A Totality of Ruins: Adorno on Kierkegaard

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Mythical dialectic consumes Kierkegaard's god, as did Kronos his children.

—*Theodor W. Adorno,* Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic

Adorno's first work in philosophy, the book on Kierkegaard (Adorno 1989, 2003b), is rarely, if ever, given the attention it deserves. This is partly due to its nature as one of the most precocious and impenetrable works from a writer who is a challenge at the best of times. But it is also due to the fact that its real subject is theology. Adorno may have subtitled it *Construction of the Aesthetic*, but a close reading soon reveals that this study of one of the greatest Protestant philosophical theologians has theology as its main target.[1]

One may identify both an underlying theoretical basis and the detailed structure of Adorno's critique. The basis is what I have elsewhere called "theological suspicion": intimately connected with and in many ways reliant upon Marxist ideological suspicion, Adorno reshapes that practice with an eye on theology (Boer 2007, 394). That suspicion operates by means of critical discernment, in which one is constantly on the watch both for the subtle effects of theological modes of thought and for the possible genuine contributions theology may make. The study of the Kierkegaard book is clearly a case of the former exercise of theological suspicion, for Adorno seeks to uncover the theological underlay of Kierkegaard's philosophical system with a view to demolishing it. For Adorno, Kierkegaard's effort suffers from two problems. First, it attempts to conceal its theological basis; second, it thereby sublates and dangerously redirects the patterns of power and authority characteristic of theology.

Apart from this theoretical basis in theological suspicion, the detailed structure of Adorno's critique follows a two-fold strategy, a

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pincer movement if you will: the first locates the myth that lies concealed behind the explicit theological material, while the second identifies the impossible paradoxes that disable Kierkegaard's every effort at dialectics. Having removed the layers beneath which myth has been carefully obscured in Kierkegaard's work, Adorno moves to pull apart the paradoxes of that system. Throughout, the bulk of Adorno's argument stays with theology, particularly in the way theology forms the ground of Kierkegaard's system. But theology turns out to be a treacherous backer, dissolving into mythology at almost every turn. It is then rendered nonsensical by internal paradoxes that fail to respond to the dialectic. As if to complicate the doubled pattern we already have, Adorno makes this move twice, once in the treatment of the spheres and then again with sacrifice. I have structured my assessment accordingly, critically assessing this doppelganger argument in detail.

SETTING THE SCENE

Given the relative neglect of Adorno's study of Kierkegaard, I would like to make three preliminary points that set the scene for the following analysis. To begin with, what are the stakes involved in engaging with this text? The questions Adorno raises are pertinent to the ongoing recourse to theology among a significant number of thinkers on the Left, such as Slavoj Žižek, Alan Badiou, Terry Eagleton, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, and Clayton Crockett. The proposals keep multiplying, whether it is the Apostle Paul or Pascal as thinkers of the event (Badiou 2003, 2006, 213–22; see Karlsen), Paul as the source for rethinking the revolutionary seizure of *kairós* as a moment of potentiality (Agamben), Christ's death as the moment of God's impotence (Žižek 2000, 2001, 2003, 2008, 2009; Žižek and Milbank; see Kotsko; Karlsen), an argument for the simple, disinterested virtues of theology as a way of reconstructing a metaphysics to answer the challenges of our age (Eagleton 2003b, 2005, 2007, 2009a, 2009b), the biblical Job as a source for the creative force of suffering that bends transcendence to immanence (Negri), or even an argument for a humble and limited God as an answer to imperial arrogance (Crockett). In each case, we witness an effort to revitalize what is perceived to be a moribund politics by means of untapped resources in the Bible and theology. Almost

in every case, theology is deployed in a secularized form; shorn of its traditional content, truth claims, and belief structure; and reshaped for philosophical and political engagement. That is, theology is rendered "relevant" once again, a player in our current political impasse. In particular, it is worth noting that Badiou, Žižek, and Eagleton call upon Kierkegaard to bolster their theological appropriations. Badiou's effort (2009, 447–57) is the most critical, drawing Kierkegaard's radical and unexpected encounter with God into a revised theory of the event,[2] but here again the blockage of theological truth claims faces the hazards that Adorno had already identified. Žižek and Eagleton deploy Kierkegaard more in the form of uncritical proof-texting, offering various anchors for their work by citing Kierkegaard in terms of sacrifice, the self-suffiency of the humble virtues, the suspension of the law, the radical Christian break, redemption, and even the perceived radicalness of Christian love (Eagleton 2003a, 44–45, 52, 60; Žižek 2000, 126–27, 148; 2001, 105; 2003, 17–19, 30). In this context, a return to Adorno's explicit engagement with theology through Kierkegaard provides a salutary lesson in the pitfalls of such an approach.

The second issue concerns the critical neglect of the core of Adorno's argument in the chapters concerning sacrifice and the spheres. For instance, Jarvis's survey devotes only two pages (194–95) to Adorno's study, thereby replicating an assumption that it is a minor text in Adorno's corpus. Astonishingly, Brittain's 2010 work, *Adorno and Theology*, barely touches on Adorno's central text on theology. At least Buck-Morss (114–21) and Pensky (140–49) offer more substantial analysis, but they depart the text after the first stage.[3] Here Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's retreat to absolute inwardness (faith) may be read as both a rejection and symptom of his status as a *rentier*, living off a reasonable inheritance while subjecting the growing capitalism he saw around him to withering criticism. Beyond this point, we enter the crux of Adorno's argument concerning myth and paradox in relation to the spheres and sacrifice, but here critics prefer not to tread. Even Sherman's 2008 study passes by this core of Adorno's text, moving from the first *rentier* section to the penultimate one ("Reason and Sacrifice"). To Sherman's credit, he does engage with the questions of myth and sacrifice, but far too briefly (21–23) in what is really a survey of a few points. Too soon does he turn to an effort to differentiate Kierkegaard and Heidegger and then an effort to locate Adorno's

debts to Kierkegaard (over against Heidegger). The effect is to pay scant attention to the intricacies of Adorno's argument. In sum, what follows is an engagement where very little critical attention may be found.

The third question concerns Adorno's sentence production. It is a commonplace in critical assessments of Adorno that he eschews linear or narrative argumentation, for such an approach creates a false impression concerning the nature of thought as a procession of concepts. So Adorno seeks to write self-contained dialectical sentences that may stand almost as unique aphorisms. His works then become collections of self-contained aphorisms, strung together in a way that challenges the very structures of philosophical debate. Often Adorno does write in such a fashion, especially in work he prepared for publication (the posthumously published lectures are another matter). The Kierkegaard book is no exception. However, at least two problems may be identified with this position. To begin with, critical assessments of Adorno's work tend to cite such aphorisms in isolation from more sustained analysis of his texts. Further, overemphasizing this feature of his sentence production neglects the fact that he also tries to mount a consistent argument. Needless to say, this drive often conflicts with the aphoristic tendency, producing a constant tension in his work. How should we understand this tension? Is it a result of not being able to escape linear conceptual argumentation? Is he trapped, despite his best efforts, within a baleful form? I suggest we see that tension in a more dialectical fashion, namely, that Adorno sought to transform the very nature of linear argumentation through hermetically sealed sentences. Now we are forced to halt, think, and work out the connection between them, for he will not hand it to us on a plate. Here a formal feature of his texts comes to the fore: those formidable sentences are usually gathered in pages-long paragraphs. Are these paragraphs not a signal of a deeper connection between the sentences, analogous to the collective group that encourages the idiosyncratic particularities of its members to shine out ever more brightly so that the collective is strengthened? In the very name of the collective, individuals give free expression to their distinct selves so that they may come back at a much deeper level of collectivity. My examination of Adorno's argument in *Kierkegaard* attempts to keep this dialectical tension in mind at every turn.

THE SPHERES

The key to Kierkegaard's system is the famous system of the three spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, which relate to one another hierarchically and dialectically and are mediated by irony and humor. Adorno tackles the spheres head-on, arguing that the dialectic of the spheres fails to achieve the desired unity, becoming a "totality of ruins" (1989, 90; 2003b, 130). The problem is that the dialectic Kierkegaard proposes is inherently idealistic; from there it is a short step to identifying their theological and thereby mythical nature. Later, Adorno goes on to show how Kierkegaard's dialectic of the spheres fails to be dialectical as such, leading to the implosion of the spheres. For now, my task here is to explore their mythical substrate.

Myth

Before doing so, however, let me undertake a distinctly non-Adornoesque move, namely identifying the different types of myth Adorno espies in Kierkegaard's text. As is well known, Adorno refuses to define key terms, thereby attempting to resist their reification as concepts. But I seek to resist being mesmerized by Adorno's approach, much in the same way that he warns us against being enchanted with Kierkegaard's texts, for fascination "is the most dangerous power in his work" (1989, 11; 2003b, 19). Kierkegaard's ability to mesmerize may be due to his poetic style; analogously, Adorno's mesmerizing ability lies in the dense rigor that draws one in and threatens to wrap one within Adorno's own unremitting style.

In that spirit, we may identify seven distinct senses of myth in Adorno's criticism: the superstition at the heart Kierkegaard's famed inwardness; the despair of hell in the moment of existence; the Orphic myth of the harmony of the spheres; the Nordic myth of Odhinn-Wódhan; propitiatory sacrifice (via the Greek myth of Iphigenia and Agamemnon); gnosticism; and above all, the chthonic myths of nature. The first two appear in the opening discussion of inwardness, where Adorno also makes a historical-materialist move and locates the inward Kierkegaard as the deepest expression of the bourgeois individual, albeit in the act of attempting to resist such a life. However, since I have dealt with these two dimensions of myth in an earlier

treatment (Boer 2007, 402–8), I restrict myself to a brief summary. Thus, superstition lies beneath Kierkegaard's central category of objectless inwardness. In Kierkegaard's very effort to escape myth through radical inwardness, where one may finally come to faith, pray to God, and find salvation from damnation, Adorno finds myth at its most pervasive: faith is nothing less than superstition, prayer is conjuration, damnation is ruin, and salvation rescue. Yet, Kierkegaard cannot allow such an awareness of myth, and so his philosophy collapses into myth at the moment it mistakenly tries to take objectless inwardness as reality. As for existence (and thereby the foundation for the existentialist appropriation of Kierkegaard), Adorno argues that we stumble across the mythical categories of despair and hell. In absolute despair one faces the myth of hell, from which one can be saved only by the shattering experience of rescue.

The third type of myth—the harmony of the spheres—is the topic of this section, while the remaining types all turn up in the treatment of sacrifice (with which I deal below). For Adorno, Kierkegaard's key notion of the spheres—ethical, aesthetic, and religious—reveals a dependence on Plato's harmony of the spheres, which is in its turn an Orphic core to a philosophical system. Adorno's central argument regarding myth, to which almost every sentence provides yet another angle, is that no matter how strenuously Kierkegaard attempts to banish myth, it reappears again and again at the very core of his theological philosophy, precisely when Kierkegaard feels he has triumphed over myth. Or as Adorno puts it: "In the final products of the idealist spirit, the mythical content simply breaks through the cells of the systematically developed concept, where philosophical criticism has banished it, and takes possession of the old images" (1989, 57; 2003b, 84). The reason is apparently simple: theology itself is inescapably mythical.

The spheres themselves operate within a vertical world between heaven and hell, eternity and damnation, with the aesthetic at the lowest point, moving between despair and objective damnation. Irony mediates, as a *confinium*,[4] between the aesthetic and the ethical, the middle realm, which then moves to the religious sphere via the mediation of humor. At this point the holy or apostolic life may be found. But the relationship is also dialectical, with all three spheres rubbing up against one another. For Adorno, the spheres are deeply magical and hypostatized forms. The initial signal of myth's presence in the

dialectic of the spheres is language itself, for the nomenclature of the spheres is astral, mediated by abstraction: "The most universal concepts, posited by consciousness to order its multifarious contents, appear to consciousness as alien, meaning conferring powers that define their own course. They direct the individual's fate the more completely the stranger they become to him; the more hidden their human origins; the more, that is, that abstraction progresses in them" (1989, 91; 2003b, 131). Abstraction into distinct concepts is but the first step toward astrological myth. For the spheres—apart from assuming Kant's notion of the moral law beneath the starry skies above—both echo and derive from the Pythagorean/Orphic music of the spheres that Plato found so appealing. In the same way that Plato resorts to mythical language at the core of his philosophy, so also does Kierkegaard betray the language of myth with his talk of the astrological spheres.

Yet astrological language is not the only signal of myth in Kierkegaard's doctrine of the spheres, for Adorno also brilliantly deploys Kierkegaard's well-known reading of the Akedah (the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22) as another indication of the mythical nature of the spheres. For Kierkegaard, the Akedah embodies the dialectical interaction of the spheres: focusing on Abraham (in itself a problem, for the sacrifice is of Isaac), Kierkegaard argues that ethics appears here as the "universal" (one does not sacrifice one's child), a universal that is trumped by faith. Abraham "leaps" from the ethical sphere to the religious, obeying God's command to sacrifice Isaac and thereby overcoming the universal ethical demand that one preserve one's child. God's reward (the ram in the bush that replaces Isaac at the last moment) is thereby the signal that the leap of faith has been achieved, that the exception of faith has enabled the spheres themselves to connect with one another. We will also encounter Abraham in the treatment of paradox and the dialectic, but here I would like to fill out Adorno's succinct point that the Bible itself is inescapably mythical, that any use of the Bible to provide the ground for a philosophical position is bound to replicate that biblical myth in a host of mediated and sublated forms. Not only is the story of the sacrifice of Isaac mythical, but it also appears in the midst of a long and complex mythical narrative, what may be called a political myth (Boer 2009). It moves from the story of creation, through the formation of a state in waiting

(laws and sovereignty during the exodus and wilderness wanderings) to the conquest of Canaan.

Paradox

After searching for the mythical underlay of Kierkegaard's theology of the spheres, Adorno moves on to explore the various paradoxes that emerge in Kierkegaard's thought. Eventually these paradoxes, which Kierkegaard sets up in order to kick-start his dialectical method, lead to impossible tensions that break up the system, the very possibility of a system based on theology. Thus, Adorno piles one concise argument for the impossibility of Kierkegaard's theological philosophy on the other: the inextricable link between paradox and sacrifice; the breakdown of the dialectic of historical specificity and eternal significance, and then between transcendence and immanence; the vicious circle of immanence itself that makes belief in God impossible; to the ultimate argument that he reiterates in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, the sacrifice of reason (Adorno 1973, 2003c).

The turn from the myth of the spheres to their impossible paradoxes takes place in the fifth chapter of the Kierkegaard book. To begin with, Kierkegaard's own model of the spheres is riven, somewhat ironically, with a tension between "a dialectic immanent to the spheres and one between the spheres" (1989, 98; 2003b, 140). This tension appears as a contradiction between a Hegelian immanent dialectic and one of the leap across the abyss or void between the spheres that transforms one into the other—from the lowest, the aesthetic, through ethics to the highest, the religious, mediated by the fluid boundaries (*confinia*) of irony and humor and occasionally the "interesting" or even the ethical itself. Tellingly, the problems begin with a theological problem, that of the "miracle."

How do miracles open up the contradictions in Kierkegaard's thought? Let us follow the dialectical twists of Adorno's argument. Where does miracle, or the doctrine of wonder, fit? Miracles are caught in Kierkegaard's system between believer and nonbeliever. In neither case do they "work," although Kierkegaard makes claims for both. For the nonbeliever, miracles can make him "attentive," but they do not compel belief. In fact, he may equally decide to accept or reject the faith toward which miracles point. This means that miracles are efficacious

only for believers. But this move falls away from the paradox of belief, fixing miracles as eternal proofs of faith. Yet they cannot be, in line with traditional Christian doctrine, proofs of faith, since faith happens for Kierkegaard only through the leap. In either case, the categories are mutually exclusive, but Kierkegaard's point is that the tension can be resolved only through the dialectic of a qualitative dialectic that scorns Hegelian *Vermittlung*, mediation, as nothing more than "interposition" (*Mediation*). Adorno pounces, for it is not possible to operate a dialectical argument without mediation. There are two possible outcomes in this situation: the paradox of the miracle becomes a pure negation, absolute difference, and then the dialectic freezes, closing down into a "simple limiting condition" (1989, 99; 2003b, 141). Alternatively, the paradox of miracles is in fact mediated and miracles work for both believer as signs of the life of faith and for the nonbeliever as signs of how one might enter this life. But how does one attain the leap, which is for Kierkegaard the only entry into faith? Here the ambivalence and difficulty of the whole dialectic of the spheres emerges: "Where the conception of this dialectic is defined by the categories of the leap, the absolutely different and the paradox, there can be no room for the authentic dialectic. As a movement, the 'leap' is not commensurable with any dialectical movement immanent to the sphere; it is not demonstrable in any act of consciousness. Paradoxical in itself and otherworldly, the leap reveals itself to be an act of election: the consummation of an irrational doctrine of predestination that is perhaps the foundation of Kierkegaard's 'Baroque'" (1989, 99; 2003b, 142).[5] Adorno focuses on a theological paradox, that between the leap of faith and the election of believers, or, between free will and grace. The stronger form of election or grace is predestination, to which Kierkegaard's Lutheran tradition was bound. However, in light of predestination, Kierkegaard's notion of the leap becomes nonsensical, for there is no longer any risk or uncertainty, the key to the leap itself.

By this time, Adorno's immanent critique has Kierkegaard's system feeding on itself. The problems come from within the system: "Inconsistency is therefore inscribed in his dialectic of spheres by the law of its own origin" (1989, 99; 2003b, 142). Adorno takes apart the dialectic strand by strand, showing how the range of senses that "dialectic" takes in Kierkegaard's text cannot function together: a dialectic between spheres that transform themselves; a dialectic in which

there is a self-reversing phenomenon; a dialectic that operates by a logical reversal; and a movement in place.

If the dialectic falls foul of the theory of miracles, then it does so also with faith. Here Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Akedah is once again relevant, for Abraham functions as an allegory for the dialectical relation of the spheres. To begin with, Abraham indicates the opposition of ethics as the "universal" and of faith as the "exception," which enables the spheres to connect by means of the "leap." However, there is no revelation of the Word to this man, in whom the spheres collide, no mediation or completion, that is, a reconciliation or redemption through the mythical sacrifice. In the end, argues Adorno, in the case of Abraham, the spheres merely replace one another rather than operate in a true dialectic.

A similar problem appears with Kierkegaard's effort to base the dialectic on the notion of repentance. The moment of repentance, the preparatory moment before the well-known leap, forces Kierkegaard to opt for an intermittent dialectic, one that pauses for breath like the dying Christ. Not only is this dialectic fractured, riven with discontinuity and the caesurae of intermittence, but it is also a movement in place. No longer does the dialectic operate between the spheres, one in which the leap provides the key category of their relationship to one another. Adorno draws out the intermittence of the dialectic from its continual restart within the singular space of each sphere, which in turn corresponds to the whole situation of the *interieur* that he traced so carefully the earlier parts of the book. In neither case can the dialectic operate in any usual sense of the term.

As the spheres begin to rattle to pieces in Adorno's hands, he extricates the unbearable tension between dialectics and hierarchy. The spheres themselves run in descending order, from the religious through the ethical to the aesthetic, which for Kierkegaard implies a certain unintelligibility between the spheres: the lower spheres cannot make intelligible that which appears in higher ones. But Adorno is after something more. On these terms, any dialectic will break down, whether through the leap or through "intrigue." By the leap one may pass from one sphere to the other, but only by intrigue may the spheres relate to one another in the hierarchy. The effort to overcome this paradox by means of the notion of "projection," in which the higher spheres seek to project themselves into the lower spheres, only generates further

problems. In fact, these efforts at projecting one sphere into another fail abysmally, for Kierkegaard has just argued that it is not possible to move downward in the hierarchy (higher spheres cannot be understood by lower ones). Thus the hierarchy itself fails to be ordered. Any religious item cannot be understood in the ethical or the aesthetic, nor can the ethical be comprehended in the aesthetic. But where is Adorno going with this argument? "In Kierkegaard 'higher' spheres may not be arbitrarily depicted in 'lower' spheres; the 'leap' precludes adequate projection, and in the necessity of dissimulations the system of the spheres shows itself as a totality in fragments. The projection of the phenomena of a higher sphere into a lower means falsification and, therefore, every statement of the 'religious' sphere remains incomprehensible for the aesthetic sphere because it is already falsified by mere depiction" (1989, 103; 2003b, 147). Not only does the dialectic of the spheres collapse, but Kierkegaard's own thought precludes any effort to base aesthetics or ethics in theology, for both ethics and aesthetics are spheres lower than the religious. All that results is the falsification of the theological categories in the effort to produce an aesthetics or ethics. Theology is thereby incapable of providing an adequate basis for Kierkegaard's core philosophical proposal concerning the spheres.

A specific example of this falsification may be found in the treatment of aesthetics, the lowest sphere. For Adorno, Kierkegaard's early effort at constructing an aesthetics from a classical perspective—*Either/Or*—relies on "naive aesthetic speculation and positive Christian doctrine" (1989, 16; 2003b, 27), or, which amounts to the same thing, from an unreconstructed Kantian perspective or a pre-dialectical Hegelian ontology. In the end, Kierkegaard's aesthetic is antiquated and irrelevant, but Adorno turns Hegel's point in *The Philosophy of History* about inferior religious art upon Kierkegaard himself—the one who sought to provide an answer to Hegel. In the same way that piety cannot abide the presence of real art, preferring second-rate products that induce the desire for a "stupor of abject dependence," so also Kierkegaard's aesthetics and theology are in fundamental opposition to each other, as the doctrine of the spheres shows. Not only is his aesthetic coarse and excessive, but it is precisely the effort to generate aesthetics from theology, specifically from the sacred image or symbol, from the image of Christ crucified, that vitiates his aesthetics. "This [the theological] motive turns against the aesthetic itself" (1989, 20; 2003b, 32). The only

recourse left to Kierkegaard is to invoke immortality as the ultimate aesthetic criterion, and in doing so he "volatilizes eternity" into a theological category that excludes historically specific elements (1989, 21; 2003b, 33).[6]

What of the reverse process, from the lower spheres to the higher? Over against intrigue and dissimulation for the step downward, transcendence refers to the reverse, the way the spheres move out of themselves. Although transcendence may speak of moves in either direction, Kierkegaard concentrates on the way the aesthetic may move into the religious. Adorno follows through the two main modes by which this happens: through the extreme moment of decisiveness for the aesthetic (in contrast to the ever-present leap for the religious) and through the "exception" as the moment of that transcendence (the poet, marriage, feminine romanticism, or human being as such). Decisiveness and the exception thus mark such a movement upward, except that Kierkegaard seeks this transcendence in incommensurable moments or situations in which aesthetics points beyond itself, where there is no ostensible reason for their expression. This is Kierkegaard's "concretion," the inward and simple expression of a value that can speak incommensurably of transcendence. For Adorno, this is a sickly and misogynous notion of transcendent aesthetics, which breaks down precisely with this tension between concretion and incommensurability.

Enigmatic as ever, Adorno mentions the "concrete" or "concretion" a few times before passing on to his next point, but I wish to hold him still for a moment and inquire further. By concrete, Adorno refers not only to Kierkegaard's notion but also to a more Marxist sense where the concrete indicates the specificity of political economics and historical location—precisely that which appears all the more insistently the more Kierkegaard tries to escape it (as Adorno highlights so brilliantly in the early parts of the book in his discussion of objectless inwardness). In his alternate notion of concretion that is based precisely in such an inwardness, Kierkegaard attempted to avoid both this historical sense of the term as well as the universality of Hegel's system. But here we are back with the tension of the earlier argument concerning the dialectic of the spheres, now with a new twist: "Thus the system of the spheres finally collapses over the question of concretion, which originally distinguished it from Hegelian systematic universality" (1989, 105; 2003b, 149).

But Adorno is not content to rest with this point, so he turns concretion, both in terms of its contradiction and Kierkegaard's resistance, into a sign of the whole philosophical system. And that sign points to nothing less than the "ultimate contradiction" of the expiration of the whole dialectic that Kierkegaard tries to establish. Why does this effort at dialectics fail? In the end, paradox begs for an adequate dialectic, something that Adorno himself is keen to establish in his own way. Although paradox lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's philosophy, the problem is that rather than taking paradox as a dialectical category par excellence, as the object that allows dialectics to begin its work, Kierkegaard falls victim to the theological treatment of paradox. That is, the mere arrival at paradox—doctrine of the Trinity, the nature of Christ, free will and providence, miracle, and so on—is the signal of the end of inquiry rather than its beginning, for here is theological truth. The problem with Kierkegaard is that the paradoxes of theology are themselves not open to dialectical analysis, however much Kierkegaard may protest otherwise. The theological propositions with which Kierkegaard works are external, revealed, "truth contents," which appear in the highest sphere, the religious. This means that the various phenomena of the spheres—religious, ethical, and aesthetic—do not arise from within the system itself, but externally.

This transcendent basis also means that the phenomena fail as mediators or *confinia*, and they also cannot appear as images in other spheres. Here the difference between a transcendental and immanent criticism becomes apparent: with the external origins of theology, Kierkegaard's system fails as a dialectical one because there is no mediation—a category that will remain central to Adorno's exercise of the dialectic.[7] Even the use of the ethical sphere itself as a mediation between the religious and the aesthetic fails, for these two crush the ethical between them as a mode of passing from one to the other. "Theological truth crashes down to human level as aesthetic truth and reveals itself to man as a sign of hope" (1989, 104; 2003b, 148), except that such a "hope" becomes feeble due to the abruptness of the crash.

Kierkegaard therefore gives precedence to theology—and theological readings, as Adorno points out, are entirely correct to focus on paradox as the key to Kierkegaard's work—at the expense of a workable philosophy. And yet, despite his suspicion of theology as entirely false within itself, Adorno also hints at a way in which theology would

have a legitimate place: when the paradoxes of theology become the beginning of dialectics, rather than the final answer of a system of thought, then the "truth content" of theology may begin to appear, however different it may be from its ostensible content. Even in the midst of the breakdown of theology, Adorno shows hints of his fascination with theology.

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Alongside the spheres and their vicissitudes, Adorno's other main target is sacrifice, beneath which lies the problem of Christology. Once again, I explicate Adorno's search for a mythological basis before turning to paradox.

Myth

As mentioned earlier, while Adorno was content to charge Kierkegaard with a reliance on one key myth in his doctrine of the spheres, with sacrifice we encounter multiple charges: the Nordic myth of Odhinn-Wódhan, propitiatory sacrifice, gnosticism, and chthonic myths. A summary before sinking into the detail: in regard to Nordic myth, Adorno identifies the myth of Odhinn-Wódhan lurking behind Kierkegaard's discussion of the sacrifice of Christ. Sacrificed to himself, an autonomous sacrifice, Odhinn-Wódhan perpetually reappears whenever Kierkegaard touches on Christology. Further, Kierkegaard's preference for propitiatory atonement—in which Christ suffers the punishment designated for us—means that he cannot avoid a gnostic myth of redemption in which fate is central. More specifically, since redemption requires a transcending of nature, particularly fallen human nature, the only way to overcome a demonized nature is through spirit (Christ). The problem is that the crucial features of redemption, namely grace and reconciliation, become meaningless in the midst of an inescapably mythical propitiatory atonement. Finally, beyond the myth of the spheres, Nordic myth, fate, propitiatory sacrifice, and gnosticism, we find the myths of earth and nature.

Why so many myths with regard to sacrifice? Kierkegaard uses sacrifice to hold everything together against the threat of disintegration.

Why sacrifice, by which Kierkegaard means Christ's sacrifice? It is a deliberately theological notion, meant to ground his philosophy in a realm free from myth. Of course, Adorno disagrees vehemently, for the death and resurrection of Christ compose precisely the sort of myth Kierkegaard seeks to escape. And like a vortex, it draws in many other myths.

Soon the hiding places of sacrificial myth are identified, the various myths left blinking in Adorno's spotlight. To begin with, Adorno peers behind Kierkegaard's own Scandinavian context and flushes out the myth of Odhinn-Wódhan, the god who rules over all things but sacrifices himself for himself. Let me fill in some detail to Adorno's enigmatic obtuseness: Odhinn was patron of the *jarl* (nobles), possessor of the great spear Gungnir, a treacherous and untrustworthy god of war and of the brotherhoods of warriors, also of poetry, magic, wisdom (especially in war), and runes. His creatures were the raven and the wolf that fed on the bodies of the slain. Dweller in Valhalla, he welcomed warriors fallen in battle, but also demanded human and animal sacrifices that the *jarl* provided for him by raiding the villages of the *karl* (free-men, whose god was Thorr). These sacrifices were hung from trees and stabbed with spears, often around temples, in memory of Odhinn's own hanging. Strung from the world-tree Yggdrasill for nine days, bearing a spear wound, he sacrifices himself for the secret of the runes, for knowledge itself. In the *Hávamál* Odhinn speaks thus:

> I know I hung
> On the windswept Tree,
> Through nine days and nights
> I was stuck with a spear
> And given to Odhinn,
> Myself given to myself. (Davidson, 143–44)

For Adorno, this is the key—"myself given to myself"—to Kierkegaard's theory of sacrifice. And the point is that the myth of Odhinn's self-sacrifice gives us the essence of Kierkegaard's idealism, the rash claim that thought itself, reason, is able to generate not only reality but redemption. Yet, does not Kierkegaard seek to overcome idealism through sacrifice? Ostensibly yes, but the myth betrays him, for his use of Christ's sacrifice is saturated with the myth of Odhinn.

Other myths are soon uncovered. Ancient Greece appears next, now with Kierkegaard's clear references to Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. In this case, sacrifice involves submission to fate, to which Agamemnon in Euripides' play succumbs despite his struggle—he must sacrifice his daughter to appease the gods before the voyage to Troy. Kierkegaard's discussion of hope follows a similar logic. Caught in a tension between hope and memory, Kierkegaard attempts to escape the hopelessness of memory by means of a life-giving spirit (Christ). Memory is a mythical category comparable to fate, so Kierkegaard tries to avoid giving up hope in any submission to memory or fate. But in the end he sacrifices hope to memory. Adorno's argument is that the effort to struggle against fate is, like Agamemnon, bound to fail, because the life-giving spirit that apparently rescues one from such hopelessness is itself trapped with the logic of myth; or, as he adds, the circle of "nature."

However, nature is as difficult to pin down in Adorno's text as the term "myth," since it zigzags through a whole series of assumptions that Adorno refused to define at any point. In order to see what Adorno assumes about nature here, let us stay with the question of hope for a few moments, especially since Kierkegaard's eschatology and Christology hinge on the question of hope. In Kierkegaard's theological reworking, hope is a hope against hope, a hope for eternity—that is, the eschaton—which can happen only through Christ. But for Adorno this cannot work, since calling on "spirit" to appear from outside ensures that the nature from which spirit seeks release cannot be relinquished. And so, like Agamemnon, the rescue is ephemeral and the believer succumbs to fate, however much he may wish to avoid it.

Adorno works away at the question of redemption: in conventional Christian theology, redemption must appear from outside (from God), yet the only viable redemption of nature must come, dialectically, through nature itself. In the end, this is a Christological problem, for only Christ, as both God and man, can enact any sort of rescue that comes from within and outside nature—here understood as both fallen human nature and the world as a whole that has suffered from the Fall. Adorno's criticism—that a hope relying on an external spirit for rescue merely falls back into nature and fate—enables him to identify a third feature of myth in operation, namely the gnostic myth of the release from a demonized nature by spirit.

In characteristic fashion, Adorno has included via his specific example of hope a whole series of other categories—spirit and nature, Christology and eschatology, fate and memory—all of which become a "constellation" in the sense he drew from Benjamin. Yet, Adorno's point remains that all Kierkegaard's bans on myth are but screens for myth itself: "Blinded, however, it escapes him that the image of sacrifice is itself mythical and occupies the innermost cell of his thought, accessible equally by way of his philosophy as by his theology" (1989, 110; 2003b, 156).

Using Kierkegaard's dialectic against him, Adorno argues that in the very effort to remove the mythical origin of sacrifice Kierkegaard deploys precisely that mythical form of sacrifice. However much he exploits the ambiguity of myth to extirpate myth, he cannot escape it. Above all, for Adorno the mythic code in Kierkegaard's work is the term "nature": Kierkegaard perpetually tries to rescue Christianity from nature only to have it fall back into nature, since any dialectic of nature versus culture that begins with nature is always tied to nature.

Thus far I have sought to explicate what Adorno means by myth, running against his refusal to define terms. Yet I have not as yet given nature the same attention. So let me trace the various senses that the word takes in Adorno's text: the natural state of human beings; the result of the Fall; that which is not God; the physical realm of nature which is also fallen; and the timelessness and abstractness characteristic of nature. In the Kierkegaard study, nature is primarily an anthropological term, understanding "anthropology" in the traditional theological sense. Yet nature also designates what is not spiritual, the realm of this earth. Adorno uses this ambiguity to his advantage. For the theological sense of "nature," bound as it is to a theological anthropology—and thus harmatology and Christology—is indeed connected with certain crucial myths of Christianity: the Fall, the death and resurrection of Christ, the two natures of Christ, the second coming.[8]

The final part of Adorno's search for myth explicitly identifies what has been running beneath the whole discussion of sacrifice, namely, Christology. Christ's death becomes mythological when Kierkegaard understands it as a propitiatory sacrifice rather than as reconciliation. Adorno does not develop the point, preferring to account for Kierkegaard's use of reconciliation terminology. However, the argument that propitiatory sacrifice is inherently mythical is less a criticism of

Kierkegaard's emphasis as of some strains of theology itself. In the New Testament and early theology a range of themes were used in order to render the death and resurrection of Christ usable: a legal notion whereby Christ takes upon himself the punishment due to be visited on human beings; the financial paying of a debt; a military victory over Satan and death; a process of reconciliation between God and human beings; substitutional atonement in which the victim becomes scapegoat for the people as a whole; and the sacrificial theme in which potentially hostile and arbitrary gods are mollified. Not unexpectedly, these various themes run together, but the notion of a propitiatory sacrifice is very much part of the mix. Thus, Adorno's criticism is not merely of a particular facet of Kierkegaard's thought, but of a central category of Christology that is inescapably mythological.

Even worse, in Kierkegaard's hands such atonement or sacrifice is the basis for an "authentic" (Christian) existence. The search for meaning, the point at which transcendence touches individual lives, where Christ and human meet, is precisely what renders the living person meaningless due to a "graceless mythical calculus"[9] (1989, 111; 2003b, 157)—the calculus whereby Christ becomes a substitute for human beings, a sacrifice so that we do not need to suffer the consequences of their acts. The *imitatio Christi* (a phrase to which Adorno alludes) becomes one of living daily as though sacrificed, all for the sake of eternal life. The mythical core of this doctrine cannot help breaking out, as expiation becomes the key for understanding Christ and his followers.

Thus far I have traced the various senses of myth that Adorno identifies in Kierkegaard's text.[10] But let me return to the gnostic element, since the argument over the *imitatio Christi* moves on to an elaboration of the way sacrifice becomes a gnosis, which erupts in late idealism when—through spiritualism—mythical thought gains power over Christian thought, and, in spite of all talk of grace, draws Christianity into the "graceless immanence of the course of nature" (1989, 112; 2003b, 159). Adorno prefers to use "gnosis," rather than gnostic or gnosticism. The reason, I suggest, is that despite the sheer variety of gnosticisms that flourished in the early centuries of the Christian era and carried on in a range of half-lives as the consistent underside of theology ever since, Adorno's focus on "gnosis" implies the defining feature of gnosticism as saving knowledge, a secret knowing—

code words, the truth about existence, the archons and evil matter in which the spark of the soul has been trapped and forgotten itself, the salvation of the spirit through imparting a restricted knowledge—that enables the soul to escape the realm of nature and matter. In Christological terms, this means that Christ's soul did not die: his material body or a substitute was left on the cross, thereby fooling the evil hordes and even the creating demiurge of the Old Testament, who believed they had killed God himself. The implied link for Adorno is with Kierkegaard's abhorrence of nature in all its senses. One escapes nature by means of Christ's propitiatory death, yet this escape is doomed before it can begin. Thus, the "real basis" of Kierkegaard's mythology lies in his gnostic doctrines, which now connect with the questions of fate (which appeared earlier in relation to Agamemnon and Iphigenia) and propitiation: neither Christ nor God can prevent the fate of Christ's death, since this becomes a necessary step for redemption that simultaneously robs it of any efficacy. Further, this death becomes an "offense" not merely because it is propitiation for sinful human beings, but for what lies beyond human sin itself, namely the realm of evil nature from which Christ promises a futile rescue.

This argument has another, subtler, dimension, for it indicates the implications of Kierkegaard's polemic against the warping effect of the tradition of interpretation on both the Bible and Kierkegaard's ideal, early Christianity. In this context the overwhelming presence of fate, of helpless subjection to divine and/or demonic forces, was also the context for the rise and popularity of gnosticism, a distinct and major strand within early Christianity. Not only are human souls trapped within nature, but God himself is similarly imprisoned. And this takes place in the incarnation, in the subjection and binding of God in human nature. Is this not the ultimate expression of inexorable necessity, in which God cannot help but succumb to such a fate? In other words, Kierkegaard relies on a truncated gnosticism, for there is no escape, no path out of the prison of the body. All of which leads to Adorno's final point, namely that Kierkegaard's evocation of God's own fate sucks all the air out of the prison where he is caught. In this environment, where fate—a force outside God—renders God helpless, such a God fades from existence: "Mythical dialectic consumes Kierkegaard's god, as did Kronos his children" (1989, 113; 2003b, 161).

Now we come to the dialectical close of the argument, for God and "man" as pure spirit—a gnostic doctrine—must dialectically unfold into nature. More precisely, given the spiritual identity of man and god, god becomes man's spirituality, which is itself nature, that is, fate.

Paradox

As with his treatment of the spheres, Adorno turns from myth to paradox, for Kierkegaard relies heavily on the theological primacy of paradox in relation to sacrifice. Indeed, within the sacrifice of Christ resides the ultimate paradox of theology. Patient, exploring, Adorno begins by reiterating the point that for theology, and so for Kierkegaard, paradox provides the answer and not the starting point for philosophical dialectics: "The paradox is Kierkegaard's fundamental, categorical form" (1989, 115; 2003b, 164). And the crucial paradox is that of sacrifice: "every sacrifice is allotted paradoxy as the sign of its systematic seal of authenticity" (1989, 115; 2003b, 164). Conversely, sacrifice is the "essence [*Gehalt*] of paradox" (1989, 116; 2003b, 165). All of the paradoxes dear to Kierkegaard—revelation/mystery, happiness/suffering, certainty/uncertainty, ease/difficulty of religious truth/absurdity—arise from the fact that sacrifice is the basis of his dialectics. The problem for Kierkegaard is that paradox is the source of the breakdown in his dialectic, and so the yoking of sacrifice with paradox will have a disastrous effect on the possibility of that dialectic. In sum, the relation among paradox, sacrifice, and dialectics ensures a volatility Kierkegaard cannot contain.

Before tracing the detail of Adorno's argument, let me identify its essence by exegeting for a moment a key quotation from Adorno, one that is typically overlaid with multiple levels. It reads: "The model of this sacrifice is paradoxy: a movement of thought, completed in our thought, and negated as totality in this movement of thought, in order, sacrificed, to draw toward itself the 'strictly different,' its absolute contrary" (1989, 113; 2003b, 161). The ghost of Odhinn haunts this sentence, the paradox of the god who sacrifices himself for knowledge (thought itself), but then idealism itself comes to the fore: thought is both completed and negated in order to draw in the contrary, the other that it believes it has constituted through the power of thought

alone. But such an idealist dialectic has about as much chance of connecting with the other (Hegel's moment of the negative) as Odhinn has of being reliable and trustworthy. Finally, reconciliation peers out from beneath the words of the quotation: any effort at reconciliation, the effort to reconcile oneself with any other, can hardly proceed from and return to oneself, gathering the other in the process. Idealism, staring at the onset of immanent collapse, has no access to such reconciliation, cannot achieve the cathartic reconciliation promised by sacrifice, since reconciliation is precisely that category excluded by the realm of pure thought that characterizes idealism. Or, if we replace "thought" with "nature," redemption that comes from nature can never rise above nature; it must fall back, exhausted, into nature. Reconciliation thereby becomes "the imperceptible gesture in which guilty nature renews itself historically as created nature" (1989, 120; 2003b, 172).

Now for the detail: Adorno's test case is Christology. Not only does Christian theology base its anthropology on Christology, but Christology itself is the locus for theological elaborations (Kierkegaard's included) of sacrifice. That this is also paradoxical is the edge of Adorno's argument, particularly in terms of the tension between time and eternity. Nature, especially fallen nature, has for Kierkegaard no history: time is that which marks human existence as distinct from nature. The problem is that Kierkegaard attributes timelessness, a feature of nature, to Christ, in direct contradiction with Kierkegaard's insistence on the historicity of God's appearance in Christ. Adorno picks up on Kierkegaard's phrase "this nota bene on a page of universal history" to argue that this is precisely a mark of the lack of historical specificity in regard to Christ's incarnation: he might have appeared at any moment in time, interchangeable with any other.

Thus, rather than marking in a unique fashion the possibility of history itself, if not the central node of history, the life of Christ becomes timeless, falling back into nature. And this nature is specifically "fallen nature," the state of human beings in the world after the Fall. Timelessness, fallen nature, and also abstractness (three of the senses of "nature" in Adorno's text I identified earlier) form part of the trap in which Kierkegaard's Christology—and thereby his theory of the individual for which Christology provides the basis—is caught.

The paradox of time undoes Kierkegaard's Christology as well as his ontology, which cannot avoid the question of the two natures of

Christ. Thus, the paradox of specificity and eternity—the one "wiped out by sacrificial paradox" (1989, 117; 2003b, 166), the other drifting away into abstractness—translates into the paradox of transcendence and immanence. On the one hand, the telos of the incarnation becomes absolute, incomparable, and therefore indeterminate: it is beyond any compromise and thereby becomes an impossible category, a transcendence that disappears into space, without even a whiff of exhaust smoke to mark its passing. On the other hand, Christ's immanence is unacceptable and unbearable: having God at close quarters reveals him as one with whom human beings cannot communicate. Adorno uses Kierkegaard's comments on Job, for here Kierkegaard says what he cannot say about Christ—that God's immediate presence is unbearable.

Given that the discussion of Christology is ultimately part of Kierkegaard's wider ponderings on the status of the individual, the result is that human consciousness becomes supreme. Reading between the lines of Adorno's text, I would suggest that the paradoxical separation between the divine and human natures of Christ ends up being, in light of the inaccessibility of the transcendent, an option for human consciousness. And sacrifice achieves this consciousness, now in a demonic register: "In the demonic sacrifice of consciousness, man is still the ruler of a sinful creation; through sacrifice he asserts his rule, and the name of the divinity succumbs to his demonic nature" (1989, 118; 2003b, 167). Here Adorno makes use of a theological argument that would become a leitmotiv of his philosophy, namely the criticism of idolatry and thereby the ban on images. Idolatry begins in the favoring of the image over against the god; its fullest expression comes in the replacement of the god with the image. The image itself—here it is man as a chronically interior being—takes on all of the attributes of the god who has now been banished, and that man becomes more than a god. Or, as Adorno would put it, nature returns with renewed force. The end run of this logic is that the sacrifice of Christ becomes the sacrifice of God, which leads Adorno to argue that Kierkegaard's philosophy cannot avoid making him an unbeliever. This is the other side of the earlier argument that Kierkegaard's paradoxes allow no room for God to exist. In fact, this question—was Kierkegaard a believer?—cannot be answered adequately except through absolutely relentless dialectical attention to Kierkegaard's philosophy.

Is immanence, then, a friendlier terrain on which to engage Kierkegaard? Now Adorno shows how Kierkegaard's argument is trapped in a vicious circle. Drawing on a quotation from Kierkegaard on the ascension—in which the impossible necessity of the ascension of Christ arises from the need of his followers so that it becomes a certainty of faith—Adorno questions the ultimate pragmatism that vitiates the paradox of a faith where sheer uncertainty is the basis for the truths of belief. It is precisely this pragmatism—the followers of Christ need the ascension for their own comfort—that indicates the closed immanence of the argument: "In sacrifice immanence reaches out beyond itself only to plunge into the blind relentless context of nature in which the immanent follower is to procure assurance of the transcendent ascension, rather than the reverse" (1989, 118; 2003b, 168).

Toward the close of the demolition of Kierkegaard's linchpin category of sacrifice, Adorno brings together the two lines of criticism he has maintained until now—mythology and paradox in the sacrifice of reason. For in the incessant rattling of Kierkegaard's paradoxes, his system falls apart: what appears to be a dialectic is one in name only. Or rather, he is closer to Hegel than he cares to think. In all his opposition, Kierkegaard replicates the idealism of Hegel, suffering an inverse fate: "Reason, which in Hegel as infinite reason produces actuality out of itself, is in Kierkegaard, again as infinite reason, the negation of all finite knowledge: if the former is mythical by its claim to universal sovereignty, the latter becomes mythical through universal annihilation" (1989, 119; 2003b, 169).

The balance of the dialectical sentences is unforgiving: it is as though Kierkegaard realizes the inverse of Hegel's own system. His effort to produce faith out of radical uncertainty destroys the possibility of philosophy itself. This is the "sacrifice of reason" to which Adorno has been working; the sheer inability of reason to function in any capacity in Kierkegaard's own system. Not only do the paradoxes, specifically the paradoxes of faith in their older and newer forms, negate the possibility of reason, so also does the theology without which Kierkegaard's effort at philosophy would not even get off the ground. Yet such an effort fails spectacularly, going every which way in a shower of sparks, for in Kierkegaard theology reverts to myth at the first turn.[11]

The theme of sacrifice, as both the core of Kierkegaard's notion of paradox and the mythical act par excellence, allows Adorno to close

his argument at the nub of Kierkegaard's own thought. Not forgetting the centrality of sacrifice in theology, Adorno lets his text run to an end with a play on the word "Passion" itself. The various permutations on *Leidenschaft* and *Passion*—as an affect that takes the place of blocked truth, as witness to agitated subjectivity, natural urge, erotic inclination, the urge to faith, sacrifice of the self, sacrificial suffering, the passion of the intellect—enable the connection between Christology and the sacrifice of reason.

The critique of passion and sacrifice serves another function in Adorno's argument, namely, the impossibility of the theological category of reconciliation. In this case, Adorno distinguishes between a more strictly theological dialectic—between passion and sacrificial suffering—to one that is mythical—passion and despair. For Kierkegaard, this is the moment when reconciliation emerges from the gloom, as a mythical rather than a theological notion. As for the connection between passion and sacrificial suffering, Kierkegaard can operate solely with a form of totality, the totality of "existence" that the death of Christ implies in theology. The only possibilities here are atonement and complete annihilation. Whereas these have a tendency toward myth, it is only when passion rids itself of the totality imposed by sacrificial suffering that the dialectic of myth shakes off its lethargy and begins its task. In this case passion joins despair: whereas the former runs straight toward its own destruction through an encounter between the "infinite, insatiable natural power" of passion itself and anything finite (as for instance in the incarnation of Christ), the latter takes its own path. Having lost its hold over passion, despair becomes the force of reconciliation.

By this means, argues Adorno, Kierkegaard has separated reconciliation from sacrifice, which thereby becomes the motif to which reconciliation turns in order to attempt, in a desperate but futile effort to bridge the gap, to raise itself above nature. By now, the problematic connection between myth and nature is well established in Adorno's argument: reconciliation, as a purely mythical category, is locked into nature. Kierkegaard's claim that reconciliation distinguishes Christianity from paganism (the realm of myth and nature) becomes impossible. He has closed down any chance of arguing this on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, for reconciliation itself operates on the basis of

despair and not sacrifice, which has already made a determined exit from any notion of reconciliation in Kierkegaard's thought.

All of this, concludes Adorno, marks not only the extraordinarily mythical nature of objectless inwardness—for Kierkegaard's doctrine of reconciliation is yet another mark of the radical retreat into inwardness—but also the mythical nature of idealism itself. If objectless inwardness is the particular form of Kierkegaard's existentialism, which Adorno has already argued is nothing but a revamped idealism, then idealism becomes the marker of myth: the historical existence of idealism as a philosophical tradition is itself a figure for myth. In fact, the final and deepest paradox relates to idealism itself. The effort to soften the harsh restrictions of idealism, particularly where this is self-conscious—Kierkegaard's objectless inwardness—takes the form of a specific focus that attempts totality: "Ultimately, however, this category dissolves the idealist construction, which then disintegrates into its antinomies" (1989, 106; 2003b, 151). Like Hegel, Kierkegaard's best efforts at dialectics cannot contain such a breakdown, for they are irresolvable antinomies rather than the contradictions with which the dialectic prefers to work.

CONCLUSION

In offering this reading of Adorno's argument in the core chapters of *Kierkegaard*, I have sought to identify and follow through the key moves from myth to paradox in terms of both the spheres and sacrifice. I have not been interested in the question as to whether Adorno's interpretation is fair to Kierkegaard (that would be another study entirely),[12] but in the patterns of Adorno's thought. And I must admit that I am as taken with Adorno's suspicion of theology as his fascination. Apart from distinguishing his own development of the dialectic from that of Kierkegaard, what he has done is show how the much-vaunted paradoxes of theology, especially those taken up and transformed by Kierkegaard, disable any viable dialectic. Rather than the appealing core of theological thought, they render theology itself a system that cannot hold together, let alone any effort such as Kierkegaard's to build an aesthetics or an ethics upon theology. Yet it is not merely a case of dispensing with theology in order to do one's

work better: the Kierkegaard book shows that what is needed is a thorough suspicion of theology.

On that matter, let me close by returning to the question of contemporary appropriations of theology, especially by a range of critics on the Left. These efforts must be subjected to an ongoing theological suspicion in which the mythical and paradoxical core of theology is perpetually laid bare. Here it is worth recalling the original context in which Adorno wrote his study of Kierkegaard. Written in the early 1930s, the book was available for sale on the day Hitler assumed power, February 27, 1933. Adorno's conscious effort was to challenge the appropriation of Kierkegaard's theological philosophy by a significant number of theologians and philosophers.[13] They were led on the theological side by the active pro-Nazi Emanuel Hirsch, the first translator of Kierkegaard into German and author of the influential three-volume study, *Kierkegaard-Studien* (1933). On the philosophical side, the most significant names were Heidegger and Jaspers, who sought to free Kierkegaard's existentialism from its theological roots; that is, to secularize Kierkegaard's thought in a way strikingly analogous to recent efforts to deploy theology in philosophy and political thought. For Adorno, this was subterfuge, for the theological basis cannot be discarded so easily. It is significant, therefore, that Adorno chooses not to attack those philosophical appropriations directly (he would do so later in *The Jargon of Authenticity*), but to focus on the theological underpinnings of Kierkegaard's own system, the system over which so many were enthused. As we have seen, for Adorno, this is an extremely tempting and yet dangerous path, for it renders theology and philosophy both meaningless and particularly virulent forms of ideology.

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Notes

1. Apart from its obvious subject, we should also remember that the book was actually a (second) habitation written under the direction of the leading liberal theologian, Paul Tillich. In many respects, Tillich is the unacknowledged theologian

in the Frankfurt School, a close friend and combatant of Adorno and Horkheimer. When Tillich was professor of systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he invited Adorno in 1939 to present a seminar, "Kierkegaards Lehre von die Liebe" (Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love) (1971).

2. Thus, the paradox of the encounter with eternity in a moment in time is nothing other than the specific and contingent moment of the event and its truth.

3. Buck-Morss openly states that she is not able to follow the "full intricacies of Adorno's argument" (121). Jameson's detailed engagement with Adorno passes the book over in his search for key contributions.

4. Note that Adorno's text uses *confinien*, even though Kierkegaard's text uses the Latin *confinium*. This may be due to the fact that Adorno was working from an inferior translation of Kierkegaard's text or to a deliberate decision on Adorno's part.

5. The mention of "Baroque" here signals the influence of Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. A detailed discussion of this influence may be found in Boer (2007, 57–105).

6. Later, in the unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (2003d), Adorno attempts a materialist aesthetics that resolutely avoids the false promise of theology, ontology, and idealism itself. Yet hints of an intensely dialectical aesthetics appear already in the Kierkegaard book: "What truly endures in artworks in not that from which time has been abstracted; in its emptiness it falls most completely to the mercy of time. Those motives assert themselves whose hidden eternity is most deeply embedded in the constellation of the temporal and is most faithfully maintained in their ciphers. Artworks do not obey the power of the universality of ideas. Their center is the temporal and the particular, whose figuration they are; what they mean that is more than this, they mean exclusively through this figure" (1989, 21; 2003b, 34).

7. "The materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*" (Adorno and Benjamin, 283; Adorno 1994, 367), the lack of which he also accuses Benjamin.

8. Yet even this does not exhaust the senses Adorno attaches to nature, for not only is it a metaphysical term deriving from Aristotle but also one that invokes the implications of the natural sciences for the understanding of history. In Adorno's essay "The Idea of Natural History" (1984), this sense of nature is more explicit. Here Benjamin's influence is profound, particularly in terms of the "natural history" that Benjamin found problematic: arguing against the classical (the account of the inquiry into nature) and the Kantian (nature itself as unending and infinite creation) senses of the term, Adorno proposes a dialectic between nature and history in which nature emerges at the most historical moment and vice versa, a dialectic that comes from the ambiguity of the term itself, whether the history of nature (nature as historical) or natural history (history as natural). A detailed study of the complex interaction between Adorno and Benjamin is beyond the scope of this article, although one may usefully consult Henning.

9. Adorno later invokes nature with a very different agenda in mind: in *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) he attempts to recover the category of natural beauty, over against Hegel, in the context of his analysis of aesthetic modernism. Here nature

becomes the irreducible Other, that which will not be subsumed under an anthropocentrism, within Adorno's non-identitarian theory of knowledge.

10. Adorno was not to leave myth alone, for it returns in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 2003). In this later work, he and Horkheimer seek to historicize myth, particularly in the Odysseus chapter, contrasting magic (the favored category of nonidentity), myth, and instrumental reason. But myth is the first mark, not only of patriarchy, but also the constitution of nature as repetition, the instrumentalization of the symbolic and the silencing of differentiation or nonidentity (hence women remain silent in myth).

11. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno make a very similar argument regarding the paradox of faith and reason, this time from the side of faith: "The paradoxical nature of faith ultimately degenerates into a swindle, and becomes the myth of the twentieth century; and its irrationality turns into an instrument of rational administration by the wholly enlightened as they steer society toward barbarism" (2002, 20; 2003, 36).

12. Such a discussion would include an assessment of the effect of the poor German translation of Kierkegaard's work available to Adorno. This was a selective twelve-volume collection, translated by Hermann Schrempf and Christoff Gottsched, published between 1909 and 1922. See Kiefhaber, 26.

13. Adorno comments that the book may well have been allowed to remain in the bookshops since the censor was unable to understand it (2003b, 261). For a careful study of the context in which Adorno's Kierkegaard study appeared, see Henning.

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