My central point of contact with contemporary debates in continental philosophy has been through my work on Kierkegaard. Understandably, then, I have been led to texts by Derrida, particularly *The Gift of Death*, with its treatment of the Abraham story and *Fear and Trembling*’s version of the same, and with Caputo’s reckoning with Kierkegaard and Derrida in texts as early as *Radical Hermeneutics* and as recent as *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. In addition, I have been looking at Richard Kearney’s concerns about the shortcomings of deconstruction, principle among these his sense that deconstruction, despite its opposition to idolatry of various kinds, nevertheless lacks the resources to distinguish worthy from unworthy objects of aspiration and imitation. Kearney suggests, too, in *The God Who May Be*, that deconstruction has a hand in promoting what we might call an unhealthy ethics of the sublime, one which borders on masochism, passivity, and paralysis. I share these concerns, and, as you can imagine, I am particularly aware of the role which this sort of suffering seems to have played in the life of that great forerunner of deconstruction, Søren Kierkegaard. Are “deconstruction” or proto-deconstructive urges to blame? For the sake of the argument, I will say

---


no. So what I wish to address is this: Continental Philosophy Today: Too much Deconstruction, or too Little? Or, alternately, is there an inherent opposition between the beautiful and the sublime?

Let me take my starting point, then, in a little story and a remark of Kierkegaard’s from *Fear and Trembling*. One day, just prior to class, I realized that I had left my copy of *Fear and Trembling* at home. In a panic I headed down the hallway to the office of one of the graduate students who had taken the course the year before. I knocked politely on Joe Tadie’s door; he wasn’t there, but I entered anyway and combed through his shelves to find his copy of *Fear and Trembling*. Great relief, the book was there, and I absconded with it. Inside the text were Joe’s copious underlinings and occasional marginal illustrations. One caught my eye: a tiny picture of a key and, in the adjacent paragraph, a sentence underlined. I took a look at the Danish: “Timeligheden, Endeligheden er det, hvorom Alt dreier sig”: Everything revolves around temporality and finitude.³

And indeed this is a leitmotif of *Fear and Trembling*, whose pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, opens his text, tellingly, with stories about the weaning of a child from its mother’s breast.⁴ These tales are paired with imaginative renderings of Abraham’s journey up Mount Moriah. The difference between De Silentio’s improvisations on the Abraham story and their scriptural original is that the former culminate in offense rather than faith. De Silentio would seem to be suggesting that the Biblical outcome, Abraham’s obedience and faithfulness, exceeds the capacity of humans: it cannot be accomplished by human power alone, and, as if to underline this fact, de Silentio is unable even to reduplicate the scriptural tale. Likewise, weaning, signaling as it does the inevitable end to the infant’s imagined unity with the mother’s breast, is de Silentio’s figure for the relation of the human to its transcendent other. De Silentio wants us to see that, without a sense for the perils of transcendence, the potential for misrecognition and despair, Abraham’s faith can mean nothing. And however heart-rending


⁴ *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 10-14.
de Silentio's depictions of weaning are, we have to think of the alternative. It is Hegel, that great unweaned infant, whose vision of *Absolute Wissen* is dismissed as closer to an infant's hallucination of oneness than philosophy's lofty culmination.

My account abstracts, of course, from interesting questions concerning the metaphysical status of Hegel's absolute, not to mention questions concerning the actual target of Kierkegaard's attacks-whether this was Hegel himself, or Danish Hegelians such as Kierkegaard's tutor, Hans Lassen Martensen, later Professor of Theology at the University of Copenhagen and finally Bishop of Copenhagen.\(^5\) When all is said and done, however, it is a safe bet that the Hegel who, in his lectures on the philosophy of history, expresses wonder and puzzlement at the widespread assumption that the inner workings of providence elude human reason, would not have been the sort of subjective thinker Kierkegaard was looking for.\(^6\)

Kierkegaard's own writings testify to human finitude in both content and form. In *Fear and Trembling* itself, the carefully drawn distinction between the murderer and the knight of faith is brushed aside by de Silentio's reference to what he calls the reality of sin, which, on his premises, precludes the possibility of fulfilling the ethical requirement all would be knights of faith must satisfy.\(^7\) This "reality of sin" renders the whole notion of the teleological suspension of the ethical utterly groundless: de Silentio has shown that there is a theoretical difference between murder and sacrifice, but it is a distinction that cannot be applied in practice. Anyone hiding in the bushes on the top of Mount Moriah is unable to ascertain whether the man raising the knife is a murderer or God's chosen one: but neither can Abraham. For de Silentio ends by agreeing with both Kierkegaard and Kant that humans lack the sort of self-transparency that would allow them to know whether they have faced and fulfilled the ethical demand (or in Kantian terms whether their motivation is that of allegiance to the categorical imperative).

---


\(^7\) *Fear and Trembling*, p. 98.
As another Kierkegaardian pseudonym proclaims in *Sickness Unto Death*, "sin has it roots in willing, not in knowing, and this corruption of willing affects the individual's consciousness."*8 This obscurity is driven home in the aporiai of SK's authorship: the theory of the stages, for example, represents not so much possible modes of existence as dead ends of human striving. The possibility for quasi-Hegelian dialectical advancement, seemingly implicit in the notion of stages, is replaced by the prospect of an ever-intensified striving which cannot achieve its aims, be it the secure possession of pleasure, ethical achievement, or even self-effacement before the divine. Similarly, the brilliant quasi-phenomenological account in the *The Concept of Anxiety*, whose description of the dawning awareness of freedom and possibility was so appealing that Heidegger had to borrow it without acknowledgement, is likewise disrupted by the unrecognized presence of sin. What does that mean exactly? It means that, in addition to the fact of human limitation, which makes it impossible for us to know in practice whether or to what degree we are acting freely, there is also an indeterminate, added limitation to our self-knowledge and our ability to love and act justly. Kierkegaard illustrates this with his typically unvarnished illustrations of our perverse penchant for wedging ourselves into precisely those exclusive circles where it is worldly-wise to be, in contrast to Christ's practice of loving with disconcerting inclusivity. But why am I talking so much about sin in a discussion of the future of continental philosophy? First, because I am convinced that sin is the real chain-saw in Kierkegaard's proto-deconstructive workshop. Odd as it is, it is Kierkegaard's use of this particular theological notion, one that on the face of it could hardly render him popular among the Romantic thinkers of his own time, nor, one imagines, among theologians or philosophers of our own time, that brings Kierkegaard's practice of writing into most intimate association with Derrida's. Kierkegaard's understanding of sin, entailing as it does the compromise of the will (i.e. the uncertainty surrounding the extent of the subject's freedom at any given time) bears with it a radical interrogation of the subject's agency. And just as the earlier pseudonymous works use the Christian notion of sin to portray the interruption of philosophical hybris and dreams of totality, so, too,

---

does the authorship as a whole gesture to the possibility of otherness invading an individual's despairing certitudes. In Kierkegaard's writings, sin and grace are paired concepts, and together they undermine the despair of both presumption (omnipotence) and paralysis (impotence). At least on a sunny day in Copenhagen. My second point, however, is that not all days in Copenhagen are sunny, and on these dark days, Kierkegaard's use of the concept of sin loses its marvelous indeterminacy and becomes one more onto-theological definition of the human. Then the concept of sin, and the way in which it shapes Kierkegaard's pedagogy, does indeed seem liable to the same critique as Richard Kearney directs against deconstruction. When "sin," in Kierkegaard's usage, changes from an uncertainty concerning human freedom to the outright proclamation of its forfeiture, we near the aforementioned realm of masochism, passivity, and paralysis, far away from the l'homme capable which Kearney would promote.\(^9\) We should also mention that the same effect is noticeable in Kant's Critique of Judgment, as soon as Kant opts to make the sublime coextensive with human reason. As soon as the sublime is domesticated into a human possession, we see the immediate effects; the experience of sublime becomes tantamount to a master/slave relation between reason and the imagination, with the imagination submitting with pain to reason's triumphant self-affirmation, experienced of course only through this mortification of the finite, of the flesh, of the imagination. Kant's description of this is rather vivid.\(^10\) The alternative, of course, is that the sublime should designate what exceeds the human, but this is not the road which Kant took. My question, then, is whether the effects which Kearney attributes to deconstruction are really the effects of the uncertainty and unexpected reversals inherent in deconstructive practice or rather of the failure to honor this uncertainty.

Granted, the advocates of deconstruction, like Derrida and Caputo, are at times prone to overshoot their case, so that, while aiming to be true to our finitude and limitation, they end in the excesses of gnosticism. As an example, in The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida, Caputo writes of the need to "break the circle of self-aggrandizement and wage-

---
\(^9\) *The God Who May Be*, p. 108.
labor, earthly or heavenly—in which the gift is inevitably trapped.”¹¹ Kearney responds, rightly I think, that “desire beyond desire—as precisely that desire for the gift beyond the commerce of daily transaction—both is and is not outside the circle of exchange.”¹² Here, too, I would think this latter stance is the properly deconstructive one, in that the possibility for the gift is assumed to be potentially present in the mundane economies of our everyday lives and desires. Similarly, David Wood takes Derrida to task for his tendency to refer, in The Gift of Death, to our “infinite duty” to the other. Our duty to each other, Wood remarks, is indeterminate, not infinite.¹³ Hence he would have us avoid the abyss of (arguably) useless guilt which Derrida opens up when he, following Levinas, refers to an infinite guilt.

But even if we clear deconstruction of the charges of paralysis, passivity, and quasi-gnosticism, how about Kearney’s other claim, that deconstruction lacks the (imaginative) resources required to sustain a life of discernment and striving? This to me has the ring of truth, at least with regard to the emphases of Derrida’s and Levinas’ ethics. But if it is true of their practice, need it be true of all forms of deconstructive practice? I would ask whether the insistence on human finitude which deconstruction promotes is necessarily opposed to the role played by imagination in a creative, ethical life. I believe it is not. The uncertainty and awareness of limitation cultivated by deconstruction is, in my view, the very soil in which creativity takes root and thrives. ☐

