

Spectres of Duty

Silence in Ibsen's *Ghosts*

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The article considers Ibsen's *Ghosts* through the figure of duty. The two main characters embody different notions of duty. Pastor Manders's position is a religious one and Mrs Alving's a political one, but neither can stand on its own. They both infringe upon, and contaminate, each other. This process of self-contamination, which silence sets in motion, leads to an alternative understanding of duty as well as of the political.

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But the auto-immunitary haunts the community and its system of immunitary survival like the hyperbole of its own possibility. Nothing in common, nothing immune, safe and sound, heilig and holy, nothing unscathed in the most autonomous living present without a risk of auto-immunity.

Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and knowledge', chap. 37

I. Duties

The action of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) spans less than twenty-four hours.¹ Mrs Alving is preparing to inaugurate an orphanage in memory of her dead husband. Her son, Oswald, has returned from abroad for the occasion. This is only the second time Oswald is back in Norway since he was sent away as a young boy. The opening as well as the running of the orphanage is entrusted to Pastor Manders, an old friend who also arrives for the occasion. Much of the first act is taken up by a conversation between Mrs Alving and Pastor Manders about marital duty and maternal responsibilities. She recounts how she remained with Captain Alving, a debauched husband she did not love, only in order to protect Oswald. This 'family drama' – the play's subtitle – is set in relief against the mercurial relation between the housemaid, Regina, and Engstrand, who is presented initially as her father, only to be proved otherwise.

The fact that the play dealt with significant contemporary social issues, such as notions of duty, earned the critics' approval of *Ghosts*.² Yet, according to the prevalent interpretative approach, the play is flawed because the ideas are not supported by adequate dramatic action. The origin of this judgement is Bernard Shaw who contended that the ideas and themes in *Ghosts* have the gravity proper to a great work, but the technique is deficient.³ For instance, under close scrutiny the climactic moments of the play are found wanting. The burning down of the orphanage on the night of its opening is not precipitated by the dramatic dialogue itself and hence does not contribute to the completeness of the characters. And the final scene, in which the following dawn Oswald exhibits the softening of the brain due to the syphilis he inherited from his father, is only ad hoc tragic, since a disease is not determined by the actions of any character, and therefore lacks the significance requisite to a social tragedy.⁴ Robin Young succinctly presents the reception of the play in writing that the 'power [of *Ghosts*] derives from the intricate thematic unity throughout the play' but the 'deficiencies of its dramatic structure' make it a 'static play'.⁵

The hypothesis tested here is that *Ghosts* is not merely a *drame à thèse*. Instead, the technique of the play, the *stasis* in *Ghosts*, is inseparable from the central debate between the characters about what constitutes a duty. Or, to put this differently, the literary force of the play arises through its philosophical import.⁶ How is duty related to spectrality? In other words, how can duty be understood in terms of that which returns, in terms of a repetition that structures singularity? How is dramatic tension co-articulated with the paradoxical structure of singularity and repetition? In order to pursue these questions, it is useful to sketch a genealogy of the central conceptual idea in *Ghosts*, the concept of duty.⁷

Historically, there are two divergent ways of understanding how a duty is to be dispensed with, by whom and towards what purpose. The divergence depends on whether duty is understood as the basis of the social or, alternatively, as a product of society – that is, whether duty contains, or whether it is contained by, sociality. One of the most influential expositions of the first position is found in Cicero's *De officiis*. *Officium* does not mean merely 'obligation' or 'responsibility'. In addition, there is a functional element: *officium* lies at the foundation of society. Cicero's argument can be summarized by starting with the definition of man as a rational animal: it is through the operation of reason that duty arises.⁸ Man is both

inconceivable without reason and reason necessitates duty. Therefore, duty is the basis of men's common existence. This notion of duty remains constant from antiquity through Christianity and will not be significantly challenged until Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes's insistence on a state of nature preceding society no longer defines man as a rational animal. Before reason – and the *before* here is not simply an anterior epoch but constitutive of the ontology of the human – there is a network of power relations that barely distinguishes between man and animal.⁹ In this sense, man is not social *ab initio*, but becomes so through agreement or contract. Consequently, duties are products of this contract and function as limitations of man's uncontrollable nature. *While for antiquity and Christianity duty partakes of the essence of man or humanity, so that duty contains the social, conversely, for a certain Enlightenment tradition, duty is contained within the existential potentialities of the human being.*

In *Ghosts* there are at least two different extrapolations of duty which are not simply incompatible, but even definable and understandable in opposition to each other. Pastor Manders holds forth an idealized notion of duty that must be upheld always and by everyone. Mrs Alving's idea of duty is directed towards the attainment of happiness for herself and her son regardless of abstract principles. Manders espouses, *mutatis mutandis*, the Stoic and Christian understanding of duty and Mrs Alving a position closer to the one that sees duty as a product of the social possibilities within each individual.

Regardless of the different notions of duty, however, the way that both Manders and Mrs Alving act and speak has one element in common: they remain *silent* about something in expressing their ideas about duty. Looking at how these silences operate will open up a way to broach the different politics espoused by Manders and Mrs Alving. Their speeches work through the use of silence, while silence is also inscribed in their respective conceptual extrapolations of duty. In addition, a silence permeates *Ghosts* that is not to be equated just with the speeches of each individual character, but with the play as a whole: the silence about the syphilis transmitted from Captain Alving to Oswald.¹⁰ Syphilis remains an unutterable word – a silent signifier around which, nevertheless, all the words and action of the drama revolve.¹¹ In other words, it is by using silence that the different characters attempt to impose their notion of duty, and, simultaneously, the text of *Ghosts* is circumscribed by the silencing of

the venereal disease that plagues the family. At the same time, the two silences interact. The immunity that each character seeks for his or her idea of duty is contaminated by the play itself. Even more emphatically, if the immune system of each extrapolation of duty has the silence about the disease inscribed in it, then the poisoning occurs from the inside. *Duty poisons itself and in this sense disease allows for a different politics of silence.*¹² How does spectrality effect this self-poisoning?

II. Ensuring the divide of private and public

Contrary to Engstrand, for Pastor Manders duty is always the abandonment of self-interest and self-profit. Manders understands duty as an inviolable principle. For instance, a wife's duty is, as he tells Mrs Alving, to remain with her husband regardless of the circumstances: 'we have our duty to do, Mrs Alving! And it was your duty to stand by the man you had chosen, and to whom you were bound by sacred ties' (Ibsen 1961, 371). This is a principle because it defines something essential in the human and hence no particular reality should be able to dislodge it. Thus, it must be followed even in the most adverse circumstances. In which case – and this is Mrs Alving's case when she returns to her debauched husband – the actor or doer of the duty is a martyr, sacrificing herself for the higher principle, for the attainment of humanity. Yet this sacrifice cannot be isolated onto one duty. Rather, one principle follows another, there is a whole system of principles and all of them must be followed. Thus, Mrs Alving, according to Pastor Manders, has failed as a mother because she sent her son away: 'Just as you once denied your duty as a wife, you have since denied it as a mother' (p. 372). An individual must follow those principles, but the principles themselves are a manifestation of what is essentially human, and hence they follow – or haunt – the individuality of every singular person.

Thus a distinction is drawn between the particular individual of the here and now and an eternal individuality or humanity. The latter, which encapsulates duty and sociality, must take ontological precedence: humanity will be the foundation of any particular individual. Manders insists that the particular circumstances must be subservient to the inviolable principles. Nevertheless, implicit in Manders's position is the recognition that the principles that follow or haunt the essence of being

human are like ghosts, which cannot be realized and which need the support of a here and now, pragmatic authority in order to sustain them. Manders cannot, of course, openly admit that. In order to silence it, he has recourse to the distinction between the private and the public individual. This distinction seeks to displace the clear opposition between the eternal and the particular. Duty now will be defined either with a recourse to the essence of the individual, or through the essential authority bestowed upon a public body – yet, which of the two definitions is preferred is entirely contingent, dependent upon the *circumstances* and the *particular* details of the argument. Thus, while the duty of the individual will have to be, according to Manders, an eternal and inviolable principle, nevertheless Manders only has recourse to the here and now – the authority of others – as a foundation of that principle. Manders surreptitiously – that is, *silently* – hides the spectral foundation of the principle as such, which is thus disfigured and loses its foundational power, transferring it instead to that which it was supposed to confound. The spirit retreats momentarily but immediately returns by lending its authority to selected representatives.¹³

This technique is discernible at those points where Manders seeks to tell apart – to sharply distinguish, to separate, to contain within themselves – the private and the public. This happens, initially, with Manders's reaction to Mrs Alving's books, and then with his insistence against an insurance policy for the orphanage. The liberal 'books, periodicals and newspapers' read by Mrs Alving 'are lying on the table' in full public view, as Ibsen notes in the set instructions (Ibsen 1961, 349). Manders is horrified to see them. Not because he has read them – 'You don't think that I waste my time examining publications of that kind, surely?' Manders rhetorically asks – but because the authority of others, the public opinion, disapproves of them. 'Yes, but your personal opinion ...' Mrs Alving starts to say, but Manders interjects: 'My dear lady, there are many occasions in life when one must rely upon the opinions of others. ... How else would society manage?' (p. 360). Thus, the private opinion is subservient to the public opinion. This does not mean that one, personally, cannot read them. Rather, what matters is precisely the sharp divide between the private and the public. It is not the books themselves that affront Manders, but their being left lying on the table, there for anyone – for the public – to see: '[lowering his voice] But one doesn't talk about it, Mrs Alving. One doesn't have to account to all and sundry for what one reads and thinks in the

privacy of one's own room' (p. 360). For 'society to manage', one's privacy must not be mixed with one's participation in the public realm. The precondition for the social is one's private and eternal duty, which consists of keeping the private and the public apart.

Within the public, all principled or dutiful actions are guaranteed by 'the others'. It is the pragmatic presence of the others, in the here and now, that guards the eternal and inviolable principles. What is at stake in Manders's fierce persistence with the distinction between private and public comes to the fore immediately after the conversation about the books. The question is raised whether the orphanage should be insured with an insurance firm – that is, whether the orphanage should be given some protection within the ambit of the legal organization of society. Mrs Alving is all along willing to leave all such decisions to Manders, yet she does assume that the orphanage will be insured. To her surprise, Manders is fiercely opposed to taking up an insurance policy. The reason is that, counterpoised with the legal order, there is another law, there is the divine order. The orphanage is 'dedicated to a higher purpose' or to serving God (Ibsen 1961, 361). Therefore, Manders contends, it must be perceived to be a manifestation of the divine and of an eternal principle of helping destitute children. 'It would be pretty easy to interpret things as meaning that neither you nor I had faith in Divine Providence' (p. 362). Manders does not say simply that the legal and the divine must be separated. He says that they must be *seen* to be separate for the eyes 'of men in independent and influential position of the kind that makes it hard not to attach a certain importance to their opinions' (p. 362) as well as for 'certain papers and periodicals' that will attack Manders for taking up the policy (p. 363). What matters is neither the act, nor even the principle underlying the act, but rather the opinion of the authorized guardians of the principles. In a part of the dialogue that was left out of the final draft, Manders articulates this explicitly:

One has certain obligations towards the society one lives in. With a good and useful aim in life to work for ... one owes it to that aim and one owes it to oneself to appear in the eyes of the public in as blameless a light as possible. Because if one is not blameless, one gets nowhere. (p. 469)

Every private individual has responsibilities, but they are social obligations and duties only so long as they are perceived to be so. Duty is eternal only when particular dutiful actions have been authorized as such.

Manders's position about duty exhibits an invidious circularity sustained and legitimated by the operation of silence. What has to remain silent is the fact of a private individual's obedience to, or duty towards, the principles. The individual cannot express that by using the language of the public laws. The private and the public, the legal and the divine, must be kept separate. This separation of independent and self-contained realms is the only forthcoming insurance for the individual. If one is free of sin, then one will be protected by Divine Providence. Moreover, this private silence – or, silence about the private – is said to comprise one's duty, whose recognition by the others gives rise to the social. However, this does not mean that the private following of the principles is not expressed. On the contrary, the silence that Pastor Manders advocates is expressed any time that the public means of expression are rejected in favour of the private means of expression. The non-signing of an insurance policy is the expression of private virtue and trust in Divine Providence, but it is recognized as a private duty only by the public when it remains unarticulated. The legal or public documents insuring the orphanage – that is, the public expression proper – must be suppressed, silenced. It must only be expressed in silence. The technique of silence distinguishes between expression and explicit articulation in the public realm. Manders's politics of a silent principle of duty dictates that only a silent expression of the private would be a manifestation of the eternal principle of duty. Yet all along this duty, even though unexpressed publicly, is still received by the public in the guise of the 'men in independent and influential position' and of 'certain papers and periodicals'. Despite Manders's best efforts, the public and the private intermingle. Indeed, it is at the points where the intermingling occurs that politics arises – as is the case with Manders's politics of not signing an insurance policy.

At the same time, the weakness – the naivety – of a politics based on the others' authority is evidenced at those moments when the real, the here and now, are affirmed, such as the burning down of the orphanage. Manders's politics of duty is founded upon the silent expression of the individual virtue. This silence is supposed to express the eternity and inviolability of the principle. However, such universality is only possible because of the existence, in particularity or in the here and now, of others bestowed with authority. It is to *ensure* this set up that there must be a division of self-contained totalities: the private, the Divine, the unexpressed, the eternal

and the principled on the one side, and on the other the public, the legal, the expressed, the particular and the pragmatic. Silence is the technique guaranteeing the division and self-containment of the two totalities. This set-up crumbles the moment it becomes obvious that such a division is unsustainable. Not only does the private infringe upon the public – as in the case with the insurance policy – but, more dramatically, this infringement highlights that the conception of the particular and the pragmatic and so on, which was placed surreptitiously at the foundation of the division, is in fact a weak one. While the public and the pragmatic are supposedly subservient to the eternal and the private, in fact they lie at their foundation, giving rise to a notion of reality as the non-eternal, the non-principled. But this is a reality composed only of guilty individuals and accusatory observers, and is confounded the moment that the unspoken in the divide of real and universal affirms its expressive power. The burning of the orphanage is such an expression: what is destroyed with the orphanage is Manders's reality of an eternal duty. The non-eternal, identified as the others or the public, was in fact dictating his politics of silence.

Even though with the destruction of Manders's reality duty as an eternal principle loses its foundation, this does not mean that Manders's expression of the principle of duty is also completely destroyed. The expression persists, albeit as a paradox that consolidates a critical stance against Manders's position. The principle of duty can only operate if there is a division between private and public, or divine and legal. There is a higher principle of duty because it can be distinguished from the public and the legal. Yet, at the same time, what distinguishes the higher principle is the separation of the divine and the private. Because of this circularity the articulation of principles relies on external authorities. The technique in this silence, then, consists in positing the ideal as higher than the real, but proving this only with evidence from the real, that is, from prejudices.¹⁴ The burning of the orphanage is a destruction of the reality of a particular vicious circle, but the technique of silence remains. Technique is not merely content, hence it cannot be obliterated – it cannot be negated absolutely. Yet, although the technique remains, still its materiality has changed: its politics has suffered a fierce critique by having its basis or foundation removed. The principle of silence about one's private duty has found an expression whose implications for the political

and for sociality are a rebuke to the sharp division between private and public.

III. Inheritances

Manders dispenses with his role as a representative of religion by vehemently propagating that duty is an eternal principle, Mrs Manders adheres to her feminine and maternal instincts by insisting that duty is a dispensation of the real – not the eternal. Thus, whereas according to Manders duty is all-encompassing in one's relation to others, for Mrs Alving, on the contrary, duty arises from one's circumstances and is a response to one's relation to others in the here and now. The difference between the two positions is discernible in *Ghosts* vis-à-vis the concept of happiness.

The private and eternal notion of duty is never realized in one dutiful act – as already intimated, there is always an indefinite series of duties to perform. Hence, strictly speaking, duty can never be accomplished, it can never be exhausted. This entails the spectral quality of duty as it is conceived by Manders, and it manifests itself as the absence of happiness. One carries out one's duty as a martyr, sacrificing one's real pleasure. The non-eternal or pragmatic realm where happiness unfolds is subservient to the universality of the real.

All this demanding to be happy in life, it's all part of this same wanton idea. What right have people to happiness? No, we have our duty to do, Mrs Alving! And your duty was to stand by the man you had chosen, and to whom you were bound by sacred ties. (Ibsen 1961, 371)

To seek happiness is to promote something material, real, sensual. Duty is not to be enjoyed but to be suffered: 'Your duty should have been to bear with humility that cross which a higher power had judged proper for you' (p. 372). Duty, says Manders, is a trial that has different stations. Each station must be lived through, but always with this in mind: that the reality of the situation is secondary compared with the endurance of the principle of duty. To deny that and to seek happiness is the natural prerogative of the female spirit. The feminine, 'disastrously selfish and stubborn', is ensnared in the real and cannot let go (p. 373).¹⁵

Manders's notion of reality is, of course, more a pastoral fantasy than a reflection of what actually took place. After hearing him out, Mrs Alving indicates that to him quite unambiguously. In reality, Captain Alving was entirely debauched, unable to restrain his philandering and incapable of fulfilling his duties as a husband. The proof was not only his disease; it was also present in the house as Mrs Alving and Pastor Manders converse: Regina, the fruit of Captain Alving's dalliance with their housemaid. Mrs Alving's point is clear and forceful: her seeking of happiness was not a relenting of any 'sacred duty' but, on the contrary, the assumption of her maternal duty. She wanted to protect her son from the debauched behaviour of his father. Her search for happiness, then, was not a descent into caprice as Manders assumes, but rather the practical attempt to secure a good life for her son and herself. She did not send away her son in order to be free to enjoy herself, but she rather sacrificed her own maternal feelings by sending Oswald away so as to prevent him from being contaminated by his father. 'I felt the child would somehow be poisoned simply by breathing the foul air of this polluted house' (Ibsen 1961, 376). Presented with the facts of the matter, Manders admits that he feels 'quite dazed' (p. 375). Manders realizes that his criticism of Mrs Alving has been unfair, and that indeed Mrs Alving carried out her duty. But, Manders wonders: 'How could a thing like that be kept secret?' How could the fact of Captain Alving's debauchery have remained silent? Manders feels dazed because the technique of Mrs Alving's silence is different from the technique of his silencing the sacred and private duty. By broaching this new technique of silence, Mrs Alving's notion of duty will be clearly delineated.

Silence for Mrs Alving is a practical measure towards the attainment of happiness. Her actions are not dictated by any ideal principle, but by the needs of her household, the network of pragmatic requirements that arise in her everyday living. At the forefront of her mind is the wellbeing of Oswald. Mrs Alving, then, *remains silent in order to deny the ideal*. The denial of ideality constitutes that which is silenced in Mrs Alving's politics of silence. The sacred and eternal matrimonial duty was of no help in the situation Mrs Alving and Oswald found themselves in. Such ideals are useless in the face of adverse circumstances. The here and now of their pragmatic existence at Rosenvold was not going to be taken care of by any spiritual ideas. Instead of blindly following principles, Mrs Alving took

action: 'I took control in the house ... complete control ... over him and everything else.' And this, despite the fact that she was extremely unhappy, as Manders acknowledges: 'What a terrible ordeal for you.' Here happiness comes into play for Mrs Alving: 'I'd never have stood it if it hadn't been for my work. And I think I can say I have worked!' (Ibsen 1961, 376). Happiness is not at all a pleasure that comes upon a passive female, as Manders had assumed. Rather, happiness has to be created. Work is the precondition of happiness – and, hence, happiness and work are the technique of dissimulating that something has been denied by Mrs Alving's politics of silence, namely ideality. There is an enormous labour to be carried out, a labour that is itself caused by unhappiness, but at least retains the redemptive promise that happiness will be forthcoming in the future. Mrs Alving's labour is encapsulated in her silence as the practical means of brushing off any idealist residues of duty and of creating the promised happiness.

Thus, although both Mrs Alving and Manders see the dispensation of duty in keeping silent, and they might even agree on the content of that which is to remain unspoken,¹⁶ still their politics of silences are diametrically different. The difference becomes obvious as soon as the divergent notions of sociality of each silence come to the fore. First, whereas Manders advocated silence as that which would allow for the non-articulation of the private within the public realm, Mrs Alving, on the contrary, advocates silence as the most expedient way of getting along with business, that is, of articulating her personal feelings publicly. For instance, it is purely for practical reasons that she did not make public her discovery of Captain Alving with Regina's mother at the conservatory, and she even admits that she used that affair to her own advantage: 'Because I had a weapon against him, you see, and he didn't dare say anything' (Ibsen 1961, 375). Second, whereas a denial of happiness – the taking over the burden of one's cross – is the manifestation of the ideal within the real, Mrs Alving's unhappiness is the absence of her ideal – that is, happiness – within the actuality of her son's and her own life. Mrs Alving has been working to rectify things because the skewed reality makes her unhappy. At the same time, her unhappiness and the labour it entails contain the promise of a better life. And that's a better life here, in this world, presumably with her son in later years. A better *lived* life, not a burden that must be shouldered

despite its being devoid of hope, being permeated instead only with fear – the fear of others and their authority.

Nonetheless, at the same time, Mrs Alving's silence also expresses what her labour seeks to deny – namely, the ideal. This ideal, happiness, enters the orbit of a vicious circle which contaminates her position as soon as happiness is not merely the regulative or formal precondition of her actions, but actually becomes imbued with a specific content. This content is, for Mrs Alving, Oswald's inheritance.¹⁷ The orphanage was ostensibly built to honour the memory of Captain Alving, but in fact, for Mrs Alving, it has a specific purpose: 'I didn't want Oswald, my son, to inherit a single thing from his father' (Ibsen 1961, 377). Mrs Alving determines the extension of the term 'inheritance' here to two specific referents: she did not want Oswald's happiness spoiled by any rumours about the debauchery of his father, so the memorial was built to quench the rumours before they even started; and she did not want Oswald to inherit anything from his father's estate, all of which was donated towards the establishment of the orphanage.¹⁸ According to Mrs Alving, then, happiness is built by eliminating everything in the term 'inheritance' that can metonymically bind Oswald to his father. In other words, Mrs Alving articulates her private imperative to action in such a way as to circumscribe the public terms of reference for Oswald's 'inheritance'. In fact, the scission of the relation between Oswald and his real father is the culmination and telos of her maternal duty, as it is conceived by Mrs Alving. Moreover, it is towards this obliteration of the 'real' Captain Alving and the silencing of anything to do with him that Mrs Alving has expended a great deal of her labours: not only in terms of building the memorial, but also in the letters she wrote to Oswald in which she constructed an idealized image of his father.

It is precisely this idealized image, recalcitrant and indelible, that Oswald *has* inherited. Despite her best efforts to deny the ideal, Mrs Alving's own actions continuously reaffirmed its intractable mark. The imago of the father comes to haunt Oswald. Its power appears more erosive than any rumours and more taboo than the Alvings' marriage of convenience. At the moment Oswald and Regina are overheard flirting in the room next door, Mrs Alving realizes that her plans for happiness have floundered – and it is as a desperate attempt to salvage Oswald's happiness that she is even prepared to allow his union with Regina, his half-sister. The father

image, which actually may be anything but ‘ideal’ in any ethical sense, appears before Mrs Alving upon hearing Oswald and Regina at the end of Act I. The dead spirit has returned to haunt the living: ‘Mrs Alving: [*hoarsely*] Ghosts! Those two in the conservatory ... come back to haunt us’ (Ibsen 1961, 378). It will be recalled that Mrs Alving conceived of her silence about Captain Alving and Regina’s mother in the conservatory as a practical means of taking control over the household and of eliminating any residues of ideality from the dispensation of her maternal duty. It now appears that her attempt to excise the ideal from the real, the universal duty from the practical work towards happiness, was in actuality also an affirmation of that which she sought to deny. The project or telos of obliterating the ‘real’ Captain Alving has no other result than the image of the father returning to haunt the family. Crucially, this is not solely the image of Captain Alving – if that were the case, then Mrs Alving would have been successful in circumscribing the father’s identity and thereby restricting its referents. Rather, what returns is the ideality of the image as such, the father as an eternal principle. Oswald is *like* his father, he has *inherited* the father – not only Captain Alving, but the metaphorical father inheres in the son.

No matter *what* work has been done, no matter *how* the real has been promoted, the ideal always returns in the guise of the ghost. It is from this perspective that Mrs Alving’s famous speech about ghosts must be read:

Ghosts. When I heard Regina and Oswald in there, it was just like seeing ghosts before my eyes. But then I’m inclined to think that we are all ghosts, Pastor Manders, every one of us. It’s not just what we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunts us. It’s all kinds of old defunct theories, all sorts of defunct beliefs, and things like that. It’s not that they actually *live* on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them. I’ve only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. Over the whole country there must be ghosts, as numerous as sands of the sea. And here we are, all of us, abysmally afraid of the light. (Ibsen 1961, 384)

There is no resignation or fatalism in Mrs Alving’s speech. On the contrary, she remains brutally pragmatic, focused on the practical side of things. But now the realization has dawned on her that inheritance is transmitted regardless of an individual’s actions. It is not a content that is inherited, not ‘*what* we inherit from our mothers and fathers that haunts us’. It is, rather, the fact of there being a spectral inheritance – the inhering

of spectrality.¹⁹ Therefore, the ideal returns in the guise of a definition of the human as being impossible to be unburdened of that inheritance: 'we are *all* ghosts ... *every one of us*'. The plural of the personal pronoun – 'us' – is an acknowledgement of the ineliminability of the ideal, a recognition that her practical measures still posited what they sought to deny. Mrs Alving recognizes this while remaining faithful to her practical side, still being attentive to what is going on around her, without letting her response become subservient to authority or prejudice. In other words, she clearly articulates the inexhaustibility and spectrality of the ideal, that is, she verbalizes that which negates her own technique of expression – her own silence. In her famous speech about ghosts, Mrs Alving affirms the ideal that her own politics of practical happiness sought to eliminate.

IV. Portions, potions

The failure of Mrs Alving's duty is not the same as the failure of Pastor Manders's duty. The two should not be confused, nor allowed to merge. The idealized duty propagated by Manders collapsed through the pressure of the real, at the moment that the real reinstated its power – either as the actuality of Captain Alving's debauchery or as the burning of the orphanage. This reinstatement of the real is, as already intimated, a critique through negative means of Manders's idealism, universalism and essentialism. Ibsen's critique is manifest as the near ridicule of Manders in Act II, when he is completely manipulated by Engstrand to promise financial assistance for his guesthouse – to commit church funds to what effectively will be a brothel. The deplorable naivety of the pastor is easily exploited by Engstrand's devilish cunning.²⁰

Conversely, the practical duty of the here and now propagated by Mrs Alving failed through the persistence of the ideal. The spirits return to contaminate the enacting of her maternal duty – her pursuit of happiness. Whereas Mrs Alving was seeking a potion to remedy the 'foul air' polluting her household and threatening to poison Oswald (Ibsen 1961, 376), the potion had already infected Oswald as a poison: the disease contracted from his father. This is not merely a practical failure, but also an affirmation of the idealized father image. After Oswald has disclosed to his mother that he suffers from the unnamed and unnameable disease – syphilis – he laments the fact that, as he thinks, his reckless behaviour,

rather than a familial contamination, is responsible for the disease: 'If only it had been something inherited ... something one couldn't have helped. But this! The shame of it, throwing everything away like that, wantonly, thoughtlessly ... happiness, health, everything ... one's future, one's whole life ...!' (p. 397). Despite – or, rather because of – Mrs Alving's best efforts, her son wants the ghost of his father. Oswald desires the idealized father image along with its poisoned inheritance. It has already been shown that Mrs Alving, unlike Pastor Manders, is not blind to the consequences of her silence. Her speech about ghosts indicates she does not shrink away from the only conclusion to be drawn from her practical circumstances – namely, that the practical is imbued (or, contaminated) with the ideal, the ideality that her silence had sought to deny.

Yet, however courageous this recognition might be, and however consistent with Mrs Alving's assuming her practical responsibilities, nevertheless it is not a recognition that can bring any solace, let alone any certainty. Indeed, as her final words in the play testify, she is in fact confronted with the abysmal uncertainty about how to respond to that which inheres in Oswald: '[*She shrinks back a step or two and screams.*] No, no, no! ... Yes! ... No, no!' (Ibsen 1961, 422). Oswald's condition has suddenly deteriorated: the softening of his brain has transformed him into an inarticulate fool, a shadow of his former self. Her son has become a mere body. Oswald's mind is gone, the spirit has left him – it has left him precisely when the spirit of his father, the spirit of *the* father as the indelible inheritance, has returned. At this moment Mrs Alving is faced with undecidability: does she poison her son with the morphine, as he has beseeched her? Or, does she let him live on, albeit only as a body bereft of spirit? Her vacillation – 'no, yes, no' – is, again consistent with the situation: when the ghost returns, there is no certainty. Every security that had been afforded by the 'real' has now been eroded. Although Mrs Alving's idea of maternal duty was based on separating the real from the ideal, the pragmatic from the eternal, the practical from the universal, still at the moment of crisis all portions are not so much disproportionate, as rather devoid of any sense of proportion whatsoever – they are disproportioned or un-portioned. The potion will be forever both poisonous and remedial. More accurately, it is the point where the potion spontaneously turns the remedy into poison and the poison into remedy. There is no right action for Mrs Alving – and yet there is no false action either. What is she

to do? A merciful euthanasia will be a practical solution premised on an ideal of life and humanity, while a non-intervention would be an affirmation of the ideality of the son by being left with a barely sentient body. Mrs Alving's tragedy resides in this paradox of uncertainty.²¹ It is a tragedy because it cancels out Mrs Alving's justification for her duty, namely to act so as to achieve happiness. Mrs Alving's imperative to praxis now transfigures itself into an apraxia, a spirit-induced paralysis affecting both herself and her son.

The utmost caution must be exercised at this point. A careless reading will hastily infer that, since Manders and Mrs Alving both failed in their different ways to accomplish their idea of duty, then the only person standing triumphant at the end is Engstrand.²² Indeed, Engstrand is the only character in the play who has been successful. Within the few hours of the play's action, he has secured both the funds for his enterprise as well as the services of Regina. Yet to hastily conclude that Ibsen hails the success of Engstrand would be to miss the point entirely. *Ghosts* is about spectrality, about the inexhaustibility of the relation between the eternal and the real. Engstrand is successful only to the extent that his technique of lying succeeded in imposing onto others a specific content, that is, the project of the guesthouse. But Engstrand's technique of silent deceit has its own ghosts – namely, all that which give rise to the unmasking of his lying – which are going to come to the fore sooner or later. No one can succeed over the ghosts, and that's why *Ghosts* is not about Engstrand's success. To read *Ghosts* as a play about spectrality entails taking the inexhaustibility of the ghost seriously. This has two aspects: first, the recognition of what Manders's and Mrs Alving's positions on duty have in common; and, second, whether anything is thereby asserted that is reducible neither to Manders, nor to Mrs Alving, nor to the sum of the positions articulated by any characters in *Ghosts*, but in which, rather, the material and social form of duty resides.

Manders's and Mrs Alving's positions on duty have in common the insistence on a portioning of the real and the ideal. Their practice of a politics of silence consists in this portioning as such – regardless of the fact that their silences, and hence the content they ascribe to duty, may be different. They may construe this portioning of real and ideal in different ways – as it has been argued, Manders privileges the ideal in the guise of the eternal principle of duty, whereas Mrs Alving privileges the actuality of

her situation as the basis upon which any dutiful action can be taken. And, as it has also been indicated, their privileging opposite sides of that portioning has different effects – the exposition of Manders’s politics and the erosive uncertainty encountered by Mrs Alving. But what remains constant is the fact that they both insist on portioning. Moreover, they insist on holding the ideal and the real apart, because such a sharp separation for them is a potion, a remedy, that holds the social together: for Manders, the sanctity of the private guarantees the public sphere, while for Mrs Alving the public labour leads to personal happiness. In both cases, it is a remedy with a telos, a specific notion of successful outcome – the prevailing of principles or the happiness of mother and son. However, this drive towards a success is also in both cases a contamination by the very potion that they used as the means of reaching their telos. The potion – the means – turns into poison. Both Manders and Mrs Alving aim to immunize their ideas of duty from something that inheres in them – either the real, which surreptitiously becomes the foundation of the ideal in the guise of authority, or the ideal, which inheres nonetheless in the futural happiness sought by the mother as well as in the son’s image of the father. They both, then, try to insure their construal of duty against something within it, to sacrifice or eliminate something that inheres in it – in other words, they pursue their *project* as the treatment of an auto-immune disease, as the attempt to obliterate the opposing portion which, however, not only intimately belongs to them as well, but also is that which gives surety to their side and protects its existence. And yet, it was precisely the persistence with a project – that is, with a telos, an image of futural success, a persistence in the attempt to dominate the other portion despite its endurance – that ultimately led to their own self-poisoning. Thus, at a certain point, their politics of silent domination was so eroded from the inside – eroded by the auto-immunity haunting it – that it imploded.²³

Only by recognizing that the portioning of the politics of silence is motivated by a politics of domination can a different construal of duty be allowed to emerge. This will be a duty as affirmation of dis-portioning, or of the unfolding of difference. Difference is not merely an embracing of the other’s position – because, then, the other will still be the potion for a remedy of oneself. Rather, it is a difference inscribed in one’s own position – that is, the recognition that what matters is not the bifurcation of real and ideal, but rather the relation between the two. This affirms an

unfolding that responds to a universality but with recourse to singularity. In other words, it is the recognition that the ghost inheres, that the potion is both poison and remedy, and that *auto-immunity is the site where politics is carried out*. This might appear all too similar to Mrs Alving's position as it was articulated in her speech about ghosts. But there is a crucial difference: Mrs Alving was still thinking about a politics of power and was lamenting the fact that power always escapes one's grasp; whereas an affirmation of difference as the foundation of singularity entails the continual enacting of relations to the universal as well as the interruption of those relations. What is thereby acknowledged is the fact that power as domination is always present; but power as relation does not assume subjugation as its telos. Instead of a notion of domination that contains the political, it rather affords the power of judgement, the power to make decisions about the relations between the singular and the universal. *This power of judgement is the site of the social*. Thus, the pernicious undecidability plaguing Mrs Alving has been avoided – although this only means that no decision can be made about how the real can dominate the ideal. In other words, undecidability is no longer a pure failure of the project. Instead, if there is a notion of undecidability that endures or inheres – a spectral undecidability – that's an undecidability lacking in guarantees or authority, without any assurances about the successful accomplishment of the project, unable to lament the non-fruit of a utopian image because there was none from the start. Indeed, it is an undecidability precisely to the extent that it does not try to manipulate or manufacture the future and in that sense it is an affirmation of a politics without a secure foundation – *the identification of the political as the being open towards the ghost*.

Allowing for the ghost to arrive is, then, a creative endeavour – it is the creating of social relations, the creation of sociality. The ideal and the real are no longer apportioned to self-contained totalities, but rather positioned in a differential and productive relation. Because this relation is *productive* it need not be articulated by any character in *Ghosts*. Rather, it resides in the interstitial movements of that which remains silenced in the discourses of each character. In other words, it produces a silence that is not reducible to any of the silences of any of the characters individually. This new silence is no longer caught up in the politics of silence that is plagued by the bifurcation of the private and the public or the real and the ideal. This new

notion of silence can be applied to the play as a whole. But Ibsen's technique of silence is not reducible to a single content – the syphilis. This new silence, rather, establishes a productive force within the text. This is an affirmation of silence as a *techne*, that is, silence as the productive or creative impetus of the text. The text's continuous interpretation – or, rather, the continuous *possibility* of its interpretations, its interpretability – is guaranteed by the spectral inexhaustibility that shatters all illusions of containment of, and domination over, communication. Here, there are no longer any chimeras, no steadfast distinction between idealized or practical determinations of duty. *Ghosts* itself becomes a site open to the ghost, that is, a site that creates its own futural unfolding. The critical project will consist in assuming the responsibility of enacting such an unfolding.

However, alongside this creative text and its critical elaboration, the ghost also has to admit of a further aspect: namely, its also having already been created. This is not merely to point out that the technique and content dichotomy with its various permutations (ideal and real, theory and praxis, principle and action, and so on) is as old as the ghost itself. Rather, and more importantly, it is an affirmation that such a state of affairs cannot even arise unless the ghost's return is permitted. In other words, it is the possibility of returning or repetition, of the reaffirmation of something already created. As soon as this possibility arises, then it inscribes itself on a double matrix: the literary and critical project on the one hand, and the political on the other. The endurance of openness – the return of the ghosts – escapes the confines of the page. In a sense, the ghost was created before the page, before the text titled *Ghosts* and signed by Henrik Ibsen. However, this gives rise to a new politics – a politics that may retain silence, but in such a way as not to be defined in terms of domination. This new politics of silence, which permeates – haunts – *Ghosts*, arises from the inexhaustibility of the ghost. Because the ghost cannot be exhausted, then it cannot be fully articulated. It is no longer permissible to view it from the perspective of an imperative to complete articulation or containment, because as a ghost it escapes the confines of individual intentionality. The ghost has been before the individual – no less than it will also be after it. The new politics of silence, then, is a politics of *spectral* silence: a politics in which the ghost is allowed to appear but without the intention to master it or to use it for mastering someone else.

With the politics of spectral silence, a *contretemps* has been introduced: the temporality that arises at the point of tension between the being creative and the having been created. Here, the philosophical comes into play. Not the philosophical as the pursuit of a perennial truth, but rather as the justification – as the making possible – of the dual unfolding in time of the new politics of silence. Specifically in *Ghosts*, the philosophical consists in the recognition that notions such as duty and the social have been received by the text, no less than worked through in the text. The religious notion of principled duty is inadequate to deal with the past that determines the reality of the now. The practical search for happiness in a created future fails because it forgets that the future as an ideal is already inscribed in the past. Out of these two impasses, another notion of duty arises. This is a notion of duty *created* by those impasses, albeit not stated explicitly. Moreover, such a creation could not have been explicitly articulated, because its technique consists in responding to the demands that arise out of the juxtaposition of the real and the ideal. This is a *singular* demand, non-reducible to a particular articulation. This is a singular duty that befalls every reader of *Ghosts* qua reader of the ghost – that is, a duty that is inexhaustible, enacted as a response to the articulation of reality and ideality, and non-containable within any stable discourse or fixed personal identity. A duty created and, thereby, still to come.

NOTES

1. See Ibsen 1961.
2. For the early reactions to *Ghosts*, see Egan 1972.
3. Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891); see e.g. Shaw 1979, p. 152 and *passim*. Shaw has been deeply influential in the reception of Ibsen in English. In other countries, the reception of *Ghosts* was characterized by a focus on the content at the expense of the technique of the play. For instance, the most influential critic in the German reception of Ibsen was the Danish Georg Brandes. Brandes's writings derived authority from his personal relationship and extensive correspondence with Ibsen. (For an engaging account of Ibsen's and Brandes's relationship, see McFarlane 1979.) As David George asserts, 'Brandes was primarily interested in Ibsen's ideas and rarely discussed his technique,' and for Brandes *Ghosts* was interpreted through its determinism (George 1968, 30). This view, then, became widespread, regardless of whether Ibsen was viewed as a naturalist or a realist. In Austria, also, Hugo von Hofmannsthal had expressed a similar view in his article of 1891, 'Die Menschen in Ibsens Dramen' (see Hofmannsthal 1979).

4. As Ronald Gray puts it in relation to the fire: 'The fire, which has strictly nothing to do with her [Mrs Alving's] actions ... is thus ... unconnected with the sequence of events' (Gray 1977, 75–76). And as Gray concludes about both the fire and Oswald's syphilis: 'The lack of connection between her [Mrs Alving's] conduct and the two catastrophes is a serious fault in the construction of the play' (p. 78). Cf. also *infra*, n. 22.
5. Young 1989, 92. John Chamberlain concurs (Chamberlain 1982, 84), and he also discusses a number of articles that distinguish between the technique and the message of *Ghosts*, only in order to disparage the former.
6. The philosophical here is not to be understood as the imposition of a system of thought upon *Ghosts*, but rather as the relations that are allowed to unfold between message and technique within the parameters set up by the play itself. The philosophical approaches to *Ghosts* tend to read the text through the terms of a specific system or philosopher. Thus, for instance, Charles Leland in 'Ghosts seen from an existential aspect' reads Mrs Alving's predicament in terms of existentialism (Leland 1974); and Jane Ellert Tammany in *Henrik Ibsen's Theatre Aesthetic and Dramatic Art* reads the play through the lens of Kierkegaard (Tammany 1980). This is not to say that they do not offer useful insights: Leland is correct to point out Manders's essentialism and Tammany's discussion of the Kierkegaardian Moment is interesting. Rather, the problem is that any reading of a work through categories of a specific philosopher or system is faced with a pernicious dilemma: either the collapse of the distinction between literature and philosophy, or the privileging of philosophy over literature. The most interesting philosophical discussion of Ibsen – which however does not focus on *Ghosts* – is Charles R. Loyns's 'Ibsen's realism and the predicates of postmodernism'. Loyns uses Freud, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida to show the central paradox of *reading* Ibsen's realist dramas: 'to read these plays as social documents consigns them to the failure of rationalism; to see them as manifestations of the subjective relegates them to an irrelevant solipsism' (Loyns 1994, 191). As it will be argued, this double bind is staged in *Ghosts* through the contradictory positions on duty espoused by Mrs Alving and Pastor Manders.
7. Horst Bien observes that a discussion of *Ghosts* (and the *Doll's House*) is to be carried out in view of how the relation between the universal, the particular and the singular is constructed (Bien 1970, 183). This is also the approach in the present reading of *Ghosts*. Spectrality blends the boundary line between a pure universality and a pure particularity. The notion of duty is discernible in the ways whereby the collapse of a duty based on universality or on particularity is accomplished. Conversely, a new notion of duty will arise when spectrality and singularity are taken into account.
8. The word *officium* is a translation of the Greek Stoic notion of *καθήκον*. At the outset, Cicero defines *καθήκον* in relation to human rationality 'as duty [*officium*] for the performance of which an adequate reason may be rendered' (Cicero 1968, chap. 8).
9. In the famous formulation in chapter 1 of Hobbes's *De cive*, 'Man to Man is an *arrant Wolfe* [Homo homini Lupus]'.
10. In a letter to Sophus Schandorph from Rome, dated 6 January 1882, Ibsen wrote about the negative reception of *Ghosts* upon its publication less than a month earlier:

They [that is, the critics] endeavor to make me responsible for the opinions expressed by some of the characters in the play. And yet there is not in the whole book a single opinion, a single utterance, that can be laid to the account of the author. I took good care to avoid this. The method in itself, the technique which determined the form of the work, entirely precluded the author's appearing in the speeches. (Ibsen 1964, 200)

This is not to suggest that Ibsen as the author is above the work, thereby positing a transcendental subjectivity. Cf. Binswanger 1949, as well as Paul de Man's response in 'Ludwig Binswanger and the sublimation of the self' (de Man 1983).

11. For the most cogent examination of the social and medical background about syphilis in *Ghosts*, see Sprinchorn 2004.
12. Hans Hiebel observes about Oswald's syphilis that 'Das Motive der Krankheit scheint jedoch eher als *Metapher* gedacht zu sein, als *Bild* für psychologische und soziale Determinierung' (Hiebel 1990, 108). The present reading suggests the opposite: the motive power of disease in *Ghosts* is crucial for a political and social interpretation of the play – or, even more emphatically, disease in *Ghosts* determines the political and sociality.
13. Northam has analysed Manders's speech, convincingly showing that the unnatural way the pastor speaks – especially his rhythmic locution, or his 'pseudo-verse' as Northam calls it – is a live demonstration of what he preaches: namely, the reliance on others for one's ideas. It is as if Manders has memorized everything he says about duty (Northam 1973, 82–84).
14. Ibsen's attack on the clergy in *Ghosts* is not motivated merely by an animosity towards religious institutions. As a critique of those institutions, it is also an affirmation of a certain politics – a politics of the Enlightenment. This will be obvious if one recalls the opening of Immanuel Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?' Kant defines Enlightenment as the freedom from self-incurred tutelage, the freedom to exercise one's mind unhindered by prejudices and the authority of others (Kant 1998, 53).
15. Manders's is a logocentric and, hence, masculine discourse which is based on the assumption that the multifariousness of the real cannot be tamed. Adherence to the real only leads to ill discipline and disaster. Happiness – and all the pleasures of this world, characteristic of the female spirit – have to be abandoned. A feminist reading of *Ghosts* should start by exposing this assumption in Manders's discourse. Joan Templeton has undertaken a feminist critique of those interpretations of *Ghosts* that consider the drama to have been precipitated by Mrs Alving, because she did not love Captain Alving and hence, when she returned to him, denied him 'marital pleasure' thereby leading him to debauchery. Templeton correctly shows that such interpretations are not supported by the text (Templeton 1997, 146–162). However, Templeton's interpretation is itself limited, precisely because it does not question the assumption upon which a critique of happiness and earthly pleasures is carried out in *Ghosts* – namely, the assumption that these are the prerogative of the feminine. So long as that is assumed, then the interpretation that Mrs Alving is *responsible for* the 'marital pleasures' is legitimate. Conversely, when such an assumption is exposed and undermined, then a feminist critique can be carried out that does not merely bifurcate between the masculine promotion of spirituality and the feminine adherence to bodily pleasure.

16. For instance, they both agree that, in some sense, private matters must remain hidden from the public. Thus, it will be recalled, Manders insists on the individual's right to read liberal books and journals so long as this is not made public. Also, Mrs Alving remains silent about her private relationship with her husband. And, Manders and Mrs Alving concur that the truth about Captain Alving must not be revealed.
17. This notion of inheritance distinguishes Mrs Alving from Nora in *A Doll's House* – a distinction that is rarely remarked upon. While Mrs Alving conceives of her duty as dictated by the happiness of her son also, Nora finds an escape from the 'doll-house' by realizing that she has a duty to herself and her own personal happiness. Although a detailed comparison cannot be carried out here, suffice it to say that Mrs Alving is not simply the obverse of Nora – the wife who stayed behind versus the one who left – but also, and thereby, someone who holds a different justification for her actions and, hence, has a different notion of just duty.
18. 'The money I have donated ... to this Orphanage adds up exactly ... to the amount that made Lieutenant Alving such a good match in his day. ... That was my purchase price ...' (Ibsen 1961, 377).
19. The argument here is that memory in Mrs Alving's speech on ghosts is no longer reducible to the individual, as for instance Gerhard Danzer asserts (Danzer 1996, 82–85). Rather, memory is the ineliminable trace of the ghosts, which is beyond an individual's control. One cannot simply change memory by an individual labour.
20. Engstrand is a character having clear devilish features. These are indicated not only by his bodily deformity and his self-serving manipulations, but also, as Errol Durbach (1978) has shown, in his use of language. Marie Wells is wrong to argue that, as social drama, *Ghosts* must be placed 'within a totally secular framework' which excludes references to the devil (Wells 1994, 141).
21. It would be too narrow to see the tragedy of the final scene only from the perspective of Oswald's mental deterioration, as Bernard Shaw assumes: 'This last scene of *Ghosts* is so appallingly tragic that the emotions it excites prevent the meaning of the play from being seized and discussed' (Shaw 1979, 154). Instead of the drama being concentrated on Oswald, it should actually be sought at the paradox that any action at the end is both right and wrong – both remedy and poison. This would explain Ibsen's reluctance to say what Mrs Alving did. Indeed, the tragedy would dissipate the moment a decision dispels uncertainty. (See also *infra*, n. 22.)
22. Engstrand's success – the success of the demonic in *Ghosts* – has been noted most clearly by Errol Durbach:

For when the Devil speaks the language of the Priest [that is, when Engstrand manages to manipulate Manders] ... an entire moral system stands upon the verge of collapse. This, surely, is what Ibsen means by 'ghosts': dead ideas, emptied of validity, and unscrupulously exploited by hypocrites who can turn the system to their advantage and who invoke moralities which their deviousness consistently undermines. The 'ghost' exists as a pervasive act of language. (Durbach 1978, 59)

Durbach not only infers that the devilish Engstrand dominates signification in *Ghosts*, but also that this domination is what constitutes spectrality. In other words, Engstrand is identified as the dramatic pivot of the whole play. There is a

co-supponibility between disparaging the technique of *Ghosts* and seeing the egoistically antisocial attitude of Engstrand prevail.

23. Derrida has shown how the politics of mastery is steeped into this process of immunity and contamination. Besides his discussion of the *pharmakon* in Plato, Derrida takes this up in *Rogues*, where democracy is articulated as the interruptive power allowed by the auto-immune processes exposing the contradictions of a politics of mastery (Derrida 2005, see esp. part I, chaps 3–4). Derrida also uses the figure of auto-immunity in discussion of the events of 11 September 2001 (see Borradori 2003). For the most important treatment of the political import of auto-immunity in Derrida, see Nass 2006. Gilles Deleuze in *Spinoza* has also used the figure of auto-immunity in relation to the ethical. See his discussion of Spinoza's correspondence with Blyenbergh about evil (Deleuze 1988).

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