic order.

In Lacan's own investigation into ethics, he elaborates on this type of act and links it with sublimation. In Seminar VII where he draws a correlation between ethics and aesthetics by colliding Kant with Sade, Lacan contrasts the Kantian and the Freudian notions of pathology, and he illustrates this through his criticism of a "Kantian fable." In the *Second Critique*, Kant, in an attempt to illustrate how ethical choice outweighs natural inclination, offers the following scenario:

Suppose someone asserts of his lustful appetite that, when the desired object and the opportunity are present, it is quite irresistible. [Ask him] if a gallows were erected before the house where he finds his opportunity, in order that he should be hanged thereon immedi-

ately after the gratification of his lust, whether he could not then control his passion; we need not be long in doubt what he would reply.²⁷

Lacan then outlines two other possibilities that, he says, Kant does not foresee. He argues, in effect, that the man in the scenario proposed by Kant may very well act against his own life interests and risk the gallows by entering the house and seizing his lustful object. But, he will do it for a reason that Kant fails to see: "All of which leads to the conclusion that it is not impossible for a man to sleep with a woman knowing full well that he is to be bumped off on his way out, by the gallows or anything else [and] it is not impossible that this man coolly accepts such an eventuality on his leaving – for the pleasure of cutting up the lady concerned in small pieces."²⁸ The first of these cases where the man sleeps with the woman even though he will be executed upon completion of the act is, according to Lacan, usually "located under the rubric of passionate excess."²⁹ The second case, according to Lacan, in which the man will violate the interdiction against sleeping with the women so his own murderous inclinations get the better of him, "the annals of criminology furnish a great many cases."³⁰ Both possibilities, however, according to Lacan "change the facts of the situation, and at the very least the demonstrative value of Kant's example."³¹ These two cases, then, illustrate, according to Lacan "two forms of transgression beyond the limits normally assigned to the pleasure principle in opposition to the reality principle."³² The first is sublimation and the second is perversion. "Sublimation and perversion are both a certain relationship of desire that attracts our attention to the possibility of formulating, in the form of a question, a different criterion of another, or even the same, morality, in opposition to the reality principle."³³

Leaving Lacan's comments about the second perverse possibility aside, especially since the pervert never fully enters the symbolic order, sublimation, in this Seminar, relates to the domain of ethics because, according to Lacan, "it creates socially recognized values."³⁴ Following Kant's scenario, Lacan envisions the possibility that the man with the lustful appetite will proceed to sleep with his desired object even though he knows full well he is to be killed as a payment for his pleasure. Rather than thinking of his own pleasure or natural passion, the choice of spending the night with the Lady is the only way for him to show he is acting contrary to the pleasure and reality principles. Not sleeping with the Lady, as Kant expects, would be embracing the pleasure principle as the ultimate principle of his life. But sleeping with the Lady, even though immediate death is immanent, is the only way for the man to show his ability of formulating a different criterion of morality in opposition to the reality principle.³⁵ By acting in a manner that is unforeseeable within the confines of the existing reality principle,

acting without the guarantee of the existing symbolic order, his sublimatory act changes the coordinates of the reality principle by reaching beyond the pleasure principle.

In the end, for Kierkegaard, the ultimate ethical act, which he actually designates as a religious one, is the repetition of the forced choice, a repetition of the qualitative leap, a repetition of the subject's entry into the symbolic order. He shies away from fully disclosing what this would exactly entail in *The Concept of Anxiety*, leaving it for what he calls dogmatics – something beyond the limits of psychology and addressed briefly in Chapter V and in *Fear and Trembling*. Anxiety is the confrontation of the "nothing" that re-marks an excess of the individual's fundamental alienation, his or her traumatic heterogeneity, in the universality of the human sinful pact. It signals the possibility of formulating a choice in opposition to the reality principle. Therefore, when faced with the anxiety of ethical possibility, one can choose the enigmatic object of anxiety that lacks the guarantee of the reality principle over an ontologically consistent identity and meaning provided by prevailing choice of hereditary sin and the symbolic pact. Because the sublimatory act lacks the guarantee that the symbolic order provides, it can transform the given symbolic space, and as an ethical act in the Kierkegaardian sense it becomes a religious act as it relies on faith as its only foundation. Only in this manner can the subject grasp the possibility of freedom with the "terrible as well as the joyful" that it brings.

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NOTES

¹ Reidar Thomte, "Historical Introduction," Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. xii. *The Concept of Anxiety* will be hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

² An editor footnote follows this oblique excerpt: "The editors of Kierkegaard's *Samlede Vaerker* suggest that 'it' refers to 'immediacy' and not to 'innocence' on the ground that 'innocence' is found nowhere in Hegel's *Logic*. However, Thurlstrup points out that this is not quite true, for the term 'innocence' appears several times in the *Logic*, also in the very place where Hegel deals with the mosaic myth [in the *Encyclopedia*]," p. 234.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, trans. Alix Strachey (New York: WW Norton, 1959), p. 58.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar X: Anxiety*. Unpublished seminar, Nov. 14, 1962. Imme-

diately following this warning, Lacan claims that the entire existentialist tradition has strayed too far from Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety. He also implies that existentialism itself emerges as a form of thought precisely to ward off anxiety in the Kierkegaardian sense. The Seminar can even be read as a return to anxiety's origins in Kierkegaard's text in order to recover its proper understanding.

- ⁵ In Jacques-Alain Miller's words, "The concept [is] the instrument of the symbolic grip on the real." Jacques-Alain Miller, "Introduction to Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety," *lacanian ink*, 26 (2005), p. 31.
- ⁶ Peter Fenves, *"Chatter": Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 267, n. 14. Fenves writes: "The mediating link between this debate and Kierkegaard is, of course, Hamann, whom Kierkegaard cites at the close of the treatise and whose many 'responses' to Herder constitutes a severe challenge to any identification of language with the power to concentrate thought and thus to fashion and employ concepts. ...Kierkegaard put no more trust in a 'divine' origin of language than in a human one," p. 267.
- ⁷ Robert Herbert, "Two of Kierkegaard's Uses of Paradox," *The Philosophical Review*, 70.1 (1961), p. 42.
- ⁸ Of course, this explains why Oedipus was unconscious of his desire in the strict Freudian sense.
- ⁹ Ronald M. Green, "The Limits of the Ethical in Kierkegaard's The Concept of Anxiety and Kant's Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer UP), p. 77.
- ¹⁰ Kierkegaard proclaims that this is inevitable by definition in a textual footnote: "If a particular individual could fall away entirely from the race, his falling away would require a different qualification of the race. Whereas if an animal should fall away from the species, the species would remain entirely unaffected" (28).
- ¹¹ One of Kierkegaard's journal entries reads: "The nature of hereditary sin has often been explained, and still a primary category has been lacking – it is anxiety; this is the essential determinant. Anxiety is a desire for what one fears, a sympathetic antipathy; anxiety is an alien power which grips the individual, and yet he cannot tear himself free from it and does not want to, for one fears, but what he fears he desires. Anxiety makes the individual powerless, and the first sin always occurs in weakness; therefore it apparently lacks accountability, but this lack is the real trap" (quoted in *Concept* 235).
- ¹² According to Josiah Thompson, "Kierkegaard knew dread in its most sympathetic disguise as a 'seeking after the adventurous, the tremendous, the mysterious.'" Josiah Thompson, *The Lonely Labyrinth: Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1967), p. 162.
- ¹³ Freud's Little Hans, in fact, evades the uncertainty of anxiety by developing a phobia that structures his world into something meaningful. See "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 10. Ed. James Strachey. (London: Hogarth), pp. 1-147.
- ¹⁴ Fenves, *"Chatter,"* p. 79.

- ¹⁵ I am reminded of Shoshana Felman's comment apropos the unconscious: "the unconscious is no longer the difference between consciousness and the unconscious, but rather the inherent, irreducible difference between consciousness and itself. The unconscious, therefore, is the radical castration of the mastery of consciousness." cf. *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). Parallel to this line of thought, I am attempting to construct Kierkegaard's notion of ignorance as a sort of opening and closing (the pulsation) of the unconscious. Rather than simply being opposed to knowledge, Kierkegaardian ignorance marks a radical condition and predicament while being an integral structural component of knowledge.
- ¹⁶ J. Preston Cole, *The Problematic Self in Kierkegaard and Freud* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1971), p. 79.
- ¹⁷ George J. Stack, "Kierkegaard: the Self and Ethical Existence," *Ethics* 83.2 (1973), p. 116.
- ¹⁸ Vincent A. McCarthy, "Schelling and Kierkegaard on Freedom and the Fall," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1985), p. 106.
- ¹⁹ Miller, "Introduction," p. 11.
- ²⁰ For a more refined reading of this entry, see Fenves, p. 83.
- ²¹ Lacan argues that anxiety emerges when "the lack is lacking." Lacan, *Seminar X*. Unpublished seminar, Nov. 28, 1962.
- ²² Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparte: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Kevin Newmark (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1988), p. 96. That Kierkegaard himself suffered from this oppressive weight can be seen in several aspects of his life. In his "Historical Introduction," Reidar Thomte, the English translator of the edition of *The Concept of Anxiety* to which I have been referring, recognizes the extent to which Kierkegaard's text "represents an analysis of his own life" (xiv). Kierkegaard himself acknowledges the influence his own life circumstances and personal suffering had in the composition of his text when he points out in his journal entries his inability to stay with Regine and how much his father's anxiety caused him to suffer in turn (quoted in *Concept* 170-1). Kierkegaard knew the truth of anxiety because he himself was a sufferer. His father's grave suffering from anxiety indicates the extent to which separation failed to occur in Søren's own life. His father simply could not shore up a strong authority in the symbolic order for his son. This lack of separation in Kierkegaard's own life may be responsible for Søren's lifelong admiration for Danish, his mother-tongue. As most critics know, because Kierkegaard disdained the imperialistic role of the language of the father – Latin and German – he had to petition to be allowed to write his dissertation in Danish. His lack of detachment from his mother may also explain why he had to ruthlessly break with Regine and dedicate himself bookishly to his religious pursuits. It may also explain his obsession with Abraham and Isaac's sacrificial father/son relationship. See William McDonald, "Søren Kierkegaard," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2006 Edition) Ed. Edward N. Zalta, date of access: 5.5.06, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2006/entries/kierkegaard/>>.

- ²³ In case one thinks this difference is just a matter of semantics, earlier Kierkegaard claims, “the object of anxiety is a nothing” (77). The inclusion of the indirect article would seem to indicate that the object of anxiety is a nothing turned something.
- ²⁴ “*elle n’est pas sans objet.*” Lacan, *Seminar X*. Unpublished seminar, Jan. 1, 1963.
- ²⁵ Jacques-Alain Miller maintains that the *objet a* constitutes a “heterogeneous” component of the signifier. Miller, “Introduction,” p. 30. This not only clarifies that the object of anxiety is a negative outgrowth of the entry into the symbolic, but it also clarifies Hamann’s initial claim that anxiety is the only proof of our heterogeneity.
- ²⁶ Joan Copjec, “The Tomb of Perseverance: On Antigone,” *Giving Ground: The Politics of Propinquity*, eds. Joan Copjec and Michael Sorkin (London: Verso, 1999), p. 253-4.
- ²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. T. K. Abbott (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1996), pp. 45-6.
- ²⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: WW Norton, 1992), p. 109.
- ²⁹ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 109.
- ³⁰ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 109.
- ³¹ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 109.
- ³² Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 109.
- ³³ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 109.
- ³⁴ Lacan, *Seminar VII*, p. 107.
- ³⁵ Alenka Zupancic, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 76.