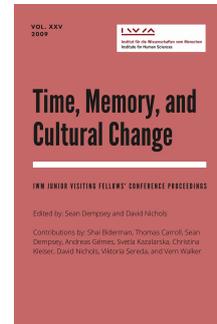


# The Genesis of Secular Responsibility: Aesthetic Education and the Neighbor

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IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXV © 2009 by the author

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In *The Gift of Death* (1995), a suggestive moment occurs when Jacques Derrida discusses the political theorist and sometimes Nazi jurist, Carl Schmitt, and his reading of Matthew 5: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-4). Schmitt concludes that Jesus’ teaching addresses the love “we must show to our private enemies, to those we would be tempted to hate through personal or subjective passion, and not to public enemies,” and he reminds us that “no Christian politics ever advised the West to love the Muslims who invaded Christian Europe.”[1] Schmitt subscribes to a clear us/them, friend/enemy distinction and from his perspective to love your neighbor as you love yourself makes sense only as long as that neighbor is someone from the same community or neighborhood. We can even love our enemies as long as they are private enemies or rivals found within our own group; loving them makes sense because passion can cloud our judgment and potentially threaten our own locality. But loving the foreigner, stranger, or outsider who threatens me and mine—for Schmitt this is non-sense. However, it is this position that Derrida critiques, and his argument focuses on the symmetry of Schmitt’s reading of loving the neighbor as you love yourself.

“If you love only those who love you and to the extent that they love you, if you hold so strictly to this symmetry, mutuality, and reciprocity, then you give nothing, no love, and the reserve of your wages will be like a tax that is imposed or a debt that is repaid, like the acquittal of a debt. In order to deserve or expect an infinitely higher salary, one that goes beyond the perception of what is due, you have to give without taking account and love those who don’t love you” (106)

This critique of Schmitt’s symmetry is significant because of a point developed earlier in *The Gift of Death* concerning the sacrificial logic of the Abraham and Isaac story—“a decision always takes place beyond calculation” (95). If Abraham had known that he would receive his son back when he set out to sacrifice him, then he accomplished nothing

because he risked nothing. Abraham's decision to sacrifice his son is meaningful only if, as Kierkegaard might say, it was made on the basis of the absurd. Similarly, if, as Schmitt would have it, our relationship to our neighbor is merely symmetrical, then it remains on the level of the calculable and thus doesn't really change anything. This is problematic even within Schmitt's political logic because if the sovereign is he "who decides upon the exception" as Schmitt claims, and if Derrida is right that decision always takes place beyond calculation, then there is an instability in the logic. The symmetrical view of the world—you are my friend, they are my enemy—is built upon an underlying asymmetrical decision that is beyond calculation. The question remains: why exactly are these my friends and those my enemies? How can we judge the basis of a decision concerning what is inside and outside the circle of my community if that decision takes place beyond calculation? How can we, as ethical human beings, become responsible for our actions if they are predicated upon a decision we did not make ourselves?

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida builds upon Jan Potacka's ideas about responsibility and traces how the history of religion is the history of "a *passage* to responsibility" that is also tied to a history of the subject's relationship to itself and to the other. Derrida argues that at its core religion presupposes access to the responsibility of a free self and that the space for such responsibility is made clear only when a distinction has been made between the "demonic on the one hand (that which confuses the limits among the animal, the human, and the divine, and which retains an affinity with mystery, the initiatory, the esoteric, the secret or the sacred) and responsibility on the other" (2). The "responsible" subject manages to make the orgiastic or demonic mystery subject to itself, and thus the responsible subject emerges from and stands above mere (animal) necessity and has the agency with which to respond freely to life's demands.

The broad strokes of this history of responsibility are made through a series of "turns, intricacies, versions, turnings back, bends, and conversions" (8): from the cavernous, "earth-mother" oriented orgies of the mystery religions; to the Platonic Conversion, which turns the eternal gaze away from the shadows on the cave wall and toward the ideal permanence of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful; and finally to the Christian revision of the Good as the goodness of a "supreme, absolute and inaccessible being that holds us in check not by exterior but interior force" (31). Rather than the longing look of the Platonic gaze toward the Good, in Christianity we are looked at by a God "who regards without being seen" (3). Each of the successive steps Derrida describes are renewed attempts at responding to the calls of an other that previously had been lost in the enthusiasms of orgiastic and demonic mystery. Each step "rises *on the back* [*sur le fond*] of a past mystery" (7) by either repressing or incorporating the prior, and thus each is at the same time a further manifestation of secrecy.

My interest in this paper is to sketch how responsibility might be possible in a secular age. If, as Derrida suggests, the history of responsibility has led to the necessity of the free subject subjecting itself to a god "who regards without being seen," then what happens to responsibility in a secular modernity where subjects no longer feel compelled to relate themselves to the gaze of a god who sees in secret? I suggest that we can begin to answer this question by reading recent reevaluations of the figure of the "neighbor" as a

supplement to Derrida's development of Potacka's ideas concerning the genesis of responsibility. The neighbor has had a long history in political-theological thought, stemming in large part from the commandment in Leviticus 19:18 to "love your neighbor as you love yourself." This history developed out of the scriptural traditions and has been revitalized in modernity by a variety of thinkers including Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Freud, Weber, Durkheim, Rosenzweig, Levinas, and Lacan. More recently, reevaluations of the concept by Eric Santner, Kenneth Reinhard, and Slavoj Žižek in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (2005), as well as Kiarina Kordela's development of the idea in the second half of *\$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (2007), have sought to extend our understanding of the neighbor by exploring how it has become a privileged locus for the reinvention of both the ethical and the political in late modernity.

The figure of the neighbor is significant in this quest because it marks the threshold between ethics and politics, particularly as Levinas has defined these two categories. For Levinas, ethics is an asymmetrical and nonreciprocal relationship to the other as the neighbor to whom a debt is owed that can never be paid. Politics, on the other hand, is a relationship between equals, each of whom is substitutable for any of the others. The dilemma here is that whereas ethics demands that I sacrifice all of the others to that One to whom a debt is owed that can never be paid, politics demands that I be willing to sacrifice that One so that every one can be substituted or exchanged with every other. As Reinhard argues, what is perhaps most radical in Levinas's thought is "the unbridgeable gap between ethics and politics: insofar as ethics involves the encounter of the *two* of the neighbor and the self, it cannot conceive of the *three*, the symbolic representation and mediation on which politics is based."<sup>[2]</sup> The challenge of the encounter with the neighbor is understanding how such an event might potentially produce this third perspective that makes politics possible.

In order to traverse or at least make sense of the antinomy between ethics and politics it is useful to look more closely at the figure of the neighbor. Central to the recent reevaluations of the neighbor I am exploring is Freud's claim that the neighbor, or what he calls the *Nebenmensch*—the fellow or adjacent human being—"falls apart into two components, of which one makes an impression by its constant structure and stays together as a thing [*als Ding*], while the other can be understood by the activity of memory—that is, it can be traced back to information from [the subject's] own body."<sup>[3]</sup> So the figure of the *Nebenmensch* joins together the objectivity of a thing with the subjectivity of the subject's own memories, and is thus a peculiar configuration of inside and outside. For Freud, this dual process of judgment and memory reinscribes the double gesture of the commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself." But the question remains, when I love my neighbor as myself how is the perplexing relationship between subjectivity and objectivity untangled?

In an early letter to Wilhelm Fleiss describing paranoia, Freud says paranoiacs "love their *delusions as they love themselves*. That is the secret." In other words, paranoiacs confuse the distinction between inside and outside and their projected delusions are thought to be objectively true.<sup>[4]</sup> What the logic of loving the neighbor provides is a means of working through such paranoid fantasies by recognizing the gap between subjectivity and

objectivity, or that space Derrida articulates between the demonic (that which confuses the limits) and responsibility. As Reinhard has argued, “when the proximity of the neighbor collapses, paranoid delusions and hallucinations emerge, often precisely in the place and the guise of the (missing) neighbor” (27). Paranoia is the failure to recognize or articulate this space and, as Hannah Arendt’s work suggests, one potential political outcome of this failure is totalitarianism, which in part is precisely the loss of this spacing proper to the function of the neighbor. The loss of this spacing threatens to swallow the responsible subject back into the enthusiasms of the demonic. The paranoid loves his delusions as he loves himself because he fails to judge the *Nebenmensch* and is thus lost in the enthusiasms of undifferentiated signification. Jacques Lacan argued that the paranoid fails to judge, and thus recognize and accept responsibility for the spacing between self and other, because “the paranoid *fails to believe*, not in one reality or another, but in the transcendental element (the Name of the Father) that should demarcate the difference between *das Ding* and the world of representation and hold the space between them open” (35). If this demarcation is successfully made, then the subject can traverse the travails of paranoia, and in fact Lacan suggests that the secular “structure of the human world” is predicated on just this transcendence of “paranoiac knowledge.”[5] Secular “belief” produces a responsible subject and thus makes politics possible by recognizing a transcendent element (the third) that demarcates the difference between the objective thing and the subjective memories and representations projected upon it. The realization that results from this recognition is that what I call my “self” is aporetic, asymmetrical, and non-identical with itself—I am split between subjectivity and objectivity just like my neighbor.

But how can this recognition be realized? One possibility is suggested by the radical logic of non-violence and “turning the other cheek.” If I strike the other and he strikes back, then this makes perfect mimetic sense. But if I strike the other and he does not strike back, then I may simply dismiss him as weak, foolish, or crazy. But if he keeps resisting my projections and refusing to return violence with violence, then a moment may come when I am forced to acknowledge that this behavior is outside my comprehension and is something that I cannot calculate. And it is in this encounter with incalculability that a new decision can be made—to love my neighbor as myself and to recognize his incalculability as a reflection of my own. If this new decision is brought about, then it is due to a collapse of judgment—and recall that Schiller claimed that one of the goals of an aesthetic education is to bring about this collapse of judgment that marks the foundation of the political. However, it is important to note that this collapse of judgment differs from the paranoid’s failure to judge at all. The essential difference is that this collapse occurs despite the effort exerted in the responsible subject’s attempts at judgment. Such a collapse can serve as the foundation of the political because it brings into awareness the possibility of a third perspective from which the disjunction of friend/enemy and self/other might be resolved and where the surplus effort exerted by the subject might be accounted for and thus justified.

The political is suppressed as long as the friend/enemy, us versus them mentality is maintained. Aesthetic education is one possible means of overcoming obstacles to political negotiation by encouraging a reflective activity that offers practice at negotiating

between different conceptions of the good. What also needs to be activated is the sense of irony that we associate with Schlegel—“a capacity to acknowledge as contingent and time-bound the truth to which we are nevertheless committed.”[6] By exercising our imagination, and identifying with the different possibilities of being human presented in culture and in everyday experience, we can recognize the different kinds of human being we could potentially have been if the social and historical situation we were born into had been different. This recognition calls into question our ability to definitively judge the relative value of various positions. How can I be certain of the righteousness of my own position if I recognize how completely differently I would see things if I was born to a different set of parents in a different part of the world? With this recognition comes the willingness to acknowledge the need for political solutions.

I have already suggested that the logic of non-violence is one way of triggering the recognition of the spacing between self and other that engenders secular responsibility. Another way the aesthetic education necessary for traversing paranoid fantasies of exceptionality can occur is through literature. As Kiarina Kordela notes in *\$urplus*, literature is paradoxically “an instance of repose from our tormenting monologue, and an experience in which we are given more chances, compared to reality, to encounter really another gaze.”[7] In her view, literature possesses such potential because it is here the reader experiences pleasure in encountering neighbors who routinely defy the projections of significance placed upon them and thus open gaps between what the fictional figure is for himself or herself and the correspondent subjective memories and impressions the reader projects upon the figure. Like Freud’s *Nebenmensch*, literature joins together the objectivity of the textual artifact with the subjectivity of the reader’s own memories in such a way so that readers can encounter the gap or tension between objectivity and subjectivity, and this encounter becomes an opportunity for recognizing, or perhaps *recognizing*, the particular perspective from which the reader looks at the world. These moments of recognition are potentially pleasurable because a feeling of epiphanic excess or surplus can be experienced—a surplus that stems from an excess of signification within what is manifestly before us. In part, this pleasurable surplus is generated by the overcoming of the perspective or world-view that presided over the subject prior to the encounter with the neighbor (or with the work of literature), and it is this (pleasurable) self-overcoming that produces the gaze, or the perspective of the “third” that makes politics possible.

In order to clarify how this perspective of the third can be produced, it is necessary to return to the issue of responsibility. But how can I become responsible for everything that I say and do, if this everything is predicated upon the exclusion of one thing for which I am not responsible for—the facticity of the historical and cultural position I find myself born into? In other words, how can I become responsible for the habits and practices of a situation I didn’t choose to be part of in the first place? In the recent reevaluations of the neighbor by Santner, Reinhard, and Kordela, Lacan’s theory of sexual difference is utilized to suggest that there are two fundamentally different ways of relating to this anxiety, which are aligned with the masculine and feminine structures of desire. Although Lacan insists that these structures are not based on genitalia and that a man can have a

feminine structure of desire and vice versa, let us leave aside contentious questions of gender for a moment to see what purchase this theory may provide on the problem at hand.

The masculine structure is one of a universal and its exception, and is illustrated by Freud's myth of the primal father in *Totem and Taboo*. In the beginning, there was one—the primal father—who had access to all the wealth and all the women. His sons were jealous and banded together to kill this father so that they could be free to express their own desire. So, in order that all men could be equal, and that all could come under the law, an exception had to be made of the one who was not equal—the primal father—and it is his death that marks the emergence of the law. The idea of equality is established by a constitutive exception, the exclusion of the One who is not equal. The tension in society arises from conflicting tendencies: the Oedipal guilt of having killed the primal father and the desire to *stand in for* and be this father in some derivative way within the family unit, the company, or the nation-state. In the masculine structure of desire, the subject responds to this Oedipal guilt by identifying with what is perceived to be the cause of guilt—the absent father—thus generating the belief that the guilty feeling will cease as the subject becomes more like the primal father.

In this way, all men are equal (although some are more equal than others based on their relative approximation to the ideal) and the circle of the shared community or culture drawn around this relative equality is maintained by both an identification with or focus upon the One who has been excluded and a defense of the ethical perimeter of the communal circle by exclusion of those who do not fit into the constructed narrative: foreigners, immigrants, homosexuals, blacks, Jews, etc. These “others” are excluded and function as scapegoats upon which is projected the residual Oedipal guilt of having identified so closely with the Father that “we” killed him so that we could be him. Through this inversion, the guilty conscience can claim that *they* want to kill our Father and stain the purity and sanctity of our community, and thus the guilt is satisfyingly sacrificed. This follows the perennial logic of sacrificial economies: surplus negative feelings are projected upon the sacrificial token, the token is killed or consumed, and thus negative feelings are eliminated at least momentarily. Unfortunately, the original stain never washes away completely and the act of sacrifice must be repeated compulsively. Despite man's most diabolic attempts there is no final solution, the debt is never fully repaid, and the last judgment is indefinitely deferred.

What Santer, Reinhard, and Kordela suggest is that there may be a better way of responding to the pressures and anxieties of desire, and they look towards the feminine structure and the figure of the neighbor for a means to counter or supplement the logic of a universal that is held in place by a constitutive exception. The feminine formula does not simply invert or complement the masculine one but instead presents a fundamentally different structure, one characterized by a non-all (or *pas tout*). In this formula the community (or neighborhood) is a set that remains incomplete and open. There is nothing outside this set nor any constitutive exception to mark its boundaries, and since there is no totality that encloses me there is nothing that I am not responsible for. And due to the logic of this double negative—the only thing I am *not* responsible for is the

*nothing* outside my set—I can never finish talking about what I am responsible for. It is this demurral—this recognition of the need to keep talking—that opens up the space of the neighbor.

Although the logic of this feminine structure of desire is intriguing, the question becomes how can this openness and awareness of the non-all be inscribed within habits and practices? This is where the figure of the neighbor comes in. If the everyday encounter with the neighbor is not the face to face encounter with the other that Levinas describes, but is rather an encounter with the desires and representations I project upon the other, then “the true structure of the ‘normal’ dialogue with the other, the neighbor, is that of a monologue, insofar as it is always a ‘conversation’ between the subject and the gaze imagined by it in the Other.”[8] The task of producing the political is the task of breaking through the monotony of this monologue and thus traversing the paranoiac’s love of his own delusions. This break through can occur when I realize that the gaze that I encounter in my neighbor is beyond what I am currently capable of imagining or calculating on my own—and it is in this moment that I anticipate a field of vision or gaze above my own. This is the perspective of the third that mediates politics and it is from this transcendental perspective that at least momentarily I “see” myself as seeing *as if* from above.

Rather than the longing look of the Platonic gaze toward the Good, or the gaze of the Christian God “who regards without being seen,” in a secular age the responsible subject anticipates the surplus of a third perspective which exceeds the exchange of views between itself and its neighbor. It is the transcendental surplus of this third that functions in the manner of Lacan’s *Name of the Father*, demarcating the difference between the noumenal world of things and the phenomenal world of subjective memories and representations, and holding the space between them open. By passing through this space, secularity can move beyond the delusional monotony of paranoiac knowledge. To return to the language of Derrida’s critique of Schmitt, it is only when we risk going beyond our “perception of what is due” that we can become responsible for the incalculable decisions that shape our world. However, if this process is to be perpetually pleasurable, then new projections must be produced that can subsequently be overcome or consumed. Thus just as in capitalism, the process of overcoming the “perception of what is due” is interminable and requires continual expansion into new markets. Somewhat surprisingly, in order for secularity to work we may need a continual supply of new neighbors to encounter (and new media to devour) in order to continue experiencing the sublime pleasure of producing that perspective of the third whose gaze makes politics possible.

In a recent article, Kordela argues that although Hans Blumenberg’s account of secularization may not be fully satisfying he does make us “see the importance of human *Schuld* (the German word for both moral or legal guilt and economic debt) for the sustenance of the Other, which for us may no longer be God per se, but remains the world as a consistent and meaningful system.” In order for the world to appear consistent, the responsible human subject must *stand in for* the inconsistencies, and “assume the role of a phantasmatic surplus-cause.”[9] However, this *standing in for* is very different from the assumption of the father’s role in the Oedipal drama of the masculine structure of desire.

There the guilty subject attempted to repay his perceived debt by putting on the role of the primal father. In this masculine structure, the ethics of owing a debt that can never be repaid is the product of a politics that sacrificed the constitutive exception so that all that remained could exist under the law. The feminine structure, on the other hand, recognizes that all of this is just a *put on*—there *never* was any One *not* under the law. In order to be in on the joke of this (divine) comedy, we must be willing to accept responsibility for those inconsistencies that seem exceptional to the world as a consistent and meaningful system. This assumption of responsibility can be found pleasurable because the sacrifice of our fantasies of exception clears a space for superior hopes that are so much the more enchanting.

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Notes:

1. Derrida, Jacques. *The Gift of Death*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 103. Subsequent references to this book will be made in the body of the essay.

2. Žižek, Slavoj, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 49.

3. Freud, Sigmund. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth, 1958, 1:331 (translation modified); quoted in *The Neighbor*, 30.

4. Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth, 1958, 1:212; *Briefe an Wilhelm Fliess*. Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1986, 110.

5. Kordela, A. Kiarina, “Marx’s Update of Cultural Theory.” *Cultural Critique* 65 (2007): 53.

6. Jager, Colin. “After the Secular: The Subject of Romanticism.” *Public Culture* 18:2 (2006): 304.

7. Kordela, A. Kiarina. *\$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2007, 137.

8. Ibid., 137.

9. Kordela, A. Kiarina, “Marx’s Update of Cultural Theory.” *Cultural Critique* 65 (2007): 55.

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*Preferred citation:* Dempsey, Sean. 2009. The Genesis of Secular Responsibility: Aesthetic Education and the Neighbor. In *Time, Memory, and Cultural Change*, ed. S. Dempsey and D. Nichols, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows’ Conference Proceedings, Vol. 25.