

Laws, Exceptions, Norms: Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin on the Exception

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Most fundamentally, “exception” suggests a limit: on a rule, to fulfill its mandate; on reason, to make sense; on logic, to be consistent with itself. Concomitantly, it suggests transcendence: the omnipresence of the ineffable, a lurking regime of permanent negation. The exception is everything *but*: the non-law, the state of emergency, the other, the negation of what-holds-in-all-circumstances, the impossible, the unthinkable, the aporia, the utopia. More than a simple extreme, but on neighborly terms with all antinomies, the exception describes the space where law doesn’t apply. The exception is fulfilled through non-application. As Samuel Weber notes of another borderline, the extreme, to think the exception is “to construe its being as a function of that which it is not.”¹

Notwithstanding the family resemblances between exceptions and extremes, there are differences. Extremities exaggerate. Exceptions transform. Extremities imitate. Exceptions give birth, creating boundaries to be transgressed. Never merely singular, exceptions require others, laws, to act as antitheses, to prove exceptions true through acts of contradiction. Exceptions mark where the familiar is “on the verge of changing into something else, the point at which it encounters the other, the exterior, the alien.”² Exceptions are reminders (*things were not always like this*) and promises (*things could be different*). There are times and places, cognitive junctures, where one can say little with certainty except that everything goes. Everything goes, that is, except exceptions. Definitions are forged and annihilated at this crucible where meaning is made and undone.

1. Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s Abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008), p. 179.
2. *Ibid.*

Whereas premodern legal thought was sustained by metaphysics, modern social thought has transformed metaphysical into legal norms, making the exception in jurisprudence analogous to the miracle in theology, as German legal theorist Carl Schmitt famously discerned.³ The transmutation of metaphysics has given rise to a distinctively modern fetish for the exception, summarized in a famous sequence of aphorisms by Schmitt, which can be reduced to four postulates:

The exception is more important than the rule.
 The exception is more interesting than the norm.
 The norm proves nothing; the exception proves everything.
 The rule lives only from the exception.⁴

Schmitt's logic is well known and has many times been contested as well as embraced. Less thoroughly probed are Schmitt's debt to Kierkegaard and the afterlife of his teaching on the exception in Walter Benjamin's oeuvre. Here I consider what Schmitt took from Kierkegaard's formulation of the exception, what he made his own, and what Benjamin appropriated while pursuing a different kind of metaphysical politics. This triangular genealogy aims to ground an originally metaphysical concept in a non-transcendent realm, and thus to read Kierkegaardian repetition after metaphysics.

Plato dedicated one of his last dialogues to laws (*nomoi*). Laws for Plato meant not the normative jurisprudence that had yet to come into existence in Athenian society, but *nomoi*, personal conscience merged with the social good, and grounded in the recognition that the individual's welfare is tied to the collective's well-being. In Plato, the exception has yet to acquire a cognitive attraction. Written after *The Republic*, *Laws* is distinguished from the former by its comparatively greater structural and conceptual openness to the problem of governance and by its refusal to provide facile answers to difficult problems.

Among other significant arguments, Plato sets forth in *Laws* a framework for a balance of powers requisite for the harmonious functioning of society, the needfulness of moderation rather than excess in human

3. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Munich and Leipzig: Humblot & Duncker, 1922), p. 36.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 49. In citing from the German edition, I have consulted and often used in modified form the English translation *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985).

behavior, and the divine origin of the laws.⁵ Plato does not distinguish between human origins and divine beginnings, and instead conceives of them to constitute a single whole. Laws are the foundation not only of order but of pleasure, for “all law has to do with pleasure and pain.”⁶ Plato puns frequently on the double meaning that Attic Greek ascribes to *nomos*, wherein it signifies both law and a register of music.⁷ The homonymic confluence is more than fortuitous: just as music gives pleasure, so do laws engender the harmony that governs a polity. To adapt Plato’s terminology, laws presume *physis* (nature) to act upon, just as *physis* cannot assume a shape or possess weight and substance without *nomos*. Political existence is the action of *nomos* on *physis*. Inasmuch as Plato’s political vision is nomothetic, adhering to norms rather than suspending them is a condition for political life.

Among modern theorists of the political, Søren Kierkegaard was one of the first to invert the Platonic paradigm through the concept of the exception. Three works published in 1843, the most intensive year of Kierkegaard’s writing life, oscillate consecutively between exceptions and norms: *Either/Or*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetition*. More than *Fear and Trembling* and *Either/Or*, *Repetition* catalyzed Carl Schmitt’s revival of the exception in the early decades of the twentieth century, during the years of his most intense reflections on the metaphysics of politics. Repetition is for Kierkegaard what the exception is for Schmitt: a suspension of the law. Repetition’s attraction is constituted through transcendence. The very distance between Kierkegaard’s and Schmitt’s exception traverses the political theology of modernity, wherein “all political concepts are secularized theological notions,” as Schmitt famously observed.⁸ Although “the trajectory between [the] Kierkegaardian exception and Schmitt’s definition of sovereignty” has readily been acknowledged, the precise contours of this genealogy, including Schmitt’s divergence from Kierkegaard, has yet to be probed.⁹ To arrive at a post-Schmittian concept of the exception,

5. Plato, “Laws,” in *Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (1871; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), pp. 57, 155.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

8. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, p. 37.

9. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Aleida Assmann (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2004), p. 65. See also Bartholomew Ryan, “Zones of Exception: Carl Schmitt Appropriating Kierkegaard,” *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and*

it is first necessary to see how Schmitt rewrote the Kierkegaardian concept of repetition and its dialectic between the universal and the particular.

Repetition's Metaphysical Existence

Kierkegaard subtitled his masterwork on repetition “A Venture in Experimental Psychology.” The narrative is occupied largely by a young lover’s vacillating affection for a woman he loves and dreads, fears and desires, and the narrator’s attempts to extricate the young poet from his unfortunate love affair. As the narrator Constantin Constantius tells us, however, the real subject of his book is not love but repetition: repetition as a category of metaphysics, and as a challenge to the hegemony of the present in modernity. Repetition corresponds to the ancient Greek category of recollection (*anamnesis*), the source of all knowledge.¹⁰ Repetition is the perennial possibility of return. “Just as it used to be taught that all knowledge is a recollection [*en Erindren*], so will modern philosophy teach that all of life is a repetition [*en Gjentaelse*],” Constantin prognosticates.¹¹ Leibniz, the monadologist par excellence, is credited as the first to discover modernity’s underlying premise in repetition. Only with *Repetition’s* second and third sections, comprised respectively of the love-struck poet’s letters to Constantin, a chronicle climaxing in the collapse of his love affair and interspersed with provocative readings of the *Book of Job*, and the narrator’s defense of his text before an imaginary tribunal of readers, are we brought face-to-face with the exception as a suspension of the law, the end of transcendence, and a supersession of the universal.

Constantin Constantius (his name is a nod to *Repetition’s* double plot line) defends his text before a tribunal comprised of his reading public by commenting on the many misreadings to which his work has been and

Resources 14 (2011): 177–207; and Ellen Kennedy, *Constitutional Failure: Carl Schmitt in Weimar* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), pp. 47–48, 205.

10. For the Platonic sources for *anamnesis*, see Charles Kahn, “Plato on Recollection,” in *A Companion to Plato*, ed. Hugh Benson (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), pp. 119–32.

11. Søren Kierkegaard, *Gjentaelsen: Et Forsøg i den eksperimenterende Psychologi* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1843; 1961 reprint), p. 3. All further references to this text are given parenthetically, followed by reference to the English translation *Repetition; and, Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M. G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009); here, p. 3. In citing from Danish texts, I have in all cases consulted and often adapted the English translations of Piety and Walter Lowrie (Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, trans. Walter Lowrie [New York: Harper & Row, 1941]).

will systematically be subjected. He acknowledges along the way that he has followed the example of Clement of Alexandria—and anticipates Nietzsche’s statement that “every word is a mask”—in writing “so that the heretics will not understand” (147/131).¹² The narrator complains that most readers—most heretics of *Repetition*’s metaphysical dialectics—annul simultaneously the universal and the particular. For such readers, clarifications are superfluous. Both sides of the metaphysical dyad are impenetrable to the unenlightened.

The next (unnamed) category of readers perceives the universal as a structural category but is blind to the exception’s value. They read texts such as *Repetition* for their universal applicability (what we might call its “message” or “content”) rather than for their particular qualities (“form”). Rarer, and more valuable, than readers who perceive the universal alone are those who perceive the particular, now figured as the exception, in a guise that at once subsumes and transcends the universal, while grasping it “with intense passion” (93/73). These readers relate to texts as singular (albeit repeating) events in the time-space continuum.

Among the exception’s many attractions is its propensity to interrupt the monotonous flow of time. One might say of the exception here what Constantin maintains earlier for repetition: “Repetition is reality; it is the seriousness of life” (6/4). In concluding, the pitch of the narrator’s polemic increases: “One grows weary of perpetual chatter about the universal, always the universal, repeated to the most tedious extreme of insipidity. There are exceptions. If one cannot explain them, neither can one explain the universal” (151/78). Thus far, Kierkegaard would seem as enamored of the exception’s existential allure as Schmitt. And yet Kierkegaard’s exception is more thoroughly metaphysical than Schmitt’s, anchored as the former is in repetition’s entelechy. Additionally, Kierkegaard, unlike Schmitt, seeks to preserve the antinomy between exception and norm. In order for exception to be oppositional and to function as a critique of the norm, it must be aberrant. Whereas Schmitt argues in favored of political totality, Kierkegaard’s exception is granted “to the individual being governed rather than to the powers that govern.”¹³

Kierkegaard reserves for repetition, recollection’s antithesis, the qualities that Schmitt assigned to the exception, the antithesis of the norm. In

12. Compare Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), VI-2.244/5.234 (§ 289).

13. Ryan, “Zones of Exception,” p. 205.

Repetition, Kierkegaard wrote: “Modern philosophy makes no movement. In general, it merely makes a commotion. Repetition, on the other hand, is transcendence” (57/50). Like the exception, repetition is located outside space and time. It is eternally singular and new. Indeed, for Kierkegaard, repetition’s ideal location is in eternity, where life repeats itself. “Only Job’s children were not returned to him twofold,” Constantin notes in an exegetical interlude, “because a human life does not allow itself to be doubled in this way. Here only a spiritual repetition is possible, even though it cannot be so complete temporally as in eternity where there is true repetition” (88/75).

If there is true repetition only in eternity, it follows that the exception’s original mandate can be fulfilled only in a world permeated by metaphysics. Hence Schmitt’s political theory is unapologetically theological. By contrast, those who have followed in Schmitt’s footsteps, most notably Walter Benjamin, have taken exception to Schmitt’s derivation for the exception in Kierkegaard’s metaphysics and sought instead to ground it in immanence. This return to worldliness was inaugurated by Benjamin’s evocation of the Baroque mourning play’s aesthetic, whereby “the beyond [*Die Jenseits*] is emptied of everything wherein even the slightest breath of world weaves and from it the Baroque extracts a plenitude of things.”¹⁴ Benjamin insists that the Baroque play unfolds on the ground of creaturely existence (*Schöpfungswelt*): “the state of creation, the ground on which the mourning play unfolds, determines unmistakably the sovereign as well” (65–66). Notwithstanding his high stature in relation to the rest of humanity, the sovereign is included “in the world of creation: he is the Lord of creatures, but *he remains a creature*” (66, emphasis added). Benjamin’s excavation of the Baroque’s encounter with creaturely existence breaks with the regime that construed the exception as an exclusively metaphysical event.

Kierkegaard privileges the exception under the sign of repetition. Indeed, the exception under the sign of repetition, recollection’s antithesis but also its fulfillment, is the only exception for Kierkegaard that counts. This is a very peculiar exception indeed. According to modern sovereignty’s logic, the exception equals the unrepeated and unrepeatable. In Kierkegaardian logic the opposite holds: the singular and the irreducible are precisely what is repeatable. And indeed this peculiar inflection to the

14. Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 48. Future references are given parenthetically.

Kierkegaardian exception is precisely the aspect most worth preserving. The exception's existential and repeatable singularity ultimately makes possible Benjamin's break with transcendence while also protecting it from assimilation into the norm. But to arrive at the parting of ways between immanence and transcendence in Kierkegaard and between politics and metaphysics in Schmitt, we have to probe more deeply into Kierkegaard's cosmology.

Long-suffering Job

The paradigmatic exception under the sign of repetition is, we learn from the young poet's correspondence with Constantin, Job. Job "constituted himself an *exception* [*Undtagelse*] to all human juridical interpretations" (75/65, emphasis added). He recreated himself as at once the law's fulfillment and its replacement: "by his tenacity of purpose and by his power he demonstrated his authority, his well warranted authority" (75/65). Job is the patron saint of the Kierkegaardian exception. Refusing to accommodate himself to the norm, he persists in asking the impolite questions that his friends sought to dissuade him from posing. The poet, himself an exception opening onto another exception, specifies in a letter to Constantin: "The greatness of Job does not consist solely in the fact that he said, 'The Lord give, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord'" (127/58). These words, the poet points out, were uttered only at the beginning of the *Book of Job*, and never repeated. Rather, "Job's significance is that the border conflicts intrinsic to faith are fought out in him" (107/67). Uncannily anticipating Kafka's fictions, Job is figured as a plaintiff in eternity's court, representing "the whole weighty plea presented on man's behalf in the great lawsuit [*store Sag*] between God and man, the prolix and dreadful process [*Proces*] of justice . . . that ends with the explanation that the whole thing is a trial [*en Prøvelse*]" (127/67). Glancing ahead in time, we can discern how Kierkegaard's reading of Job's complaint anticipates Benjamin's anatomy of the German mourning play. In the later work, Benjamin found in the medieval literature of lament (*Klagenliteratur*) a trial (*Prozess*) consisting of a complaint (*Klage*) "directed by creation against death" (*Ursprung*, 188).

As in the medieval literature of lament, so in the Hebrew bible. Job's heroism consists not in his piety but in holding steadfast to his authentic experience of existential doubt. Most notably, Job's questions derive from the creaturely realm. Far from God testing Job, in Kierkegaard's reading,

Job tests God. This text results in his initial undoing, but also, ultimately, in his victory. “Job is no pious hero,” the poet concludes, “he gives birth with prodigious pains to the category of trial [‘*Prøvelsens*’ *Kategori*]” (128/68). It is no minor achievement to withhold approval in the context of a power relation as asymmetrical as it was between Job and God. Job is an exception: he insists on drafting his own laws, even when he knows full well that his life and welfare are entirely in God’s hands, even when the Hebrew text portrays him as an ordinary man. Job is the sovereign of his own domestic realm, and, more importantly for Kierkegaard, of his soul. He achieves an existential freedom in the midst of bondage that is for Kierkegaard the highest possible human goal. That Kierkegaard presents Job as the patron saint of the exception when Job’s role is to dissent from God’s theodicy attests to how the Kierkegaardian exception continuously disrupts the norm.

Kierkegaard’s poet concludes with a paradoxical attempt to transpose the exception to the realm of eternity. As he admits, this transposition threatens to undermine his entire argument. And yet, he insists, his concern is with this world, not with what comes after: “I can see well that this category might have a tendency to erase and suspend reality as a whole by defining it as a trial [*en Prøvelse*] with a relation to eternity [*Evigheden*]. Yet this objection has no force for me; for since a trial is temporary; it is *eo ipso* qualified by its relation to time and must be done away with in time” (129/68). The poet’s dictum summarizes *Repetition*’s take on the exception. Just as the exception’s relation to eternity determines its validity, so is the exception compelled to incorporate transcendence into itself. So long as it operates outside eternity, repetition in Kierkegaard’s account will be shot through with holes. Seamless totality lies beyond the boundary of its realization. This same dependency on metaphysics attends the state of exception that Schmitt sought to achieve against the grain of Weimar legal theory.

Job’s dreadful *Proces* cannot be easily located within Kierkegaard’s threefold typology of human realization. As the poet informs the narrator, “it is neither aesthetic, ethical, nor dogmatic...it is completely transcendent” (77/68). Recalling the Hegelian slave-master dialectic, Job’s polemic places man in “a purely personal relationship of contradiction to God” (77/68), whereby the latter requires the former in order to realize itself and vice versa. The relationship of contradiction also structures the exception in relation to the law. It undermines the law, but the law requires

the exception in order to assert its primacy and to enact its legislative will. That this contradiction is ontological, and is therefore, restrictively, a condition of all human sociality, has been demonstrated by both Derrida and Agamben in their readings of the contradictions entailed in modernity's conception of the law.¹⁵ But the consequences of the tension between the law's metaphysics and its politics vary radically from Kierkegaard to Schmitt to Benjamin.

Reviewing the exception in light of Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin elucidates the dangers of conflating the ontological with the political. Kierkegaard was attuned to this danger, but his metaphysics offers to safeguard against such abuse. If exceptions are needed "in times of normality (security, stability, and supposed tranquility)... and not within dictatorships by those who rule," this still leaves open the question of what political frameworks to turn to when the norm has ceased to rule. Kierkegaard outlines a vision for exception during times of peace, but how can his insights be mobilized during times of war?

The term itself, *das Ausnahmen*, began (in modernity) with Kierkegaard's *Repetition*. Would there have been a state of the exception without a metaphysical exception to precede it? Would there have been a metaphysical exception without a nomothetic exception in the age when *nomos* ruled? Schmitt's, Benjamin's, and Agamben's politicized states of exception pursue internally various trajectories. Originating in the miraculous, Kierkegaard's metaphysical exceptionality is distinguished from its Schmittian and Benjaminian progeny. Kierkegaard's vision dissents from, even as it inaugurates, modernity. It is the metaphysical exception that Kierkegaard prizes, although he cannot resurrect it under the conditions of modernity outside the frameworks determined by his literary productions.

As frequently with Kierkegaard, there is another, less metaphysical and more implicitly political, dimension to the exception. As Kierkegaard signaled in *Repetition*, his first engagement with the exception occurred in one of the most paradoxical chapters of one of the most paradoxical books ever written, "The Rotation of the Crops," in *Either/Or* (published the same year but written prior to *Repetition*). Here Kierkegaard puts in

15. Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law," trans. Avital Ronell, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 180–220. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998); and Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005).

the mind of his “aesthetic” (read: not-yet-Christian) narrator an account of that form of repetition so characteristic of modernity: boredom. Far from being the fulfillment of *anamnesis*, boredom is its negation. As such it is a condition of possibility for the coming into being of the political state of exception. The aesthetic narrator replaces St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s adage, “idleness is the root of all evil,” with a new idiom for a new era: “boredom is root of all evil” (282). He then offers a theodicy of the world’s creation from boredom (*Kjedsommelighed*):

The history of boredom can be traced from the very beginning of the world. The gods were bored, and so they created man. Adam was bored because he was alone, and so Eve was created. Thus boredom entered the world. Thus boredom entered the world, and increased in proportion to the increase of population. Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored together, then Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel were bored *en famille*; then the population of the world increased, and the peoples were bored en masse. To divert themselves they conceived the idea of constructing a tower high enough to reach the heavens. This idea is itself as boring as the tower was high, and constitutes a terrible proof of how boredom gained the upper hand. The nations were scattered over the earth, just as people now travel abroad, but they continued to be bored. Consider the consequences of this boredom.¹⁶

Inasmuch as it registers the divorce from metaphysics that has transpired in modernity together with that divorce’s pedestrian consequences, and in endeavoring to resurrect the sacred in a secular world, Kierkegaard’s history of boredom constitutes a prehistory for later deployments of the exception. Repetition is Kierkegaard’s temporary antidote to God’s disappearance from the world, attested from the Baroque mourning play onward. Rather than resisting the gradual replacement of the norm by the exception through passivity-inducing boredom, Kierkegaard accommodates modernity’s estrangement from the norm, and crafts from this estrangement a new temporal modality that is activated by the exception, an epiphenomenon of repetition. In marrying repetition to creaturely existence, Kierkegaard introduces the exception to existential time.

Before modernity, law ruled within the boundaries of divinely and therefore, given the dependency of law on the sacred, legally sanctioned

16. Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaards samlede værker*, ed. A. B. Drachmann, H. O. Lange, J. L. Heiberg (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandels forlag, 1843), 1:258.

power, but that time, Kierkegaard suggests, has passed. We now live in the age of an exception that conceives itself as the law's antithesis, and which therefore rejects past beliefs and practices, as well as past gods. This exception inscribes itself on human consciousness through boredom. It repeats while lacking the ability to produce an antidote to boredom. As such, even the miraculous exception in modernity is non-generative. It is a dead letter, a death-inducing principle, a stifler of freedom. The agent of boredom, it is also the root of all evil.

It is not by accident that Kierkegaard's young poet tells Constantin that language has failed him when he relied on it most, and specifically that he has lost the capacity to find names for his suffering, for the intimacy between *nomos* and *nom* penetrates deeper than etymology. Order is generated by naming. Disorder, *anomie*, the condition of being without law, is generated by namelessness. "What good would it do if I were to respond?" the poet asks. Kierkegaard's narrator cannot respond to the poet's letters, for, in addition to explicitly requesting no response, the poet has left no return address. He has no location. The epistolary exchange between poet and narrator therefore transpires in a context of incommunicability, under the sign of silence. "There is no one to understand me. My pain and my suffering are nameless, as I myself am—I who, though I have no name, nevertheless remain perhaps something to you, and in any case remain Devotedly Yours" (117). In the absence of order, the poet reiterates his namelessness: devoted, but anonymous.

Kierkegaard in Disguise

As Kierkegaard predicted, *Repetition* was read by few and understood by even fewer during the years immediately following its publication. With only one major exception, no one, even at this late date in the history of Kierkegaard's reception, has reflected seriously on the Kierkegaardian exception from a political point of view. The one exception to this assertion however trumps the general rule. The exception is Schmitt's masterful anatomy of sovereignty in *Political Theology*, written in 1922 during the height of the Weimar crisis, a decade before Hitler's rise to power.

For readers already initiated into the intricacies of Kierkegaard's thought, Schmitt acknowledges his debt. Kierkegaard is not named in *Political Theology*, but it is impossible not to see references on nearly every page of the book to the Danish thinker, from Schmitt's preference for the existential as against the normative, to, most obviously, his engagement

with the exception. All these themes suffuse *Political Theology*, and all derive from Kierkegaard. Schmitt references Kierkegaard only once, and by vocation rather than by name, as “a Protestant theologian who demonstrated the vital intensity possible in theological reflection” (15), but Kierkegaardian allusions are laced throughout the text.

One of the most pivotal of Schmitt’s Kierkegaardian allusions occurs when he measures Jean Bodin’s place in the history of reflection on the exception. “The decisive point about Bodin’s concept,” Schmitt writes, “is that by referring to the emergency he reduced his analysis of the relationships between princes and estates to a simple either/or” (8). This passage is linked to the subtle reversal of the Kierkegaardian assertion, advanced soon afterward, that repetition fulfills itself in the exception. The significance of Kierkegaard for Schmitt is substantiated by explicit allusions to the Danish thinker that occur elsewhere in Schmitt’s oeuvre, from his early work on political romanticism (1919) to his late work on *nomos* in international law (1950).¹⁷

In *Political Theology*, Schmitt invokes Kierkegaard on the relation between the rule and the exception. “The exception,” Schmitt postulates in an explicit borrowing from the Protestant theologian, “is more important than the rule . . . the seriousness of an insight goes deeper than the clear generalizations inferred from what ordinarily repeats itself.”¹⁸ Although the debt has often gone unregistered, Schmitt is here closely paraphrasing multiple passages from *Repetition* and *Either/Or*. However, Schmitt paraphrases with a difference. He replaces the Kierkegaardian metaphysical exception, grounded in transcendence, by his own sovereign exception, grounded in a marriage between transcendence and immanence. (The endeavor to ground the exception exclusively in immanence was left to Benjamin.)

Whereas Schmitt absorbs religion into politics, Kierkegaard absorbs politics into religion. Schmitt wants to resurrect the dichotomy between the exception and the mundane that Kierkegaard undoes. Schmitt opposes,

17. Schmitt’s references to Kierkegaard begin with *Politische Romantik* (Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1919), p. 58, and extend to his last major work, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (1950; New York: Telos Press, 2003), p. 292. For Schmitt’s scattered references to his reading of Kierkegaard, see his *Tagebücher: Oktober 1912 bis Februar 1915*, ed. Ernst Hüsmert (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), p. 416, and Schmitt, *Die Militärzeit 1915 bis 1919*, ed. Ernst Hüsmert and Gerd Geisler (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005), pp. 66n71 and 577.

18. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, p. 22.

as Kierkegaard never did, the repetition to the exception. The exception, he maintains, “is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception, the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism rendered torpid by repetition” (22). Schmitt was as much at variance with Kierkegaard with respect to repetition as Benjamin was at variance with Schmitt with respect to sovereignty. From the “power of real life” to the valorization of interest, every element of Schmitt’s deliberations on the exception originates in Kierkegaard. The only stipulation that could never have been made by Kierkegaard, the contribution that is unique to Schmitt and that inaugurates the latter’s rejection of the metaphysical exception in favor of the sovereign exception, is the image of “power of real [*die Kraft des wirklichen Lebens*]” breaking through the crust of a mechanism rendered torpid through repetition. This breaking movement originates in a post-metaphysical universe that requires worldly—and, specifically for Schmitt, the state’s—coercion to bring about the miraculous.

Repetition for Schmitt is the enemy that the exception undermines. It is related to the norm that stultifies political life and prevents decisions from being made. For Kierkegaard, repetition *is* reality (*Virkeligheden*) in the deepest sense; it is the seriousness of existence (*Tilværelsens Alvor*). “He who wills repetition,” we read in Kierkegaard, “has attained true maturity.” The Kierkegaardian metaphysical exception pursues repetition because it is persuaded that self-consciousness can only be attained in the act of repetition. No one is more repetitive, more insistent, and indeed, more monotonous in his complaints to God than Job. And yet it is Job’s persistence, his willingness to perturb God, his friends, and his future readers, to hold faith with himself as well as with eternity, and the tenacity evinced in his questions, that makes him the patron saint of Kierkegaard’s exception. Notably, Job’s paradigmatic status is relinquished entirely when Kierkegaard’s exception is appropriated by Schmitt and Benjamin.

Kierkegaard signals the tendency of the metaphysical exception that repeats itself, most fully represented by the story of Job, to annoy those who desire an end to repetition, when, in the chapter from *Either/Or* cited above, he selects Victor Eremita (“Victor Hermit”), to observe that the modern world can be divided into two types of people: those who bore others and those who bore themselves. Those who bore others are never bored with themselves. Those who bore themselves are never bored by

others. The boring versus bored distinction recapitulates that between repetition and singularity: “Those who do not bore themselves are generally people who, in one way or another, keep themselves extremely busy. These people are precisely on this account the most tiresome and the most utterly unendurable.”¹⁹

Why are such forms of boredom unendurable for Victor Eremita, whose position Kierkegaard distinguishes, without ever fully disassociating it, from his own? It is boredom’s relation to repetition, which bifurcates in varying directions. Some repetitions constitute mechanical reflexes at best and constraints on freedom at worst. Other repetitions bespeak an entirely different kind of freedom, and are implicated in the search for authenticity. Repetition is not subsumed by the mindless rotation of the crops: it is movement as opposed to stasis, merging in contrast to isolation. In Kierkegaard’s reading, repetition leads not (necessarily) to the negation of the human, but to fulfillment at a higher spiritual level. The repetitions of those who bore Victor can culminate in mere industry (particularly in modernity) or in a qualitatively different kind of activity, but neither Victor nor Schmitt distinguish between such results. For Kierkegaard’s narrator, as for the German legal theorist, repetition, like *nomos* itself, is a regime to be overcome. Repetition is juxtaposed to the exception both by Schmitt and by Kierkegaard’s narrator as an intrinsically inferior way of organizing life. By contrast, Kierkegaard’s metaphysical exception enacts repetition existentially, as an unceasing but meaning-suffused “rotation of the crops.” Rather than juxtaposing repetition to the exception, as Schmitt had done and as is conventionally done by modern regimes that fetishize the perceived singularity of sovereign power, Kierkegaard shows repetition as a temporal rhythm that enables exceptions to transpire in the form of miracles.

It is curious that Schmitt does not make explicit reference in *Political Theology* to the moment in *Repetition* when Kierkegaard’s young poet invokes Job as the paradigmatic exception. Schmitt politicizes without comment a dialectic that Kierkegaard had treated as purely spiritual. (Again, it was left to Benjamin to make the tension between repetition and creaturely existence yield a post-metaphysical exception that could nonetheless partake of the miraculous.) Kierkegaard makes abundantly clear that there are as many modes of exceptionality as there are ways of being human. The sovereign exception is, according to the Kierkegaardian

19. Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaards samlede værker*, p. 257.

entelechy, the least substantive of all. And yet Kierkegaard's cosmology enables Schmitt's merger of metaphysics and politics and thus recapitulates morphologies taken by the exception in modernity, which fetishize singularity while striving for an existential creaturely existence. When we fail to perceive Schmitt's debt to Kierkegaard, we misconstrue the status of the exception in his work, and obscure the significance of Schmitt's programmatic rejection of *nomos* (and of repetition, on which *nomos* relies) for contemporary political thought.

In reviving Bodin's demarcation of the sovereign as the one with the capacity to act on the exception, Schmitt locates power outside ethics, in a space where the only claim that can be made for sovereignty is that it is exceptional, that it determines the conditions of its own legitimacy, and that it answers to no authority outside itself. Yet, oddly, the state of exception's very transcendence is premised on the exception's miraculous, decision-making, power. Grounding the political in the theological enables Schmitt to totalize political agency, vesting it in entities that have at their disposal the material resources to act in politically significant ways. Through such reframing, Schmitt pushes the exception in the direction of the norm, until it is entirely consumed by it, and wholly absorbed into the power of the state. This problematic move raises but leaves unanswered the question of how the exception can retain its exceptional qualities while still intervening in the political.

In grounding the political in the theological, Schmitt diagnoses the conditions under which sovereignty operates in modernity, as at once the product of past forms of life and their systematic negation. In proposing politicized metaphysics as the most efficacious means of regulating modern political life, Schmitt evinces his debt, as well as his enslavement, to Kierkegaard's Christian inheritance. The supersession of this inheritance had to wait for a thinker whose life and death made him more attuned to the political dangers entailed in the divinization of the political, and who, instead of hypostatizing the sacred, sought to integrate it into creaturely existence. This thinker was Walter Benjamin, whose writings from 1916 to 1925 systematically denaturalize the metaphysization of the political, and thereby help us to move beyond both Kierkegaard's metaphysical exception and Schmitt's sovereign exception.²⁰

20. For these specific dates, regarding Benjamin's work on the German mourning play as the culmination of his prior thinking about temporality, secularity, and the state of exception, I follow the dedication page of *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, which

Keeping the Exception Exceptional

Political theorists who think Kierkegaard today think him via Schmitt on the state of exception, or, even more derivatively, via Agamben's reading of Schmitt. But Schmitt's state of exception, is, as has been shown, peculiarly indebted to Christian metaphysics, even as it breaks free from these moorings. Schmitt's state of exception is, as Schmitt specifies, the secularization of the political. That the state of exception has become another norm is a sign of our times, as recognized most notably by Giorgio Agamben's reminder that "the modern state of exception is a creation of the democratic-revolutionary tradition and not the absolutist one."²¹ Writing in an era when the exception had yet to acquire its twentieth-century political morphology, Kierkegaard approached exceptionality exclusively through metaphysics. Aligning exceptionality with repetition, the Danish thinker aimed to preserve its miraculous capacities, its ability to make the old new, and to keep faith with eternity. To Kierkegaard we owe the insightful alignment between the exceptional and the existential, and the notion of exceptionality and repetition as kindred rather than opposed, along with the more burdensome metaphysical baggage entailed in these concepts.

Even as it attended transformations in the concept of the political and the individual, the exception was not immune to changes transpiring within varying disciplines. Fascination with the exception has notably inflected the social sciences. Sociology and anthropology are both historically constituted as the study of that which deviates from the norm, with the object of analysis in the former being the social deviant and the object of analysis in the latter the non-European native. The object's distance from the norm is in both cases its point of departure. Exceptionality for social science is a problem to be solved, a condition to be exposed, and a predicament to be either eradicated or preserved, sometimes through the same abdication. In an age engaged by the exception, extremities become paradigmatic and therefore (to paraphrase Kierkegaard) interesting. Their very deviance from the norm attests to their hermeneutical power. But as in Schmitt, the most apparent danger here is again the striving for the absorption of the exception into the norm. The scientific study of deviancy

reads: "Entworfen 1916 Verfaßt 1925/ Damals wie heute meiner Frau gewidmet" ("Conceived in 1916. Completed in 1925. Then as now dedicated to my wife."), p. 6.

21. Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 5.

is an important contribution of the social sciences; the attempt to “correct” such deviancy to bring it closer to the norm is a more controversial legacy.

Without explicitly locating himself within the Kierkegaard-Schmitt genealogy, Michel Foucault reflected on the normalization of the exception in his diagnosis of modern disciplinary society. “The judges of normality are present everywhere,” wrote Foucault in the mid-1970s. “We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social worker’-judge. It is on them that the universal regime of the normative is based. Each individual . . . subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements.”²² These details explain how, for Foucault, the carceral system engenders the normalization of modern sovereignty. Far from emerging victorious, the exception has been superseded by the norm. Thus is the rise of the exception in the public eye marked by institutional endeavors to resuscitate the norm. No matter how frequently modern intellectuals valorize the exception, no matter how much states depend on exceptionality, the privilege of acting outside the law will always redound negatively on those who figure themselves or are figured as exceptions to the rules.

Of the three theorists of the exception considered in this essay—Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin—the third adopted the most radically anti-metaphysical vantage point for theorizing the exception. In a 1930 letter omitted from Theodor Adorno’s edition of his friend’s correspondence, Benjamin wrote that Schmitt’s “mode of research in political philosophy has confirmed my own mode of research in the philosophy of art.”²³ And yet, even while claiming intellectual kinship with the Nazi legal theorist, Benjamin produced a radically un-Schmittian account of the exception under the conditions of creaturely existence in his reading of the Baroque mourning play.

By contrast with his filial devotion for Schmitt, unmarred, at least in the extant textual archive, by any nuance of doubt, Benjamin was explicitly hostile to Kierkegaardian metaphysics, including to the exceptionality entailed in Kierkegaard’s vision of the scared. In reviewing Adorno’s *Habilitationsarbeit* on Kierkegaard, published the day Hitler

22. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 310–11.

23. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974), 1:887. In addition to the account of the Benjamin-Schmitt encounter detailed in Samuel Weber, “Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt,” *Diacritics* 22, nos. 3–4 (1992): 5–19, see Horst Bredekamp, “From Walter Benjamin to Carl Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 247–66.

came to power, Benjamin noted that the “ultimately theological nature” of Kierkegaard’s thought doomed the Danish thinker to “impotence.”²⁴ Benjamin praised Adorno for unmasking Kierkegaard’s “fraudulent theology of an existence based on paradox.”²⁵ Polemicizing specifically against Kierkegaard’s “existentialist philosophy,” Benjamin stated that the “arrogant pretensions” that underwrite Kierkegaard’s thought rest on the latter’s “conviction that he had found the realm of ‘inwardness,’ of ‘pure spirituality,’ which had enabled him to overcome appearance through ‘decision,’ through existential resolve—in short through a religious stance.”

Notwithstanding the intriguing provocations inscribed into this polemic with Kierkegaardian transcendence, the terms of the dispute also bear the imprint of Benjamin’s projection of an argument with Schmitt onto the Danish thinker who had preceded him by nearly a century. For it was Schmitt, even more than Kierkegaard, who treated the decision as the key to action. Stated otherwise: it was Schmitt who translated into politics the program that Kierkegaard proposed for metaphysics. “The legal force of the decision,” Schmitt asserted in *Political Theology*, “is something other than the result of an argument. It is not calculated by means of a norm, but rather inversely: only from a point of ascription can it be determined what a norm and normative correctness is. Starting from the norm, no point of ascription can be produced, but only a quality of a content.”²⁶ Although the view that decision is the axis of political agency is expressed most fully in Schmitt’s existential ascription point (*Zurechnungspunkt*), it is only Kierkegaard whom Benjamin publicly holds accountable for grounding ethics in metaphysics. About Schmitt he remains conspicuously silent. Nonetheless, Benjamin’s critique implicitly addresses Schmitt’s sovereign exception as the product of Kierkegaard’s spiritual authenticity. Reading Schmitt through Kierkegaard via Benjamin enables us to discard the fetishization of violence intrinsic to Schmitt’s politics along with the fraudulent metaphysics that often attends Kierkegaardian theology, where blind leaps of faith substitute for the difficulty of grappling with modernity’s loss of access to the sacred.

24. The timing of Adorno’s monograph *Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933) is noted by Adorno himself in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 2:261.

25. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1927–1934*, vol. 2, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), p. 704. Benjamin’s review originally appeared in the *Vossische Zeitung*, April 2, 1933.

26. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, pp. 42–43.

With his account of the sovereign's contingent creaturehood in his analysis of the Baroque mourning play, Benjamin sought to blast apart the metaphysics that had hitherto grounded the exception. In performing such a feat, Benjamin fulfilled thesis number seventeen in his notes on the concept of history, whereby the historical materialist cognizes the "sign of a messianic arrest" to "blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history."²⁷ Benjamin's assessment of the potential of such an act speaks to his achievement, as does the arresting temporality of the image that concludes this aphorism: "The nourishing fruit of what is historically understood contains time in its interior as a precious but tasteless seed."²⁸

Only by provincializing the exception, by performing acts of recontextualization, by invoking and then using archives from other times and places, can Schmitt and Kierkegaard be read against themselves, and the exception be engaged from post-metaphysical perspectives that resist the totalization of the political. Provincializing the exception means thinking differently about sovereignty. It means moving beyond the nation-state as the normative unit for social analysis, beyond modernity's selective appropriation of the past, and beyond political systems unable to countenance the true democratization of political agency. Europe was not provincialized only through the urgings of her well-intentioned intellectuals. Nor will the non-normative pasts toward which Kierkegaard gestured—as well as those non-European repetitions that he was unable to invoke due to ignorance—be given new lives merely through analysis. But one must begin somewhere in undertaking to reverse the wholesale absorption of the exception by the norm. The foregoing discussion has aimed to contribute to a much lengthier endeavor.

27. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, 1938–1940*, vol. 4, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), p. 396.

28. *Ibid.*

Introduction

At its inception, *Telos* pursued a specific project as a journal: to serve as a bridge between the world of what was then often referred to as “European theory” and a U.S. intellectual world largely defined by quantitative methods in the social sciences. Over time, the terminology changed, and it is now more common to use the parlance of “analytic” and “continental” modes of philosophy, and if the latter term still clearly points toward Europe, there are representatives of both trends in the university lives on both sides of the Atlantic. In retrospect, however, the question for *Telos* was never one of a simple cultural transfer or the pursuit of some intellectual equilibrium in which scholars in both worlds would think the same way. On the contrary, instead of thinking about method in general, at stake for *Telos* was the difference between reflections on the meaning of the human condition, thoughtful explorations of the good life, and what appeared to be an exclusively numerical measuring of the status quo, a positivist description of what already exists, with no expectation of change. In other words, *Telos* combined a critical—or again, in the terminology of the era, a radical—stance toward life with a philosophical traditionalism that it found more current than in European intellectual circles than in the United States. That bridge across the Atlantic was therefore, in many ways, a conduit for a radical traditionalism as a source for a critique of modernity gone awry. Not that all of this was fully clear from the start, nor was it ever simple: were the failings of modernity evidence of some insufficient modernization, an inadequate implementation of the program of modernity, or did they reflect flaws inherent in modernity itself? In the former case, the response would involve calls for ever more rationalization; in the latter, a critique of the domination of a one-dimensional reason and the recovery of alternatives.

The interest in “European theory,” then, was not a matter of geographical exoticism, an arbitrary selection of a distant intellectual world, but quite clearly an expression of the recognition that the European philosophical tradition represented a crucial and ongoing reflection on the human condition in general and the particular status of the West within it. This philosophy not only endeavored to shed light on the meaning—and value!—of life; undertaking philosophy, participating in the intellectual reflection and transmission, itself contributed to that meaning. Yet reconstructing these initial points of orientation for *Telos*, one cannot help but notice how much ground has been lost in past decades. The sense that Europe or the West (or the cohesiveness of any West) might lay claim to some special status and have anything worthwhile to say regarding the human

condition is an affront to contemporary sensibilities, defined more typically in terms of multiculturalism or post-colonialism. It is hard to think of a culture in contemporary Western Europe not marked by intellectual predispositions toward burdensome shame regarding its national past as well as an embarrassed inability to articulate criticisms of inhuman conditions in most of the rest of the world outside the West. Given this endemic self-doubting in the European world, it comes as little surprise that a solution—even a straightforward technocratic, policy solution—to the challenges of the European Union has been so elusive. Of course a corollary self-doubt plagues that extension of Europe in North America, the former sole superpower, as evidenced by a new inwardness and flight from global engagement.

Yet it is not only the space of the West as geographical territory that seems to be dissolving; it is also the philosophical project of the West, the imperative of philosophy, that “European theory” which *Telos* tried to retrieve more than four decades ago. Again, “European theory” does not mean simply “theory” undertaken on the soil of Europe. Indeed, the very point of the universalist tradition includes the claim that the cartographic coordinates of the location of the thinking are not the issue at all: this particular conceptual project has universal and universalizable aspirations. European theory could take place in Paris or Frankfurt, but also in Missouri or California—or Newfoundland or Cape Town, and Tokyo or Kolkata. This potential ubiquity, however, did not mean that any thinking was by definition “European theory.” On the contrary, there were certainly outsides to the tradition, but the difference was not geographical, driven instead by the substance of the tradition. As already noted, from the start, an alternative has always haunted the project, the analytic tradition, a very different conceptualization of philosophy and its agenda. In the meantime, however, the status of European theory has been challenged by other paradigms. One involves, in this age of globalization, claims of other, specifically non-European philosophical traditions, Chinese philosophy for example but also, in some accounts, Muslim thought (although its relationship to the space of Europe is obviously more complex). One should consider these on their own terms, although often discussions suffer from the overdramatization of post-colonial frameworks, i.e., instead of considerations of the particular traditions, attention is grabbed by narratives of imperialism. Yet another challenge to “European theory”—another sign of lost ground—emerges within European theory itself: instead of an effort to think the tradition further, while maintaining connections to the past, forms of postmodern theory have advocated for a break with the tradition, with western metaphysics, indeed with the European philosophical tradition from its beginning, and to replace it with a cynical dismissiveness, coupled with political correctness. This can follow the route from Heidegger to Derrida, or, alternatively, in some readings of Horkheimer and Adorno: in the end, the differences between the two paths

may be less important than the shared allegation that the western invention of the concept, the original idealism, was the source of all western evil. We should, so the arguments go, step outside of conceptual thinking: if we do, however, we may find that there is nothing worthwhile left.

Recognizing the subject as the consciousness that internalizes knowledge of the world and tries to make sense of it, mediating between the particular and the universal, and the constant reorientation toward the horizons of thought, the *telos*, as a guide for practice—these are defining components of the philosophical tradition at stake. It has thrived—and thrives—in secular intellectual versions, but it is also inextricably linked to western religious traditions, so much so that it is pointless to try to drive a wedge between reason and religion in this context. It is a tradition that resists a reduction of the world to the exclusive givenness of naturalism; mere facticity, described by an empirical positivism, is always insufficient. Yet at the same time it also resists the historicism of *Zeitgeist*, the complete relativization of human experience to the arbitrary prejudices of whatever culture seems to have seized power: thought has to be more than a random endorsement of the dominators of the day.

This issue of *Telos* is a stock-taking of the current debates on these components of the philosophical tradition, on the viability of the subject—at the center of the legacy—and the sense and senses it came to make out of the world. The issue opens with Dianna Taylor’s pointed investigation of the often exaggerated gap between French and German legacies, in particular the critiques of the subject in the work of Michel Foucault, on the one hand, and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, on the other. They agree that the category of the subject has been susceptible to manipulation and betrayed the promise of emancipation. “Horkheimer, Adorno, and Foucault do indeed show that what we have believed to be not only a constant but also a requirement in our lives—the only means by which we are able to encounter and make sense of the world—is in fact a historical contingency. Moreover, they show that subjectivation does not foster a particularly positive mode of engagement with either ourselves or the world and, therefore, does not particularly help us in making sense of either ourselves or the world.” Nonetheless Taylor also demonstrates how the critique of the subject in both traditions allows for a surpassing: “I hope to have called into sharper relief and emphasized the continued relevance of their common view that critical analysis and questioning of what appears most intransigent, ineluctable, and, yes, most valuable about our existence does not undermine but in fact constitutes the work of freedom.”

Unlike for Horkheimer and Adorno, who largely avoid explicit discussions of religious traditions, for Foucault, Christianity plays a large role, albeit a negative one: he dwells on how, through confession and other “disciplinary” practices, Christianity established the subject as a vehicle for domination. His hostile

stance toward Christianity puts him squarely in a French Enlightenment tradition and closer to contemporary hegemonic positions than his self-presentation as an oppositional thinker would lead one to suspect. An alternative account, with which *Telos* has long been engaged, emerges from the “radical orthodox” tradition in the United Kingdom, of which Catherine Pickstock is a leading exponent. In her essay, she makes a strong case for the role of ritual in the production of sense, and for the explicit status of western Christian liturgy: “. . . ritual opens up the space for there to be meaning, and brings together in a single founding, yet always already repeated, gesture both external norm and internal assent, without according priority to one or the other; neither to the technology of achieving repeated action, nor to the religiosity of venerating such patterns and regarding them as disclosive of the extra-human. This bringing-together of the two aspects, of bodily form with symbolic density, that is characteristic of Christian liturgical or ritual action, makes it hard to draw a sharp line between established western Christian religious practices and ritual action more generally, just as it makes it difficult to draw a distinction between ritual and non-ritual action.” Liturgy is crucial to the religious experience and the engagement of the worshipping subject. Its sensory aspects are inseparable from its sense: “. . . insofar as the sensory and aesthetic experience of the Mass is a mode of instruction adapted to the mode of humanity, as Aquinas emphasized, it incites the participants’ spiritual desire to penetrate further into the secret, and worship ever more ardently. Were the smell of incense or the sight of the procession or the savor of the elements mere triggers for the recollection of concepts, they might do their work on one single occasion, once and for all. But they must be repeated and returned to, and this suggests that they are vehicles for the forward moving of human spiritual desire, which can never entirely be disincarnate and so separated from these physical allurements.”

Rahul Govind further engages with the question of the subject, or rather its “fade-out” under the weight of that temporality of progress that defines modernity. Providing close readings of Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* and the *Treatises*, Govind exposes the lability of the political subject. “Although Locke is known for his epistemological skepticism toward the subject/person in his *Essay*, this very skepticism indexes an overall interest in thematizing the relationship between subject-formation and temporality. The latter cannot be extricated from a theological cum Christological horizon.” Therefore Govind generates an unexpected reading of Mill: “It has been conventional to further define modernity in terms of the freedom of a political subject from a theological determination: among others, Mill is taken as exemplary. By contrast I wish to argue that a rigorous scrutiny of the meaning and validity of such a subject—in which the rendering of time as progress inheres—calls it into question.”

Three essays follow that provide further framework to the philosophical and political-theoretical tensions of modernity. Rebecca Gould demonstrates how

the tradition of a Platonic orientation toward law faces a set of anti-normativist challenges in work of Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin, which she carefully parses. Nietzsche too belongs to that anti-normativist camp, and Paul di Georgio exposes aspects of an unexpected necessity in the Nietzschean account of the historical development of Judeo-Christian values. Juan Carlos Donado looks at the status of fiction in Descartes' *Meditations*, especially the role of chiasmus.

Steven Knepper dissects pastoral and progressivist myths concerning the countryside; drawing on thinkers as diverse as William Faulkner, Wendell Berry, Raymond Williams, and Christopher Lasch, he calls in effect for a new theorization of the countryside. A robust exchange follows between Luciano Pellicani, who insists on the priority of a secular rationalism among the American "founding fathers," and Adrian Pabst, who argues for the significance of the Christian tradition. There is a historical dimension to this exchange, alternative estimations of the eighteenth century. However what is really at stake is the status of religion in modernity. The issue closes with a note by Matt Applegate on the fascinating 1956 exchange between Horkheimer and Adorno on the possibility of radical politics, entitled posthumously *Towards a new Manifesto*. Finally, Derek Hillard reviews David Durst's translation of Ernst Jünger's *On Pain*, and James Schall comments on *A Journal of No Illusions*, an anthology concerning the origins and history of *Telos*.

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