

JEFFREY HANSON  
Boston College

## A TALE OF TWO DOUBLETS: DERRIDA AND KIERKEGAARD

### 1. Introducing the Nondogmatic Doublet

In the second essay included in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida speaks rather directly to a central issue of the book, indeed of all his writing on religious topics. Speaking proximately of Patocka, but eventually including here a number of thinkers, Derrida says he is interested in a logic that “has no need of *the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event*. It needs to think the possibility of such an event but not the event itself” (GD, 49).<sup>1</sup> Derrida goes on to associate this approach with a number of “discourses that seek in our day to be religious” (GD, 49).

In different respects and with different results, the discourses of Levinas or Marion, perhaps of Ricoeur also, are in the same situation as that of Patocka. But in the final analysis this list has no clear limit and it can be said, once again taking into account the differences, that a certain Kant and a certain Hegel, Kierkegaard of course, and I might even dare to say for provocative effect, Heidegger also, belong to this tradition that consists of proposing a nondogmatic doublet of dogma, a philosophical and metaphysical doublet, in any case a *thinking* that “repeats” the possibility of religion without religion. (GD, 49)

I have always been surprised by the “of course” (*à n'en pas douter*) that Derrida attaches to Kierkegaard's name as he itemizes his list. And the goal of this paper

---

<sup>1</sup> Clearly this is another way of phrasing the messianism/messianicity bivalence that recurs throughout Derrida's writings on religion. John Caputo sees the connection here as well. “The messianic in general clearly amounts to a non-dogmatic doublet of dogma in the sense that is being described here, a structural possibility of religion without religion, the structural possibility of the religious unencumbered by the dangerous baggage of particular, determinate religions and their determinate faiths” (PTJD, 195).

is simply to vindicate if at all possible my feeling that Kierkegaard does not deserve an “of course” and perhaps does not belong on this list at all because his doublet, if we may call it that, is actually dogmatic and not nondogmatic at all. It is on this basis that I think we can best understand some of the fundamental differences between these two thinkers.

The critically important point to observe straightaway is Derrida’s insistence on the irresolvable nature of the bivalence between the deserted Abrahamic structure and the histories of the particular religious traditions.<sup>2</sup> Derrida was never able to settle fully the question of whether the structure of religion without religion, messianicity without messianism, was itself universal or quasi-universal, abstract, and thus independent of the positive traditions of the religions of the Book or whether the specific particular histories of those religions are themselves “irreducible events” without which “we would not know what messianicity is...” In impromptu remarks on this question, which occupied his attention on a number of occasions, Derrida notably concluded, “I confess that I hesitate between these two possibilities.”<sup>3</sup>

## 2. A Problem with the Nondogmatic Doublet

There is one serious problem that results from this tension within Derrida’s own published statements on the subject that I will briefly sketch. I will follow this problem with a proposal for resolving it on Derrida’s own terms provided by John Caputo. In conclusion, I will provide an exposition of Kierkegaard’s dogmatic doublet and a brief final account of how it differs from Derrida’s.

That difficulty is: Derrida’s supposedly empty structure, despite attempts on his part to distance it from any dependence on the positive religious traditions, nevertheless does have discernable features. A number of commentators have already noticed this.<sup>4</sup> Derrida’s insistence upon the emptiness of the messianic structure is in tension with its clear association with the specific content of our political, ethical, and religious engagements here and now, with Western, liberal

---

<sup>2</sup> Whether the irresolvable status of the doublet can even be sustained on Derrida’s own terms is a separate question that I deal with elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. Edited by John D. Caputo. New York: Fordham University Press, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Smith wonders why the Abrahamic could not be just as easily substituted with another name, like “kharomic” or “Taoist” (RKP, 567). Merold Westphal makes a similar point: “...while Derrida denies that we can have essential knowledge of what, for example, democracy ultimately means, he thinks it quite possible to name the politics of the future ‘democracy’ and not ‘fascism’ or ‘feudalism.’” This comment comes very near the end of “Kierkegaard, Socratic Irony, and Deconstruction,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Irony*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (vol. 2, Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), 390. Smith: “the ethical structure disclosed by this process of desert abstraction retains very distinct geo-political ties: to Abrahamic, Western understandings of ethical obligation and to political democracy. In other words, the elements of this ‘general structure’ remain determined by a particular time, history, and place. And indeed, one of the ‘articles of faith’ of deconstruction is that it could not be otherwise” (RKP, 566).

democracy and tolerance, and indeed, it could hardly be otherwise according to Derrida's own way of thinking. Yet when it comes to the religious language of the messianic rather than the political Derrida himself has expressed reservation about his own vocabulary because of its close connection to specific religious traditions and has tried to emphasize his desire to abstract this conceptuality from a specifically religious context.<sup>5</sup>

As John Caputo has clearly pointed out: "The difficulty is not so much that we do not know what the messianic *means*, since Derrida is clear enough, even quite eloquent...The difficulty is that we are at a loss to describe the status of this undeterminability, this indeterminable messianic, without specific content..." (PTJD, 139).<sup>6</sup>

Despite this ambiguity it seems to me Derrida wishes above all to insist upon the priority of the messianic over messianisms. Despite his avowed indecisiveness, one can cite passages where Derrida speaks more directly in favor of the messianic's priority over all messianisms. For example, in "Faith and Knowledge" he writes somewhat more decisively that, "the Testamentary and Koranic revelations are inseparable from a historicity of revelation itself. The messianic or eschatological horizon delimits this historicity, to be sure, but only by virtue of having previously inaugurated it" (FK, 48). Here the priority is unapologetically placed on the empty dimension of the messianic structure.<sup>7</sup>

Despite statements to the contrary, the messianic structure remains at least to some extent determinate, bearing discernible features drawn from the messianic traditions from which it must nevertheless regard itself as independent.

### 3. Caputo's Solution

Caputo acknowledges with others that "the Derridean messianic does have *certain* determinable features, some of which...it has borrowed from the prophetic tradition, and some of which are Derrida's own invention," which

---

<sup>5</sup> *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> "Further, it is not simply a question of the genealogy or heritage of the structure of ethical obligation (whether Kant's Categorical Imperative or Derrida's 'messianic') which is a problem, nor is it universality *per se*. Instead, at issue is its mode of disclosure, revelation, or what we might describe – in a more Kantian gesture – as the question of its *justification*" (RKP, 567).

<sup>7</sup> Also, "This messianic dimension does not depend upon any messianism, it follows no determinate revelation, it belongs properly to no Abrahamic religion" (FK, 56). Derrida's desire to immunize the messianic against messianisms is so complete that he denies that the former even "depends" on the latter. A perhaps unintended consequence is that Derrida's acknowledged preference for one endangers the tension that purportedly exists between the two, which he also seems to want to maintain. Even outside "Faith and Knowledge," in *The Gift of Death*, Derrida reinforces their interdependence: "There is no choice to be made here between a logical deduction, or one that is not related to the event, and the reference to a revelatory event. One implies the other" (GD, 50). The question might very well be asked, though how one could *imply* the other if the messianic does not depend on a revelatory event.

means we should take Derrida's messianicity without messiah not "as in anyway [sic] overarching the three historical messianisms of the religions of the Book" but instead as "one more messianism, but one with a deconstructive twist, one that deconstruction has bent to its own purposes so that the idea of a *true* messianic in general, or a true universal, is a mistake...for that implies *some kind* of general validity" (PTJD, 142).

On this more prescriptive view the irresolvable tension between the supposedly empty messianic and the determinate messianisms gives way to a new messianism, in favor of which it is possible that Caputo would just as soon have the other messianisms wither away. One might wonder whether Caputo is here overreaching what Derrida's text provides. The "Faith and Knowledge" essay after all begins with the question of how religion can be spoken of in the singular, so there is a concern in Derrida's mind for the "general validity" of the conceptuality he is developing, which Caputo in the quote I just read seems to cast aside.

Without entering further into the matter here, it should be noted that this underlying principle of Caputo's reading of Derrida supports his later interpretation of the difference between Derrida and Kierkegaard to which I now turn. Quoting from a 2002 essay by Caputo: "*The difference lies in the determinacy of the terms – not the depth or intensity – of the decision.* The knight of faith pledges his troth to the paradox of the eternal in time, of the eternal incarnated in the historically determinate man Jesus of Nazareth, which clothes the god in definite historical garb; the affirmation of the impossible in deconstruction, on the other hand, is of a Messiah who can *always be determined otherwise*, of which the proper name of Jesus would be but one determinate form" (LIE, 22).<sup>8</sup> Let's grant that intensity of commitment is an inadequate criterion to apply when adjudicating the difference between Derrida and Kierkegaard; it would be impossible, on a deconstructible sliding scale established by such terms to gauge what exactly would constitute "too much" or "too little" depth of commitment.

However, I must say that while this is an important reading, it may not yet be sufficient to clarify the distinction between Derrida and Kierkegaard. The same concern I just voiced about the insufficiency of appealing to the relative degrees of commitment it seems to me would ultimately also undermine an attempt to separate the two thinkers based on respective levels of determinacy as well. At what point, one might wonder, does indeterminacy become determinate? At what point would the relatively determinate become too determinate, determinate enough to descend into the worst [*le pire*]? And does not this basis of comparison in fact assume an empty abstract superstructure, a field of possibilities that can be clothed in different historical garbs or translated into

---

<sup>8</sup> Caputo pursues the same line of argument in a discussion of the difference between Derrida and Augustine, as he himself acknowledges in a footnote on the same page quoted here. See "What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy." In *Questioning God*. Edited by John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael Scanlon. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, 291-317.

determinate forms? Isn't this the sort of metaphysical trope (of form and exemplar) that Derrida and Caputo were trying to avoid in the first place?

Perhaps these intractable difficulties were what prompted Derrida himself, sensing the questionable appropriateness of the terms he had been depending on, to declare: "I think some other scheme has to be constructed to understand the two at the same time, to do justice to the two possibilities."<sup>9</sup> Just such a scheme I think is present in Kierkegaard's thought, and it is sufficiently different from Derrida's own that it means his name should be taken from the list of partners in constructing the nondogmatic doublet.

#### 4. Kierkegaard's Dogmatic Doublet

Acknowledging then that a mere opposition between the even relatively indeterminate to the relatively determinate is insufficient to distinguish the two positions, we must nevertheless make sense of the feeling that apparently all parties have that there are significant differences between Derrida and Kierkegaard. I would argue that determinacy and indeterminacy are not entirely beside the point but the role that this opposition plays must be specified more carefully. The difference I maintain is this: that Derrida's doublet, which he admits is "metaphysical,"<sup>10</sup> privileges indeterminacy, or at least relative indeterminacy, above the determinate. On this way of proceeding, I would say that Derrida cannot maintain that his own messianicity without messianism actually *is* indeterminate but he can thereby clearly *want to* be indeterminate in a way that Kierkegaard does not. Kierkegaard by contrast, I wish to show, has a doublet that is based on what he calls psychology, a branch of the human sciences, which is admittedly at least in relation with the dogmatic, but also has both a wider relevance than mere dogma and engages the individual in a way that speculative thinking does not. Psychology is Kierkegaard's dogmatic doublet, which permits us to speak of an article of revelation, in this case sin, in a way that holds in suspense the generic possibility of hereditary and thus universal sin and the specific actuality of my own sin, which I have brought into existence.

The crucial text here is the complex introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*, wherein Kierkegaard's pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis provides for his reader a discourse on the nature and division of the sciences. In his journal, Kierkegaard wrote, "Some of the most difficult disputes are all the boundary disputes in the sciences—the boundary between jurisprudence and ethics; moral philosophy and dogmatics—psychology and moral philosophy, etc..."<sup>11</sup> In the Introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety* Kierkegaard attempts to settle some of these debates. In the epigraph to the work Haufniensis writes, "The age of making distinctions is

---

<sup>9</sup> *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Luc Marion has also objected to the term "metaphysical" in this context, stating that if it is to apply to his view he would prefer it be called "phenomenological."

<sup>11</sup> *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970. Volume 1, A-E: IV C 104 n.d., 1842-43.

past. It has been vanquished by the system,” and his introduction, with its veritable thicket of distinctions, seems directly intended to combat the system’s confusion of distinctions, particularly the confusion between metaphysics and dogmatics perpetrated by the deployment of speculative concepts like mediation and reconciliation (CA, 12). And while this polemic against the confusion of the two sciences may seem “extraneous” it is nevertheless, Haufniensis insists, essential to the topic at hand. *The Concept of Anxiety* claims to be a work of psychology, and thus it is important to understand what this discipline is and what it takes as its proper object, in this case anxiety and indirectly, sin. Inasmuch as “the present work has set as its task the psychological treatment of the concept of ‘anxiety’ it must also, *although tacitly so*, deal with the concept of sin. Sin, however, is no subject for psychological concern” (CA, 14).

In fact, not only is sin not a subject for psychology, Haufniensis claims it has “no place, and this is its specific nature” (CA, 14). In the pages that follow Haufniensis demonstrates that sin in fact is altered in both its concept and mood when any particular branch of science—aesthetics, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, and dogmatics—attempts to take it up. I want to pay particular attention to the failure of ethics to deal with sin, as this is the last and most extensive treatment Haufniensis provides, and because as he himself says, “ethics should be a science in which sin might be expected to find a place” (CA, 16). But there is here a great difficulty, and that is that ethics “develops a contradiction” inasmuch as it both imposes infinite demands and recognizes the impossibility of fulfilling them. Like the harsh disciplinarian, it crushes without uplifting—a consequence of what Haufniensis calls its ideality. Ethics never observes according to Haufniensis but is “always accusing, judging, and acting” (CA, 22). The ideality of ethics is peculiar to it, inasmuch as unlike the other “ideal” sciences, ethics tries to make its ideality actual and in so doing assumes that every individual has the capacity to meet its inflexible standards, expectations that cannot be disappointed or altered (CA, 16-7). As Haufniensis says pithily, “The more ideal ethics is, the better” (CA, 17). Because ethics is an ideal science, “Sin, then, belongs to ethics only insofar as upon this concept it is shipwrecked with the aid of repentance” (CA, 17). So shipwrecked, ethics pursues the ever-receding presupposition of sin which increasingly “goes beyond the individual” and eventually must be rescued by dogmatics, which itself does not and cannot grasp sin in its totality but must *presuppose* sin (CA, 19).

Dogmatics in turn provides the nonfoundational foundation of what Haufniensis calls “a new science” that does not begin with metaphysics, as does the “immanental science” of actual ethics (CA, 20). “It is easy,” Haufniensis says “to see that the ethics of which we are now speaking belongs to a different order of things.” While the first ethics foundered on the sin of the individual, the new ethics “explains the sin of the single individual” with the help of dogmatics (CA, 20). The concept of sin, it is worth remembering, still does not belong to any science; “the second ethics can deal with its manifestation, but not with its coming into existence” (CA, 21). We can now make sense of a passage from a draft of the introduction preserved in Kierkegaard’s papers. It is worth quoting at some length:

From what has been said, it may seem that sin has no place in any science, since metaphysics cannot lay hold of it, psychology cannot overcome it, ethics must ignore it, and dogmatics explains it by means of hereditary sin, which, in turn, it must explain by presupposing it. This is quite correct, but it is also correct that sin finds a place within the totality of the new science that is prefigured in the immanent science and that begins with dogmatics in the same sense that the first science begins with metaphysics (CA, 182).

There are some remarkable parallels between metaphysics and dogmatics that should be observed, especially since both occupy analogous roles with respect to the first and second ethics to which each corresponds. The metaphysical, Frater Taciturnus tells us, "is abstraction, and there is no human being who exists metaphysically. The metaphysical, the ontological, is, but it does not exist, for when it exists it does so in the esthetic, in the ethical, in the religious, and when it is, it is the abstraction from or a *prius* to the esthetic, the ethical, the religious."<sup>12</sup> Metaphysics to speak more precisely is not thus a branch of science but the basis of what Haufniensis calls an "immanent" or "ethnical" science, that is to say the pre- or non-Christian (CA, 20; 18 n.; 227 n. 38). The insufficiency of the metaphysical as a basis for the new science is revealed by Taciturnus' statement that it "merely is" and that it does not "exist." That which merely is can be no other and does nothing to account for movement or transcendent leap, which are the hallmarks of the existent. The same parallel is referenced by Haufniensis when he says that "logic is, and whatever is logical only *is*" (CA, 12), which means that "In logic, no movement must *come about*" (CA, 11-2). The new science is founded not on the metaphysical/logical, that which merely is and cannot account for what comes about but on dogmatics, which presupposes the pure possibility of sin and deploys psychology to explain how sin comes about in the individual. Whatever does not exist but merely is, is not an appropriate basis for the new science; with its "light-mindedness" (CA, 20) and "disinterestedness" (CA, 15) it is unsuited to the engaged interest of the individual or the actuality of sin. If metaphysics tries to deal with sin it warps it into something that merely appears incapable of being thought.

Interestingly, sin too seems to be a kind of *prius*, which no science can comprehend but which still enters into different relations with all of them. Haufniensis writes, "As a state (*de potentia*), it is not, but *de actu* or *in actu* it is, again and again" (CA, 15). This is exactly why speculative science cannot grasp it but also why it is so tempting to combine metaphysics and dogmatics in the illicit fashion that Haufniensis decries at the outset of the introduction. As he pointed out there, logic cannot have a place for actuality, and so neither can metaphysics account for sin as a deductive movement from initial premises, helped along its way by mediation. The second ethics, instead impelled by repetition, recognizes that movement happens "not through immanent continuity with the former existence, which is a contradiction, but through a transcendence" (CA, 19).

---

<sup>12</sup> *Stages on Life's Way*, 476.

Furthermore, sin, like the metaphysical, seems to have a unity that exceeds any of the determinations that a particular science or existence-sphere would impose. The difference lies in the fact that metaphysics presents itself as a conceptual totality, what Climacus called the logical system; yet we know also from Climacus that for single individuals there can be no existential system, and indeed we find Haufniensis indirectly agreeing with him inasmuch as he maintains that the only form of discourse where sin belongs is not a science at all but a “sermon, in which the single individual speaks as the single individual to the single individual” (CA, 16). So on the one hand we have metaphysics and the speculative categories, upon which first ethics is based, and on the other hand, we have dogmatics and the second ethics, which is, I would argue, the transformation of the ethical signaled in *Fear and Trembling* but not fully worked out until *Works of Love* and the other texts that belong to what Merold Westphal has creatively dubbed “Religiousness C.”<sup>13</sup> The crucial difference between the two visions of the sciences is that the metaphysical grounds ethics in its conceptual unity and deduces ethics from it according to speculative categories, whereas dogmatics “grounds” the second ethics only by means of repetition and leap.

So where does psychology fit into this picture? Psychology, or what we could also call with Johannes Climacus “the theory of subjectivity” (SAD, 375, 377), is a strange science, one that proceeds by way of “persistent observation, like the fearlessness of a secret agent” (CA, 15). Psychology has in a way no object, or a merely “negative” phenomenon for its object, since anxiety, its topic in this book, itself has no object, and because its enquiry seems to generate its non-object within itself. Haufniensis says that “in its anxiety psychology portrays sin, while again and again it is in anxiety over the portrayal that *it itself brings forth*” (CA, 15). Psychology does not comprehend sin, any more than any of the other sciences, but it does deal with it, though tacitly (CA, 14) and clearly in a way that intensifies sin. This intensification is a product of the fact that psychology is based on and ultimately tends towards dogmatics. By taking as its object anxiety, psychology finds a way to talk about the dogmatic doctrine of sin *without presupposing it*, as dogmatics does, and *without taking into account any specific actual sin*, as ethics does. As Darío González has helpfully put it:

This is exactly the point at which we can understand the necessity of a psychology, an intermediary discipline that focuses on the ‘real possibility’ of sin without indulging the confusion of its dogmatic and ethical dimensions...Psychology is an explicative discipline, we would say, only to the extent that it expresses the necessity of *making sense of the notion of sin* which dogmatics presents in its

---

<sup>13</sup> Westphal, Merold. “Kierkegaard’s Religiousness C: A Defense.” *International Philosophical Quarterly*. 44.4 (December 2004): 535-548; Westphal, Merold. “Kierkegaard’s Teleological Suspension of Religiousness B.” In *Foundations of Kierkegaard’s Vision of Community*. Edited by George B. Connell. New York: Humanities Press, 1992.

formal determinations and ethics discusses in its practical consequences.<sup>14</sup>

How does psychology make sense of sin? First, while dogmatics presupposes that sin is, and ethics deals with its actual “manifestation,” psychology makes sense of sin by explaining its “coming into existence” (CA, 21). It is therefore a science that mediates without mediation. Unlike speculative dogmatics, psychology explains movement by appealing to freedom and not the dialectical necessity engineered by what Haufniensis charmingly refers to as the “strange pixies and goblins who like busy clerks bring about movement in Hegelian logic” (CA, 12). Second, psychology explains sin in a manner that is of interest, and I choose that word deliberately, to the individual. While dogmatics presupposes a concept that is of concern to the whole human race, and this is especially clear when it speaks of hereditary sin, and ethics copes with specific particular sins, psychology deals with the really possible sin of the single individual. Again, to quote from González:

All through the book, the parallel treatment of both notions [anxiety and sin] will imply the encounter of two complementary perspectives: on the one hand, the description of a phenomenon (anxiety) that can only be observed in an individual life, but in such a way that this observation transcends the simple structure of self-reflection; on the other, the presupposition of a condition (sinfulness) that, according to the dogma, affects the human race taken as a whole, but in such a way that this presupposition becomes ethically relevant for each individual person.<sup>15</sup>

What I suggest then, by way of conclusion, is that we think about psychology as the heart of Kierkegaard’s own dogmatic doublet. Like Derrida, he presents us here with a way of speaking about religious concepts that is itself not theological or strictly dogmatic but that eschews the tools and tactics of speculation (SAD, 375). Like Derrida, he wants to speak of religion in a way that conveys its urgency and the demand of engagement. To be sure, Kierkegaard’s doublet can only be called dogmatic as opposed to Derrida’s nondogmatic doublet for a good reason. It is a recurrent theme of the pseudonyms that sin must be revealed. To speak of it, even tacitly as psychology does, is to have one foot in dogmatic terrain. Haufniensis admits as much: “As psychology now becomes deeply absorbed in the possibility of sin, it is unwittingly in the service of another science that only waits for it to finish so that it can begin and assist psychology to the explanation...This science is dogmatics” (CA, 23). And indeed, the book as a whole ends with Haufniensis declaring that “As soon as psychology has finished with anxiety, it is to be delivered to dogmatics” (CA, 162). This way of resolving the tension between revealability and revelation is surely too cozy with

---

<sup>14</sup> “The Triptych of Sciences in the Introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2001*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Herman Deuser, Jon Stewart, with Christian Fink Tolstrup (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 29, 34.

<sup>15</sup> González, “Triptych,” 15.

revelation to suit Derrida. This is not to say however, that psychology is *merely* in the service of dogmatics or can be assumed into dogmatics, if only because, as González has noticed, its objectless object, anxiety, is itself *not a dogma*. Dogma must be as it were interrupted by psychology, in order to transform our ethical categories and to indeed to transform ourselves. As an articulation of a phenomenon that is characteristic of human consciousness, psychology has both a general import while at the same time engaging the interest of the individual. I do not claim that Derrida would be happy with Kierkegaard's doublet, only that it is not like his own, and thus that he cannot "of course" say that Kierkegaard shares his view.

JEFFREY HANSON is adjunct assistant professor of philosophy at Boston College. He is the editor of *Kierkegaard as Phenomenologist*, forthcoming from Northwestern University Press.

©Jeffrey Hanson.

Hanson, Jeffrey. "A Tale of Two Doublets: Derrida and Kierkegaard," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 10 no. 3 (Summer 2010): 54-63.