

**Kant's Imputable Abyss**  
**Mimesis, Freedom, and the Intelligible Ground of Accusation**

**Cameron M. Thomson**

**June 8, 2007**

## Introduction

*People are people through other people.*

Desmond Tutu

*[H]uman activity is misunderstood if it is seen as a sequence of 'responsible' decisions taken by conscious and self-aware persons in control of their lives.*

Rowan Williams

This paper has three main aims. First, I want to propose that Kant's mature theory of freedom devolves from a mistake concerning what he takes to be the *a priori* origin-in-reason of the idea of practical spontaneity. Second, I hope to show how this theory serves to stabilize and rationalize a basic, universal structure of human social interaction whose deployment in practice is, at the same time, the *a posteriori* source of the idea in question. Third, I want to explore an approach to agency that helps to illuminate the ontogenetic conditions of possibility of this deployment. Before beginning, I will briefly rehearse the tasks associated with these aims, sketching in the connections that hold between them.

In the first section of this paper I provide a brief account of Kant's relatively early understanding of practical freedom in terms of '*absolute causal spontaneity*'.<sup>1</sup> I then show how, for Kant, this notion relates to the idea of moral accountability. I argue, next, that the development of Kant's theory of freedom, beginning from this point of departure, is constrained by his assumption that

---

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Cited hereafter as KrV, using the standard A/B edition pagination. From time to time I cite Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Unified ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996). Other Kantian texts will be cited using the following abbreviations:

**Anthro** Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). In some instances I use Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974).

**BL** The 'Blomberg Logic' in Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, trans. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

**Conj** Immanuel Kant, "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History," in *Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

**Gr** Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

**JL** The 'Jasche Logic' in Kant, *Lectures on Logic*.

**KpV** Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

**KU** Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

**MS** Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

**R** Reflexionen

**Rel** Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (Toronto: Harper & Row, 1960).

In general the *Akademie Ausgabe* volume and page number will be given immediately following these and then the page number for the translation used, if there is one. Additional *Nachlaß* will be referenced by way of their AA volume and page number.

practices such as accusing and defending, condemning and acquitting, punishing and rewarding, no matter how unjust particular instances of these may be, always evince their practitioners' possession, or the implicit operation, *a priori*, of his idea of practical spontaneity. Kant imagines, in other words, that even without their having thematized this notion, and even though they may explain their actions with reference to religious and metaphysical categories, human beings have always considered one another in a way that implies this notion's *a priority*. He thus fails to interrogate the possibility that the mode of individuation that operates by finding the *one* who 'did it,' or the *practices* in which it is embodied, have priority over an *idea* of which they are, in fact, the obscure *source*.

In section two, I identify this mode of individuation with the archaic structure of social interaction that René Girard refers to as the 'scapegoat mechanism.' I suggest that prior to the modern period, even if this mechanism was always operative in mundane ways (e.g. within intrafamilial relations) the thematization of something analogous to a modern, liberal notion of 'freedom' was an exceptional circumstance and that the class of (relatively) 'unmoved movers' was quite small, subsuming gods, demi-gods, trolls, goblins, and other ultimately blame- and praise-worthy supernatural beings. I argue, then, that Kant's theory of freedom effectively extends this class and clarifies its membership conditions so that it comes to subsume every member of the human race.

In section three, I show how the trajectory of Kant's thinking leads naturally to his theory of radical evil. I argue, more particularly, that this *terminus* is a natural consequence of the integral significance that moral accountability and its practical-political consequences have for Kant and his contemporaries. In this connection, I propose that Kant's understanding of freedom as *spontaneity* and of spontaneity as the ground of the imputability of deeds, is an alternative to an earlier, theologically informed understanding of the relation of the individual to nature and society. Kant gives no serious consideration to the problematic trans-generational cooperation of human agents that is captured by the notion of *original sin* and makes no use of the idea of *grace* as that 'freedom' which grounds both nature and human agency and social existence. The theory of radical evil is a consequence of the fact that, for Kant, far from standing at the *foundation* of the visible natural and social order, freedom can only be conceived as standing in opposition to it.<sup>2</sup>

In section four, I argue that the subject is constrained to 'take' herself to be free, not by reason, but by the community into which she is born. I suggest,

---

<sup>2</sup> This, in spite of Kant's affirmation, too late and still too constrained, of a certain 'something' that is 'neither nature nor freedom, but which is connected with the ground of the latter' (KU 5: 353; 227).

further, that she is constrained to take herself to be free under the force of intermittent accusation, by being wholly and simply *blamed* for unwanted effects that she brings forth in her community at a time when she lacks the conceptual and linguistic resources to offer or even conceive of a defense. In short, the experience of being singled out as the one who did *x* and identified as the unique *locus* of the very *ground of possibility* of *x* in the earliest phase of the one's existence has the following sequelae: the ideal identification of practical spontaneity with moral accountability and the appearance of these ideas' and this connection's *a priori*. Kant's early account of freedom in terms of 'an *absolute* causal *spontaneity*'<sup>3</sup> and the later development of this theory as embodied in his account of *radical evil*, serve to promote the timeless, community-polarizing phenomenon of scapegoating from an archaic exception to a normal aspect of human ontogeny. Combined with his ultimate refusal to allow any but an *aggravating* role to heteronomy or mimesis in the assessment of moral accountability, Kant's mature account of human freedom constitutes the theory of which this behaviour is already the practice. To the degree that the points of reference of Kant's theory are post-religious and post-metaphysical, they serve to universalize, privatize, and sublimate, what is henceforth recapitulated, in the modern period, in every childhood.

Ultimately, I want to offer a description of the relation of the *one* to the *many* that abandons Kant's 'subject-centred' approach. This paper embodies a Girardian and trauma-theoretical perspective on human social relations that enables a theoretical turn to language and intersubjectivity that I take to be more *comprehensive* than the relatively recent efforts that are embodied, for example, in Jürgen Habermas' theory of 'communicative action' and his related discourse ethics (constrained as these are, in important respects, by a persistent Kantianism).<sup>4</sup> I conclude by asserting the possibility, at least, of an entanglement of speaker and hearer (paradigmatically, of language-acquiring child and linguistically competent adult) that will support neither the discreteness of 'mature' speakers, nor the discreteness of Kant's free practical agents, upon which the notion of private legal

---

<sup>3</sup> KrV A446/B474.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), Jürgen Habermas, "An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative Versus Subject-Centered Reason," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ed. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1987), Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. B. Fultner (Cambridge: Polity, 2001). If the present context allowed, it would be appropriate to approach these matters by way of an acknowledgement of this thinker's initial, important advances in this area. Space, however, does not permit more than this cursory, but necessary concession.

persons and the coherence of blame and credit, punishment and reward must depend in a post-religious or post-metaphysical context.

## I

### Spontaneity and the imputability of actions

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), in the section dealing with the third antinomy, Kant asserts that

reason creates the idea of a spontaneity which could start to act from itself, without needing to be preceded by any other cause that in turn determines it to action according to the law of causal connection.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of transcendental freedom or spontaneity is an *a priori* idea of pure reason—arising, like other ideas of the kind, from an intrinsic need of reason to complete its proper task, namely, to provide cognitive resources for, and regulative constraints on, the understanding's quest for exhaustive explanations of phenomena. In contrast to other ideas of this kind, however (e.g., the mathematical idea of absolute priority), the idea of 'an *absolute* causal *spontaneity*'<sup>6</sup> or 'dynamical' priority has an integral and not merely regulative role to play in judgments of a certain kind. While the idea of spontaneity does not enable advances in the explanation of phenomena *qua* natural, it does serve to render the *moral* appraisal of certain phenomena intelligible, namely, those that we call 'actions.'

Spontaneity, understood with reference, not to 'cosmology,' but to human actions, is thus '[f]reedom in the practical sense' or 'the independence of the power of choice [*Willkür*] from necessitation by impulses of sensibility.'<sup>7</sup> As Weldon observes, we can read the conflict in the third antinomy as one

between the claim of the scientists that all natural events must be explicable by natural causes and that of the moralist that unless human action is spontaneous, and therefore undetermined by natural causes, the conceptions of obligation and desert become entirely without meaning.<sup>8</sup>

Al-azm worries that this approach places too much emphasis on 'an essentially moral problem,' which, though ultimately important to Kant, is mentioned in this context merely, as it were, in passing.<sup>9</sup> This is an understandable exegetical worry. However, although it is true that the third antinomy is not explicitly concerned with a task whose outcome would rationalize notions such as desert and obligation or ground practices such as accusation, condemnation, and pun-

<sup>5</sup> KrV A533/B561.

<sup>6</sup> KrV A446/B474.

<sup>7</sup> KrV A534/B562.

<sup>8</sup> T. D. Weldon, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 209.

<sup>9</sup> Sadik J. Al-azm, *The Origins of Kant's Arguments in the Antinomies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 87.

ishment, it is undeniable that these passages do reinforce a kind of primitive connection that will be key for the subsequent development of Kant's theory of freedom: the connection between spontaneity, on the one hand, and the imputability of actions, on the other. Indeed, as Kant puts it here, the 'content' of the transcendental idea of freedom, or the idea of 'the absolute spontaneity of an action,' is the 'real ground' of any action's imputability.<sup>10</sup> It is in virtue of this connection, that, as Kant writes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, 'the concept of freedom...constitutes the *keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason.'<sup>11</sup>

Velkley also argues that Kant's critical philosophy has its source in concerns that belong, properly speaking, to his theory of morality.<sup>12</sup> He, however, identifies Kant's notion of the 'end of reason' as a constraining motif which, even if only implicitly, draws his critical reflection forward to its conclusion in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. My claim, in contrast, is that Kant's interest in stabilizing the notion of spontaneity and rendering it intelligible, not for metaphysics or theology, but for a moral 'religion within the limits of reason alone,' is grounded, even more basically, in unexamined worries about the instability of the social ground of long-standing *practices* associated with the *de facto* imputation of deeds to individuals (by the collectives that surround them), namely, accusation and defense, blame and praise, condemnation and acquittal, punishment and reward, as well as the archaic, more mechanical antecedents of these (i.e., what René Girard refers to under the twin epithets 'scapegoating' and 'mechanism').

The possibility of such a connection is not raised in discussions of the relationship of Kant's theoretical to his practical philosophical concerns. I believe, however, that there is a profound connection between the *idea* of spontaneity and practices such as these. If this claim can be defended, it might be brought to bear on such debates in a useful and explanatory way. This might be done, as we shall see, by giving prominence to Kant's theory of radical evil and by showing that *this* notion and not the idea of reason's *telos* is the salient terminal point of Kant's critical philosophy.

In a Reflexion from the early 1780's Kant draws a parallel between the antithesis of Reason's activity and the receptivity of sensuousness, on the one hand, and the antithesis of inherited and imputable 'wickedness' (*Bosheit*), on the other.

---

<sup>10</sup> KrV A448/B476.

<sup>11</sup> KpV 5: 3-4; 3.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard L. Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

‘A Reason that was sensuous [or sensuously determined<sup>13</sup>],’ he writes, ‘would not be Reason.’ To claim otherwise, he seems to suggest, would be like asserting the existence of an ‘inherited and yet imputable wickedness [*angeerbten und doch zurechneten Bosheit*].’<sup>14</sup> In short, a wickedness that was ‘sensuously determined’ would not be wickedness.

This parallel between the spontaneity of Reason and the spontaneity that is required for wickedness (wickedness, indeed, as such, since for Kant an ‘inherited’ wickedness is a contradiction in terms) is illuminated by Kant’s mature (1791) designation of the ‘source’ [*Ursprung*] of the critical philosophy, not merely as ‘morality’ [*Moral*], but as ‘morality regarded as the accountability of actions [*Moral, in Ansehung der Zurechnungsfähigkeit der Handlungen*].’<sup>15</sup> Indeed, later, in the *Vorarbeiten* to his *Metaphysics of Morals* (ca. 1797), Kant will acknowledge what the foregoing leads us to suspect: namely, that ‘freedom is accountability [*Freyheit ist die Zurechnungsfähigkeit*].’<sup>16</sup> By this late date, it is evident that freedom for Kant has been ‘*Zurechnungsfähigkeit*’ all along—but accountability as always already embodied in the fact, cognizable only *a posteriori*, that human beings are, from time to time, called to account in this way, in *practice*. Freedom is accountability, in this sense, before it is ever embodied in Kant’s critical-philosophical (cosmological) notion of spontaneity. This very priority, and not merely the philosophical issues which, as we shall see, arise from the juxtaposition of spontaneity and autonomy and lead into the theory of radical evil, is symptomatic of Kant’s rejection of the doctrine of original sin and of the traditional, catholic pairing of *nature* and grace.

The notion of autonomy, in any case, is simply superfluous as far as *blaming* goes and so, unlike the notion of spontaneity, is not anticipated in the associated practices. Furthermore, even though Kant will come to see the necessity of autonomy for deeds that have what he takes to be moral *worth*, there is a sense in which the notion of a blamable deed (and so the notion of deserving to be *punished*) has priority over the notion of a deed that merits praise and reward. It is therefore spontaneity, even without reference to autonomy, that is ‘that freedom which must be put at the basis of all moral laws and the imputation appropriate to them.’<sup>17</sup> Certainly, elsewhere in the second Critique, Kant evinces another tendency, changing his emphasis to assert that ‘one would never have ventured to

---

<sup>13</sup> The *Nachträge* to the first Critique includes an almost verbatim version of this Reflexion. Among its minor differences, however, Kant has ‘[e]ine Vernunft die sinnlich bestimmt wär [sic] wäre nicht Vernunft’ (23: 17) rather than ‘[e]ine Vernunft, die sinnlich wäre, wäre nicht Vernunft’ (18: 279).

<sup>14</sup> R 5640; 18: 279.

<sup>15</sup> From the *Losse Blätter zu den Fortschritten der Metaphysik*, 20: 335.

<sup>16</sup> 23: 245; my emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> KpV 5:96; 81.

introduce freedom into science had not the *moral law*...come in and forced this concept upon us.”<sup>18</sup> But this is freedom in Kant’s ‘positive’ sense, freedom as autonomy—that freedom which, as Kant writes in the *Metaphysics of morals*, is ‘prove[d]...in the highest degree’ when a human being finds that she is ‘unable to resist the call of duty.’<sup>19</sup>

## II

### Scapegoating within the boundaries of reason alone

The moral law, in short, does *not* force the concept of spontaneity upon us—and yet it is forced upon us after all. How and by what? As we have seen, Kant’s account in the first Critique simply claims that the notion is generated (or ‘created’) by pure reason as a regulative complement of the empirical idea of natural necessity, a regulative idea that enables the ‘completion’ of the ‘series of appearances,’ or ‘the course of nature...on the side of causes’ and anchors what would be an otherwise hopeless search for the sufficient conditions of phenomena. Against Kant, however, I wish to suggest that we are constrained to a distorted idea of our individual, practical spontaneity by the practices of accusing, condemning, and punishing to which we are subjected and to which we subject others. We are constrained to apprehend the appearance of necessity which marks these practices by the fact that we have not yet imagined or lived out a social order that can do *without* them. And this appearance of necessity is genetically related, as it were, to the appearance of rectitude that characterizes even the most mechanical instance of community polarizing scapegoating: the apparent ‘rightness’ of accusation from the point of view of the accusers, when this accusation is unanimously attested to—perhaps seamlessly, never to be subsequently contested, when the accusers’ perspective is adopted by every possible defender (mother, brother) and even by the accused herself.

If the notion of freedom is an *a priori* idea of practical reason, and if freedom just *is* accountability, this implies an additional and equally *a priori* consequence. Kant argues that ‘there is in the idea of our practical reason something further that accompanies the transgression of a moral law, namely its *deserving punishment*.’<sup>20</sup> In this way Kant ensures a passage from that ‘transcendental freedom,’ without which ‘no moral law is possible and no imputation [*Zurechnung*] in accordance with it,’<sup>21</sup> to the autonomy that is ostensibly implied by the moral law,

---

<sup>18</sup> KpV 5: 30; 27; my emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> MS 6: 382, note; 47.

<sup>20</sup> KpV, 5:37; 34.

<sup>21</sup> KpV 5: 97; 81.

to desert, to punishment itself. In this way, the latter is promoted from a practice that human beings *happen* to engage in and which is descended, perhaps, from community-stabilizing religious practices that our ancestors *happened* to engage in, to the embodiment of an *a priori* idea of pure practical reason.

I am suggesting, however, that the eminent ‘punishability’ in practice of the individual suggests something like Kant’s notion of the imputability of deeds; and that the imputability of deeds implies spontaneity. But what implies her punishability? Nothing. Nothing need imply that she is susceptible to punishment. This susceptibility is a *datum*. And this given masquerades as the embodiment of the following idea—which need not ever be instantiated to be coherent in principle—of a guilt that is ‘entirely’ one’s own,<sup>22</sup> an idea that is of the essence, not merely for a modern, Kantian approach to punishment, but for the universal, mundane activity that Kant is simply theorizing in a post-theological, post-mythological mode.

My claim is not, then, that Kant argues to the metaphysical *reality* of freedom from the fact that from time to time human communities blame one or another of their individual members for disorders that beset them. I am claiming that he argues to a conclusion concerning the *origin* of this idea—beginning from this fact. I am claiming that he ignores the contingency of the latter, as well as the possibility that no such scene has ever been justifiable in terms of his own theory—even if as a *class* of phenomena the totality of such scenes could be. He proposes an origin in *reason* of the idea of spontaneity, but it is significant that this idea is defined as the *sole* ground for the very imputability that is simply a presupposition of the community’s (but not necessarily the accused individual’s) perspective on such scenes, namely, that they (the *many*) are blameless while the accused (the *one*) is entirely to blame. My tentative suggestion, then, is that the notion of spontaneity has its origin not *a priori*, in reason, but *a posteriori*, in lived (acted out, or suffered) social experiences of this kind.

That Kant ignores this possibility is an unsurprising consequence of his approach to empirical questions concerning human origins. In his ‘Conjectures on the Beginning of Human history’ (1786), published just before the second edition of the first Critique, Kant insists that such conjectures ‘must begin with something that human reason cannot deduce from prior natural causes—that is, with the *existence of human beings*.’ Kant sets out, however, from an initial state in which the members of some archaic class of earthly beings are already not only phylogenetically, but also *ontogenetically* mature. Thus, writes Kant, they ‘must also be *fully developed*, for they have no mother to support them.’ Also, they ‘must

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. KrV A555/B583

be a *pair*.’ But this is only so that ‘they may reproduce their kind’ and not, decidedly, so that they can cooperate or influence the specific outcome of one another’s *independently* efficacious spontaneity.<sup>23</sup>

This approach cannot accommodate the possibility of a *compromise* of spontaneity, a compromise of the causal independence of each, differently embodied *instance* of an ostensibly identical practical reason, precisely in the course of this class of animals’ inscrutable *natural development* in advance of what Kant counts as a ‘beginning.’ That we *must* commence with ‘something that human reason cannot deduce from prior natural causes’ is, to anticipate our later discussion, directly related to the necessity that *evil* be radically imputable to each *individual* member of the human race. It will not do to allow that *that* might be ‘deduce[d] from prior natural [or social] causes.’ Why not? The reason, as we shall see, far from being something that is disclosed in Kant’s theory, is *social* in character—right to its roots. Indeed, the extant social order depends upon this obscurity.

Kant’s thinking on freedom commences with a distinction between the experiential ‘content’ of an empirical, ‘psychological concept’ of freedom and that notion of an action’s ‘absolute spontaneity’ with which we are already familiar. Again, the *transcendental* idea’s ‘content’ is the ‘real ground of [any action’s] imputability.’<sup>24</sup> However, the empirical or psychological notion of freedom—and so too constraints and modes of bondage that must develop and persist in time and experience—involves a profound ambiguity that makes it hard to concede the distinctness of Kant’s *transcendental* idea without cheating and occluding, *before* interrogating the sources of this idea’s content, all reference to the social and natural context-of-origin of the content of the *psychological* notion. This ambiguity arises precisely from the region that Kant ignores, both the phylogenetic context-of-origin *in advance* of the ‘existence of human beings,’ in advance of language, and the ontogenetic context-of-origin *in advance* of the ‘hominizing’ incorporation of the neonate into her language-community.

Although this blind-spot distorts Kant’s earliest thinking on the connection between freedom and imputability, we can nevertheless detect the structure of social interaction that is embodied in scenes of scapegoating or accusation in his own account of a ‘malicious lie.’ It is telling, I think (*pace* Al-azm), that Kant takes the time to explicate his notion of spontaneity and to illustrate its moral significance in the context of what is supposed to be a critique of the ‘cosmological’ problem of causality. In this connection, then, Kant describes an instance of

---

<sup>23</sup> Conj, 221-2.

<sup>24</sup> KrV A448/B476.

‘voluntary’ and ‘malicious’ lying. He points out that there are two ways of describing and explaining the liar’s deed. First, we might ‘investigate’ the liar’s action as to the ‘moving causes through which it arose,’ sifting through ‘the sources of the person’s empirical character.’ We might find these in ‘bad upbringing,’ ‘bad company,’ an innate insensitivity to ‘shame,’ ‘carelessness’ and ‘thoughtlessness’ and, he writes, we would proceed ‘as with any investigation in the series of determining causes for a given natural effect.’<sup>25</sup>

In this way, we would impute the lie and its consequences to the liar’s *empirical* character without having uncovered any foundation for the laying of *blame*. This is because as far as appearances go we are justified in believing that the action was ‘*determined* by these causes.’<sup>26</sup> There is no *empirical* warrant for blaming *him*. But then Kant brings what is merely *seen* under the purview of an *a priori* anthropology that asserts the liar’s necessary, radical freedom from natural or social determination. To all *appearances*, certainly, this man’s deed was generated at an origin over which he had no control—however much proximate control he exercises. But *even so*, writes Kant, ‘*one nevertheless blames the agent*.’<sup>27</sup>

*This*—this thing that we *do*, precisely ‘*nevertheless*,’ is Kant’s true point of departure. We *do* this without ever needing to refer what we do to the notion of spontaneity. We have been doing this all along. Kant’s attention is captured by this visible *practice* and he is struck by what appears to be its inevitability and, perhaps, its necessity. But his Newtonian understanding of causality and his unwillingness to draw on the notions of original sin or of a grace-inflected natural and social order, leave him with but one way of explaining and justifying this practice. The lack of continuity between Kant’s account of freedom and an account that cites the role of natural, social, demonic, and divine modes of heteronomy in human action, is embodied in his apparent inability to allow that the *law* that governs spontaneity, and not this spontaneity alone, might actually matter in assessments of accountability for lies and other ‘evil’ deeds.

If we cannot impute the liar’s deed, along with all of the social disorder that results from it, to a unique *causal* source, if we must dilute our imputation by distributing accountability across disparate factors and forces, *including necessitation by heteronomous laws*, if we cannot identify this unique source with the man himself as he is *in-himself*, just as though he had never been a denizen of nature or a member of any earthly society, then we cannot blame *him*. As we have observed, however, Kant claims no more than that we *do* blame him. We accuse him, we condemn him, we punish him. We treat him as we would if we believed he were

---

<sup>25</sup> KrV A554/B582.

<sup>26</sup> KrV A555/B583; my emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> KrV A555/B583; my emphasis.

spontaneous. But the *thought* that he is spontaneous and that this spontaneity, even without reference to its governance, is a sufficient occasion for our accusation—is just what is embodied in the *fact* that we blame him and absolve society and nature.

Neither Kant, nor his contemporaries are the first people to *behave* in conformity with this picture of things. Every accusation, every leveling of blame with respect to an ostensibly discrete state-of-affairs, no matter how banal, to the degree that this is a social performance that simultaneously incorporates the blameless *many* and individuates the blameworthy *one*, really *practices* what Kant *preaches*. His achievement, then, is to articulate theoretically what was implicit in the ancient, collective practice of accusation: the unique activity and causality of the *one*, identified as the source of some trouble or harm; and the absolute passivity, with respect to this same harm or trouble, of the *many*.

This notion of accountability is threatened, then, on the one hand, by a *mechanistic* understanding of nature, of nature *and* society understood, then, without reference to grace. But it is threatened, too, on the other hand, by a *theological* understanding of nature, of nature and society understood in their relationship to grace and original sin, both of which are taken to be operating in the world in advance of particular human actions.

A theory of freedom, however, for which freedom is simply causal spontaneity, is not really up to the task of responding to these threats. As we shall see in the next section, first the notion of autonomy, and then the attribution of radical evil to the individual human, being emerge as further answers to a worry that we might well share with Kant about the social-performative crisis that would arise if it were not possible—at least, minimally and *some* of the time—to find *one* or *another* person (or a discrete minor class of persons) who can be held to account for particular deeds and their consequences.

### III

#### **From spontaneity to radical evil: the imputable abyss**

Briefly, these concerns lead to the following developments. First, Kant recognizes that while the absolute spontaneity of practical reason cannot be governed by the laws of nature, it cannot be simply lawless. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of morals* (1785) and later, in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant argues therefore that the freedom of the will, understood in a negative sense as its spontaneity (i.e., ‘independence...from necessitation by impulses of sensibility’), implies its *autonomy*, which is practical reason’s freedom in a positive sense.

But this account of freedom, couched in terms of the agent's spontaneity, on the one hand, and in terms of her autonomy, on the other, throws up a problem (quickly recognized by Kant's contemporaries) concerning the role of freedom in the commission of *immoral* acts. As we have seen, Kant recognizes that on his account such acts can only be imputed if their cause is spontaneous. He also comes to recognize, however, that such acts are inconceivable if this spontaneous causality is governed autonomously. As *law*, the moral law is irresistible. This means that if this law is successfully resisted, this resistance cannot be a deed of the agent insofar as she is free—that is, autonomous. This resistance has to be imputed to the agent only insofar as she is *not* free, that is, as earthly and part of the natural order. But insofar as she is *that*, she is not a spontaneous *cause* of anything at all. In respect to her character as natural she is only ever determined and determinable, never *determining* (save in a relative sense, irrelevant for morality). The assertion that the free being is autonomous undermines the very attribution of spontaneity upon which the possibility of imputation depends.

In order to save what he continues to hold to be *the* ground of the imputability of deeds—spontaneity or transcendental freedom—he introduces a critical distinction between the will, identified with practical reason as autonomous, but strictly *legislating* (*Wille*), and the will understood as a capacity for *choice* among possible maxims and so as a strictly *executive* faculty (*Willkür*). This distinction is key for understanding late works such as *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) and the *Metaphysics of morals* (1797). There, Kant restricts the attribution of autonomy to *Wille*. *Willkür* as such, on the other hand, is henceforth not to be understood as autonomous at all. Rather, the human being's 'power of choice' or 'arbitrary will' is subject to the legislation that is given by *Wille*—*subject*, but as an earthly, and not merely a rational being, not necessitated. Because *Wille* simply does not *choose*, the will, insofar as it is autonomous cannot be described as freely choosing evil over good. However, insofar as it is spontaneous, *Willkür* can be identified as the source of choices that contravene the moral law (its *own* law, but not authored by it as such) and, furthermore, as *both* free (i.e., spontaneous) *and* governed sometimes heteronomously. This move renders autonomy merely sufficient for morally salient freedom, but not necessary, while rendering spontaneity not only necessary, but sufficient as well.

Kant expresses the most profound consequence of these moves in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* when he describes what he calls a 'radical evil in human nature.' This propensity for the commission of particular evil deeds is attributable to *Willkür's* spontaneous adoption of the following principle; namely, that exceptions to the moral law be allowed from time to time, in favour of natural inclinations. The consequent insubordination of *Willkür* cannot be laid

to the account of autonomous *Wille*, but nevertheless must, in virtue of the spontaneity of *Willkür*, be imputed to the agent, not as a merely natural phenomenon, but as a citizen of a supersensible domain. This imputation proceeds as though what is imputed were a deed, even though it is, rather, an ‘intelligible’ character (*Gesinnung*) that is authored antecedently to every ‘use of freedom in experience.’<sup>28</sup> Kant’s mature moral theory, then, holds that moral accountability requires that an agent be the author, *ex nihilo*, not merely of her own deeds (as he implies in the first Critique), but of the subjective ground of possibility of those deeds, through a spontaneous failure which grounds every subsequent failure of practical reason’s conformity to its own self-legislated law ‘for the use of its freedom.’<sup>29</sup> Kant perceives, ultimately, that on his understanding of spontaneity as the ‘real ground’ of imputation, radical evil is a necessary correlate of former for any being who has ever done even *one* thing in contravention of the moral law.

Kant is certainly aware that, on this account, there is an inexplicable moment—the (timeless) moment, prior (indeed inimical) to all experience and so not accessible to memory, in which the will (as *Willkür*) adopts into its ultimate maxim an openness to contraventions of its own law (as *Wille*). But this failure of intelligibility does not, for Kant, serve to attenuate the consequences that must come to bear on the agent, for good or ill, owing to the particular deeds which flow from and express this ultimate maxim. Kant is convinced that unless the *remote* (even if merely ‘intelligible’) ‘fall from innocence’<sup>30</sup> is altogether imputable to the subject, no *proximate*, observable evil deed can be imputed to its perpetrator as its unique, absolute cause. Of course, this implies that the radical option for (intermittent) evil on the part of the *individual* is itself spontaneous. And this means that the foundation of the fundamental, subjective ground of the maxims of which the subject’s deeds are the empirical manifestation is established without the involvement—*ab origine*—either of natural inclination or instinct, or of socially mediated influence.

Kant asserts limiting conditions on the understanding’s grasp of the subject’s orientation to evil-doing in terms of an abyssal, irreducibly elementary, ‘intelligible’ origin ‘within’ the subject that is—though to all appearances something lying in the subject’s *past*—not an ‘origin in time.’<sup>31</sup> But this move simply maintains the veil behind which the *social* and *natural* character of this origin is able to hide. There *is* something pertaining to me and to my agency which cannot, it is true, be given in any possible experience that *I* might have. Nevertheless, this same ‘thing’

---

<sup>28</sup> Rel, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Rel, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Rel, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Rel, 38.

has been given to others to experience, albeit as actors and not as sufferers—namely, *my* ontogenetic origin.

Now, Kant recognizes that imitation is a key factor in the human being's earliest empirical, developmental phase of existence. '[L]earning,' as Kant writes in the third Critique, is after all 'nothing but imitation.'<sup>32</sup> For Kant, this correlation of childhood, learning, and imitation is very worrisome. For one thing, as he puts it in the *Anthropology*, when 'the game of imitation [*das Spiel der Nachahmung*]' is 'fixed' it becomes 'custom.'<sup>33</sup> Thanks to further 'blind imitation,' custom, in turn, is 'raised to the dignity of...law.'<sup>34</sup> In his logic lectures of the early 1770's, Kant had already described imitation as a 'fertile source' of 'prejudices.'<sup>35</sup> He maintains this position in lectures delivered much later, around 1800. In the latter case, indeed, imitation is tied, not merely to custom in general, but to customs that are embodied linguistically in 'formulas,' 'sayings,' 'sentences,' 'canones,' and 'proverbs.' With the 'aid' of 'rules' of this kind, he says, imitation gives rise to 'many particular prejudices.'<sup>36</sup>

This entanglement of the individual with society is inevitable, as Kant recognizes, from an empirical point of view. But to remain so entangled is culpable—the imputable immaturity of a being that is perfectly capable of philosophizing, judging, producing, and acting independently, not merely of alien causes or conditions, but independently of any alien *law*. In his *Anthropology*, Kant echoes the indictment of his famous essay on 'Enlightenment,' published almost 15 years earlier. The human being's immaturity is self-incurred. Now, however, he brings 'immaturity' into an immediate relation with imitation. 'The most important revolution from within the human being,' he writes once again, is 'his exit from his self-incurred immaturity.' In advance of 'this revolution,' Kant adds, 'he let others think for him and merely *imitated* others or allowed them to guide him by leading-strings.'<sup>37</sup>

Because he is convinced that she can and must do so, Kant urges the individual to 'ventur[e] to advance, though still shakily, with [her] own feet on the ground of experience.'<sup>38</sup> The alternative, here, is to continue living life as an imitator—and so, in essence, to continue to live an imitation life. But, as Kant insists, '[t]he *imitator* [*Nachahmer*] (in moral matters) is without character; for character consists precisely in originality in the way of thinking.' This originality is radical indeed. The one 'who has character derives his conduct from a source

---

<sup>32</sup> KU 5: 308; 187.

<sup>33</sup> Anth 7: 245; 142-3.

<sup>34</sup> MS 6: 464; 210.

<sup>35</sup> BL 24: 173; 136.

<sup>36</sup> JL 9: 76-7; 579-80.

<sup>37</sup> Anthro 7: 229; 124; my emphasis

<sup>38</sup> Anthro 7: 229; 124.

that he has opened by himself,' while the imitator does no more than '*ape*' the 'man who has a character.'<sup>39</sup> And yet, in terms of the argument of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, the imitator's *lack* of character evinces a character, after all, an originality, or 'a source that he has opened by himself—one, namely, that is radically evil.

As we have seen, Kant argues that if we blame someone it is, to be precise, because we believe that he *could* have done otherwise than he did. We see his 'deed...as entirely unconditioned in regard to the previous state, as though with that act the agent had started a series of consequences *entirely from himself*.'<sup>40</sup> But is this 'unconditionedness' really enough for the imputation of *radical evil* itself, in addition to particular evil deeds? What of the *law* without which spontaneity would be simply inert, inactive?

The *law* that governs what Kant refers to as 'a state of innocence' can only be the moral law; but the moral law cannot govern the fall in question. And yet obviously no *other* law is operating in the state out of which the fall is a transition. The transition is to be understood as a *spontaneous* transition from a domain that is governed autonomously to one that is characterized by (at least intermittent) heteronomy; it cannot be understood as a transition that is *itself* heteronomously governed. This precludes the operation of *any* law at the threshold beyond which innocence is lost and radical evil gained.

This ought to inflect our reading when Kant insists that 'every [evil] action *must* be regarded as though the individual had fallen into it directly from a state of innocence.'<sup>41</sup> Why must every action be thus regarded? Kant finds this necessity in the supposed fact that 'whatever his previous deportment may have been, whatever natural causes may have been influencing him, and whether these causes were to be found within him or outside him, his action is yet free and determined by none of these causes.'<sup>42</sup> We *presuppose*, as Kant says in the first Critique, that 'it can be entirely set aside how that life was constituted' and that 'this deed could be regarded as entirely unconditioned in regard to the previous state.'<sup>43</sup> But this presupposition pertains to the *conditionedness* of a deed and not its *necessitation*: and with respect to the imputation of radical evil to the individual this is a problem.

Kant glosses over this problem by referring to the fall from innocence as 'direct' and by asserting that the agent's action 'can and must always be judged as

---

<sup>39</sup> Anthro 7: 293; 192-3; the text reads: 'Jener ist der Nachäffer des Mannes, der einen Charakter hat' (ibid.).

<sup>40</sup> KrV A555/B583; my emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> Rel, 36; my emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> Rel, 36.

<sup>43</sup> KrV A555/B583.

an *original* use of his will.<sup>44</sup> But this is simply to restate the metaphysical basis for the empirical case that Kant has against the agent—she is blameworthy in theory and punishable in practice if and only if an action derives from an underlying character that is imputable to her as its cause, that is, *without regard* for the problem of how this most *radical*, unconditioned causation is governed or, what amounts to the same thing, *necessitated*.

Is reason regarded as a spontaneous, original cause of appearances, then, *first*, in advance of the subject's being blamed? Or is he blamed, first, so that then and only then, come Kant, say, reason, its transcendental freedom, and an apparently *arbitrary* option for evil are postulated as the *a priori* verifiable occasion for the individual subject's unique, discrete culpability.

I suggest that the agent is blamed *first*, and in such a way as to imply that the state of *being* fallen is neither an original predicament into which the human being is born, nor an early acquisition from without the subject—that it is freely authored *by her*. This is already to bar any mitigating reference to that radical *heteronomy* that is mediated by imitation and captured in the doctrines of original sin and grace. This must be allowed to inform our understanding of the human being's native spontaneity. Whatever else it may be, Kant insists, the 'subjective ground' of all her actions 'must itself always be an expression of freedom,' 'a rule made by the will for the use of its freedom' and, ultimately, 'a maxim.'<sup>45</sup> It cannot be an expression of nature or an attribute that is traceable to society. Otherwise, Kant adds, 'the use or abuse of man's power of choice in respect of the moral law could not be imputed to him nor could the good or bad in him be called moral.' Kant does not of course tell us that *we know* that this adoption is by 'free choice.' Instead he asserts simply that *if* we do not assume this adoption by free choice, *then* it 'could not be imputed.'<sup>46</sup>

Kant's understanding of imitation and heteronomy assimilates a grace-denuded 'nature' to society; he assimilates a grace-denuded social order to the order of divine-human interaction and communication. These are disastrous moves which his Pietist forebears had not yet made. Ultimately, as Palaver points out, 'Kant's refusal to consider grace' can be tied directly to 'his exclusion of good mimesis.' He breaks with 'an Augustinian anthropology' for which imitation is central,<sup>47</sup> an 'anthropology of grace,' as Alison puts it,<sup>48</sup> and an *empirical* anthropology of original sin. Instead, as we have seen, Kant opts for an intelligible anthropology (and so not really an *anthropology* at all) for which the cramped ideas

---

<sup>44</sup> Rel, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Rel, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Rel, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Palaver, 146.

<sup>48</sup> Alison, 37.

of practical spontaneity and radical evil take the place of these more ancient and fruitful notions. Again, Kant *theorizes* a mundane structure of social interaction that is as old as the human race, while at the same time universalizing, in theory, what had long been an *exceptional* understanding of individuality. Simply put, the human being as Kant things she *ought* to be (even if she never *is*) is burdened with the accountability of a god. She is left without resources for her own defense, declared to be an unmoved mover who can never claim to have been moved, radically if not proximately, by another.

But what if the subject that Kant describes, really *is* an imitator and *cannot not be*. What if she is an imitator, not merely with respect to what is superficial and explicit, but, as Girard argues, an imitator who adopts the very desires of her companions, an imitator whose attentive orientation to things in the world is shared with others of her kind, so that her world is always an essentially shared one. If imitation were ineliminable or if, even in ‘maturity,’ certain resources and constraints always remained as indispensable features of a subject that had *been* an imitator—then heteronomy, at least of a certain kind, would be ineliminable.

For Kant, there seem to be no important distinctions to be drawn within the field of heteronomy and so, none to be made with respect to imitation. Heteronomy is *eliminable*; recourse to imitation is *unnecessary*; and with respect to the formation of the will (*Willkür*), the fact that one has *been* an imitator is *irrelevant*. The agent can and must cease imitating others and, more radically, must eschew any of the subjective resources and constraints (e.g., what Kant derides as customs, ‘sayings,’ ‘prejudices’) that she has acquired by means of an early mimetic entanglement with others.

## IV

### **Mimetic heteronomy and the radical grip of ontogenetic accusation**

I have already pointed to the possibility that the human being is *taken* to be spontaneous, that is, free and so, too, *accountable* in Kant’s sense, long before she takes *herself* to be thus. I have also suggested that this ‘taking’ and not Reason is the ground of her own subsequent apprehension of herself as free in this way. This is something that has been *happening* to human beings all along, in the defenselessness of childhood. In modernity, however, this practice is accompanied by a discourse of ‘responsibility,’ ‘accountability,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘autonomy’ that has been highly influenced by Kant. It is now time to justify these claims. Before we proceed, however, I want to be clear on the following point.

The issue here is not a calling-to-account which takes the form of an invitation to *reincorporation*. Such instances are rare enough. Rather, we are concerned with a calling-to-account that takes the form of an accusation which individuates the guilty party entirely with reference to his difference as the guilty *one* from a *many* (the community) that is innocent vis à vis the same phenomena, an accusation that incorporates the members of the community through the unanimity and the collective gesture or implicit orientation by which they *exclude* the offender.

Now, I want to emphasize and expand upon my earlier suggestions concerning the possible ineliminability and even the centrality of imitation for human social and moral life. As we shall see, imitation of an implicit kind (e.g., affect sharing, joint attention) is arguably key, not merely for the origin, acquisition, and perpetuation of language, but for the structure of social interaction that I have just referred to as *accusation*. Imitation, on this view, is an important topic.

If Kant gets things wrong, then, with respect to heteronomy in general, he does so, in particular, with respect imitation. For one thing, his restriction of all causality to ‘nature’ and ‘freedom’ means that it is impossible, within his terms of reference, to understand mimesis as a *source* of human action or to understand human as *shared* or *cooperative*. For Kant, imitation of another agent, human or divine, does not differ from the culpable surrender to natural inclination: both involve the same submission to heteronomy. This means that imitation and morality are inimical. ‘What others give us can establish no maxim of virtue,’ Kant insists, and ‘the conduct of other human beings [must not] serve as our incentive.’<sup>49</sup> The coherence of Kant’s notion of morality, however (and so too of his related notions of imputability and blameworthiness), depends upon an agent’s ability to *forego* all imitation of others. ‘Ought,’ after all, implies ‘can’—for Kant. More strongly, however, the Kantian agent must be able to forego imitation, not merely in the present, but also in respect of those helps and resources acquired through mimetic osmosis, as it were, in the past.

The assertion of such a capacity really trivializes the integral and ineliminable role of other agents in the origin of the very grounds of possibility of experience, cognition, and language. This trivialization is required for the distorted account of evil and freedom that we have encountered above. Kant does not countenance a profoundly mimetic, ontogenetic, intersubjective entanglement of human beings which, like his *noumena*, would likewise not appear *as such* in any possible subsequent experience of the biologically individual human being. But how might we conceive of agency if imitation cannot be *helped* and if the sequelae

---

<sup>49</sup> MS 6: 479-80; 223.

of our early mimetic engagement with others are *constitutive* of human subjectivity? If subjectivity is the locus of agency, then what of the agency of a subject whose resources *for* and constraints *on* action and language were acquired without the involvement of freedom? What are the consequences for agency of a heteronomous origin of agency itself—even allowing that agency is also characterized by its spontaneity?

Kant has shown us what these are: the impossibility of morality, the unintelligibility of imputation, the merely empirical coherence of positive legal notions of desert and punishment. But what if the originary abyss in which our character is formed is governed all the way down by that law of imitation, cooperation, and participatory entanglement that the Christian tradition calls *grace*. What if the altogether *less-than-radical* propensity to evildoing, which this same tradition calls *original sin*, is embodied in a distortion of this ontologically prior ‘law,’ but in such a way that this distortion is not imputable to the individual agent as such? Under these conditions, our understanding of morality, accountability, and punishment would have to take account of the failure of intelligibility that is preserved by these theological notions.

Kant, as we have seen, acknowledges an originary unintelligibility, but trivializes it, and in doing so is unable to see what he is losing by giving up on theological doctrines that preserve it. Because he holds that nature-and-society, on the one hand, which he denominates, simply, ‘nature’ and ‘freedom,’ on the other, exhaust all possible modes of causality, and because he does not see nature-and-society as the unified *locus-of-operation* of both grace and original sin, he trivializes the domain of law and causality, necessitation and conditionedness, which arises from the ontogenetic attentiveness to the neonate, or child, of already relatively mature, conspecific *others*.<sup>50</sup> Kant sidesteps the problem of accounting for the ambiguous relationship of imitation to agency because his limited perspective on nature and freedom prevents him from imagining either the origin or the sustenance of agency in terms of a *co-operation* of subjects (human or divine)—for better or for worse—that is developed and maintained through mimesis.

The human being, he argues, must *become* moral. But this being is to have, and is certainly not to *expect* to have, any help in this regard. He, independently *he*, must ‘make himself worthy of humanity by *actively* struggling with the obstacles that cling to him because of the crudity of his nature.’<sup>51</sup> But what does Kant miss, by failing to perceive that the fundamental obstacle does not derive from

---

<sup>50</sup> See KrV (Pluhar), 535.

<sup>51</sup> Anthro, 186 (Gregor’s translation).

‘the crudity of his nature,’ but is rather the original stumbling block which is placed in the way of the ‘little one’—who is defenseless against the resentment, irritation, hate, rebuff and even direct, physical violence of those into whose life she is, as Hannah Arendt aptly observes, a prototypical trespasser.<sup>52</sup> The attentiveness of relatively mature others to one’s nascent character and earliest deeds, when this attention takes the form of *accusation*, is the *skandalon* that problematizes the task that Kant sets the human being.

The appearance *in her own experience* of this trespasser’s freedom, as *spontaneity* and as an accountability for which heteronomy is never *mitigating*, is generated, I suggest, in those scenes wherein the biologically individual human being is made the centre of a collective attention whose character as *accusation* or *blame* carves the individual *out* of the collective, individuates her, and obfuscates the ways in which this same community is radically responsible for the *law* that will henceforth vie with *grace* (though, hopefully, not forever) to govern her spontaneity. I propose, then, that the subject as she is ‘in herself,’ free, constrained by nothing more or less than grace as mediated through the *really* radical, natural and social determinants of her existence, is effaced by the ontogenetic representation of the individual *to* herself and *by* her accusers as one for whom ‘the causality of [her] own will’ cannot be apprehended, to use Kant’s own terms, ‘otherwise than *under the idea of freedom*,’<sup>53</sup> as spontaneity *and* as radical freedom from any law whatsoever.

### *The Radical Grip of Ontogenetic Accusation*

Originally speaking, the collective making-suffer of the *one* takes place in the *formal* context of what I call *ontogenetic scandal*. The calling of the immature individual to account, where this is embodied in communication and takes the form of accusation, is malignly generative of a distorted mode of specifically communicative agency. In such instances the already *biologically* individual, human neonate is individuated with respect to *society* by

- (1) being made to stand at the centre-of-attention of a reiterable social order whose circumference or periphery consists in a mimetically fused, unanimous collective that includes her early caregivers, her siblings, and her first peers and which is now *incorporated over against her*;

and

---

<sup>52</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, ed. Margaret Canovan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 242.

<sup>53</sup> Gr 4: 447; 53.

- (2) by mimetically adopting this collective mode of attentiveness and internalizing this perspective on herself so that the occasion of her individuation is also the occasion for her malign incorporation.

This structure can be embodied in a constellation of related possibilities that are inherent in the collectivity of these relatively mature *others* and in a consensus that identifies *her* as the unique source of the unwanted effects that she has brought into their lives: accusation, in this sense, can be embodied in consequences such as abandonment, hate, nonrecognition, double-binds, and disconfirmation.<sup>54</sup>

As Palaver argues, by identifying ‘the scapegoat mechanism’ as the source ‘from which political sovereignty emerged to overcome a violent chaos at the dawn of human civilization, Girard’s [m]imetic theory helps to solve the riddle [of] how a transcendent authority can be instituted to create peace in a society.’<sup>55</sup> My suggestion, now, is that ontogenetic scandal reproduces the *ab origine* social order which Girard describes: an order in which something like mechanical and not yet culturally thematized ‘blame’ for crises in the community is mediated, first violently, to the biologically individual human animal and then, in archaic religion, to denizens of a falsely society-transcending domain whose appearance and whose ‘cult’ (expressed in ritual, myth and taboo) was generated by this violence in the first place.<sup>56</sup> Where this achieves, in the individual, a conviction of her own unique causality, her spontaneity or freedom from natural necessity, where this is intensified through an at least implicitly physical grip<sup>57</sup> on the ‘one who did it,’ where this grip is applied even in the absence of explicit reference to desert or culpability, this sets up an obstacle, the *skandalon* that will not let the accused pass or thrive.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> For a more standard take on these matters see Philip M. Bromberg, *Standing in the Spaces: Essays on Clinical Process, Trauma, and Dissociation* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1998), 10–11, Jody Messler Davies and Mary Gail Frawley, *Treating the Adult Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Psychoanalytic Perspective* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994), 32–36, R. D. Laing, “Confirmation and Disconfirmation,” in *The Self and Others* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1962), David Spiegel, “Dissociation, Double Binds, and Posttraumatic Stress in Multiple Personality Disorder,” in *Treatment of Multiple Personality Disorder*, ed. B. G. Braun (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1986).

<sup>55</sup> Wolfgang Palaver, “Mimesis and Scapegoating in the Works of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant,” *Contagion* 8 (2003): 138.

<sup>56</sup> See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

<sup>57</sup> I owe this trope (and its prominence in this paper) to Lyotard’s notion of *mainmise*—of which more below.

<sup>58</sup> In Matthew 18 Jesus of Nazareth is shown contrasting the *reception* of children with what he (or his biographer, writing in Greek) calls *scandal*. Later in the same chapter Jesus draws this into a thematic relation with his notion of *aphesis*, or forgiveness. There is, in my view a conceptual relationship here between welcoming or receiving and *aphesis*, particularly as the latter involves a kind of surrender, a yielding or a letting pass of the other. Leaving aside supposed the church-disciplinary intentions of the redactor I take it that—just as Hannah Arendt sees in Jesus a “pioneer” with respect to forgiveness (Arendt, 237.)—so too is he an innovator in respect to his understanding of the experience of children and the significance for the political order of the character of their socialization.

What is reproduced to an at least *minimal*, but too often maximal (and even fatal), degree in ontogenetic scandal is the formal structure and its consequences of what Girard describes in terms of collective violence and the ‘single victim mechanism’—in short, a parallel mode of ontogenetic scandal. This is the ‘*satanic*’ and ‘*scandalous*’ form of social order consisting in an intensely attentive communal circumference or periphery arrayed about *one* whose ostensible indebtedness they will not discharge, whom they will not release, whom they will not yield up to life, whom they will not allow to pass, whom they will not, in short, *forgive*. According to Girard, this social order (and order it most certainly *is*)—with its appearance of necessity or inevitability—is the prototypically distorted human community. Implicitly, at least, the *one* who stands at the centre of this most intense and specifically human, cultural (i.e., joint) attention is always already the modern subject. If Freud succeeds in his endeavor (borrowing Kant’s phrase), to ‘trace’ the mature ‘use’ of this subject’s freedom to nature, however, I want to claim that we ought to do so not—in the sense that worries Kant and relieves Freud—‘wholly to determination by natural causes,’<sup>59</sup> but to what, in addition and more fundamentally, was ontogenetically *made of one* by others according to a social demiurgy that is also *ontogenerative*.

The plausibility of this scenario depends, in part, on our avoiding a conception of the human being which, like Kant’s does not give sufficient prominence to language. As Gans points out, language and not simply action is ‘the privileged formal criterion of humanity’: the criterion according to which the *origin in time* of the human, the threshold of hominization (both phylo- and ontogenetically) ought to be identified.<sup>60</sup> If the subject is a ‘center of feeling and action,’<sup>61</sup> then these two elements (‘feeling’ and ‘action’) might have their intersubjective articulation in terms of *hearing* and *speaking* respectively. Kant says that ‘[t]aken collectively’ the human race is but ‘a multitude of persons, existing successively and side by side.’<sup>62</sup> We want to insist, to the contrary, that the one who communicates with others is constituted a speaker and a hearer *in and through* her ongoing entanglement with these partners in communication. She never exists, not even when she is ‘mature,’ essentially (spatially) *alongside* and (temporally) in *succession* to responsible co-participants in instances of communicative interaction. We must not elide the theoretical importance of intersubjec-

---

<sup>59</sup> Rel, 17.

<sup>60</sup> Eric Lawrence Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 3–4.

<sup>61</sup> Marsha Hewitt, “‘to Never Wholly Die,’ to Never Wholly Live: Death and Rebirth in the Emergence of Self in the Therapeutic Process,” *Psychoanalytic Review* 91, no. 4 (2004): 538.

<sup>62</sup> Anthro, 191 (Gregor).

tive entanglement in ontogeny and so, too, the radical formation, as it were, of the listening *ear*.

In this perspective, sin might be understood, with reference to its social and, especially, its *linguistic* character, that is, as a distortion that is always reproduced and perpetuated in the lives of individuals *in society* and in a way that pervades the context or follows the groove, as it were, of the acquisition of language and culture. In this approach, the actions of the *biologically* individual person are the manifestation of a reality that is, in a somewhat sinister sense, like Kant's *noumena*, obscure. If this reality can be identified by means of the theological term, 'original sin,' then we might point out that grace, too, in a sense that is more truly radical, is transcendently operative here, too, and cannot *appear as such*. What Kant does not see is that this inscrutability does not belie the order of communicative interaction, human and divine, in which the body of the individual, beginning life in utter defenselessness, is embedded.

Even Habermas' useful, but incomplete repair of Kant's notion of 'rationality,' preserves a fundamental problem which we ought to avoid. For Habermas, as Andrew Edgar observes, socialization is specifically a matter of the individual's developmental acquisition of 'a set of competences that allow[s] [her] to *speak and act responsibly*.'<sup>63</sup> Here, as in Kant, the emphasis is clearly laid upon *action*—albeit qualified with respect to its character as communication. The socialized, that is, the socially *competent* individual '*speaks and acts responsibly*' '*attains individuality*' and, ultimately, '*performs social roles*.'<sup>64</sup>

And yet here too we find an oblique reference to passivity and receptivity. Habermas concedes Meads model for such processes and so concedes that the individual *necessarily* 'internaliz[es] the anticipated views and judgments of others.'<sup>65</sup> This elided moment in the dialectic of the 'attainment of individuality'<sup>66</sup> is of the essence: this is where the *difficulty* creeps in. The problem is that what is achieved in the socialization of the individual is not an achievement *of* the individual; nor are the competences proper to one or another agent really her 'own'; she cannot be responsible for them as though she were their author (*pace* Kant), even if, *qua* spontaneous she is responsible for the deeds that her competence enables.

In light of this distinction between competence and particular deeds (or speech acts), Freud's insight into the connection between trauma and language is

---

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Edgar, *The Philosophy of Habermas*, Continental European Philosophy (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 172.; my emphasis. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 149-204.

<sup>64</sup> Edgar, 172.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

a Freudian insight it is, nevertheless, significantly incomplete. 'That hysteria should be produced by a trauma and cured by language,' writes Juliette Mitchell, 'is not the same as asking what might be the effect of a trauma *on* language.'<sup>67</sup> But Mitchell's formulation obscures something even more fundamental. *Originally* speaking we are not asking about trauma's effect 'on' language, not hypostasizing language as though 'it' were an institution that is prior to and, as it were, puts its stamp on human nature. Just as trauma or scandal is not merely phylo- and onto-*genetic*, but really onto- and phylo*generative*, trauma is as much something from which language as a shared form-of-life arises and grows as it is something that is inflected and distorted *by* trauma.<sup>68</sup>

Obviously, my use of the term 'trauma' suggests a generalization of the notion which prescind from that 'truly horrific' concatenation of 'genocide,' 'war,' 'murder,' 'rape,' and 'violence,' which, as Luhrmann writes, is evoked by the word 'trauma,' here, '[i]n the world described by modern psychiatry.'<sup>69</sup> I do not have time to justify this generalization here. But it also means affirming that these have something in common, both in terms of their formal structure and their consequences, with the baby's experience (delusional or not) of *being hated*, for example, by her mother or *called to account* by her father, called upon to justify her own character and actions, as though these were unequivocally *hers* and as though these others, her mother and father, were not radically *implicated* in the grounds of possibility of her deeds.

Marsha Hewitt writes that '[p]sychic health is rooted in right relatedness.'<sup>70</sup> In short, there is an intimate relationship between the state of one's social relations and the state of one's psyche which belies Kant's image of human beings existing merely 'successively' and 'side by side.' Hewitt's assertion comes close to Theodor Adorno's even stronger claim that the 'self' is not merely

entwined in society [but] owes society its existence in the most literal sense. All its content comes from society, or at any rate from its relation to the object. It grows richer the more freely it develops and reflects this relation, while it is limited, impoverished and reduced by the separation and hardening that it lays claim to *as an origin*.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Juliet Mitchell, "Trauma, Recognition and the Place of Language," *Diacritics* 28, no. 4 (1998): 126.

<sup>68</sup> Again, this is "language," not as reified *whole* but as a limitless domain of infinitely varied instances of speaking (not all of which are really *communicative* or embody what Habermas calls "action aimed at mutual understanding") and instances of hearing (not all of which are really *receptive*).

<sup>69</sup> T. M. Luhrmann, "The Traumatized Social Self: The Parsi Predicament in Modern Bombay," in *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma*, ed. Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 158.

<sup>70</sup> Hewitt: 539.

<sup>71</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974), 154. My emphasis.

We want to emphasize, however, the fundamentally *linguistic* character of human sociality, to acknowledge with Joan Scott that '[s]ubjects are constituted discursively' and that experience or the 'subject's history,' cannot unfold 'outside established meanings.'<sup>72</sup> This suggests a parallel, as Angelika Rauch argues, between the 'facticity' of trauma and the horizon of possibility that Gadamer refers to as 'prejudice.' Rauch characterizes this horizon as 'a rigid conceptual objectification that is authoritarian and therefore resists dialogue and challenge.'<sup>73</sup> But even at its most asymmetrical, discourse is, as Scott insists, 'by definition shared.'<sup>74</sup> If language, inheres in the same 'intersubjective field'<sup>75</sup> in which trauma takes place, at the 'site' of a shared history, then, as Scott concludes, '[h]istorical explanation cannot...separate' what is collective from what is individual.<sup>76</sup> This implies, more specifically, that historical or biographical 'explanation' of the deeds of individuals must not elide the role of the *many* in the grounds of agency of the *one*.

Lyotard offers a compelling illumination of this entanglement in terms of a '*mainmise*' that is applied ontogenetically to the subject. It is precisely because we begin life as *infants* that we can never 'enter into full possession of ourselves.' Lyotard writes that 'we are held by the grasp of others since childhood [and] our childhood does not cease to exercise its *mancipium* even when we imagine ourselves to be emancipated.'<sup>77</sup> Lyotard's notion of childhood, here, is articulated with reference, not to biology or developmental psychology, but with reference to a social predicament, one that always involves the *others* who inhabit the world before I do. Thus, he writes:

[b]y childhood, I do not mean, as the rationalists have it, an age deprived of reason. I mean this condition of being *affected* at a time when we do not have the means—linguistic and representational—to name, identify, reproduce, and recognize what it is that is affecting us. By childhood, I mean the fact that we are born before we are born to ourselves. And thus we are born of others, but also born to others, delivered into the hands of others without any defenses. We are subjected to their *mancipium*, which they themselves do not comprehend. For they are themselves children in their turn, whether fathers or mothers.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 34.

<sup>73</sup> Angelika Rauch, "Post-Traumatic Hermeneutics: Problems for Trauma Therapy," *Diacritics* 28, no. 4 (1998): 113.

<sup>74</sup> Scott, 34.

<sup>75</sup> Davies and Frawley, 23.

<sup>76</sup> Scott, 34.

<sup>77</sup> Jean François Lyotard, "The Grip (Mainmise)," in *Political Writings*, ed. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 148.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 149. This is because "[t]hey do not attain emancipation from their childhood, either from their childhood wound or from the call that has issued from it. Thus they do not know, and they will never know, how they affect us. Not even when they try their hardest" (Lyotard, 149–150.).

If we assimilate René Girard's theory of mimetic desire to Michael Tomasello's approach to 'joint attentional scenes' we might say that the very condition of possibility of the hurt that human beings cause one another is a *mimetic* or *joint* attentiveness which is at the same time necessary for both the origin and the perpetuation of language and other communicative, cultural behaviour. It is in virtue of this more general fact that it is *specifically* true that wounding 'is an intensely social act' wherein, as Culbertson says, 'the carrier of the weapon is also the carrier of subtle and not-so-subtle cultural messages.'<sup>79</sup>

As Robben says, '[every] infant begins its existence in a relationship with another human being.'<sup>80</sup> The neonate, as Rauch says, is not 'autistic...at birth,' but really 'born to make contact.'<sup>81</sup> Trauma, as Davies and Frawley insist 'occurs only within an intersubjective field,'<sup>82</sup> within that 'third area' which, as Winnicott puts it, is the 'the place where we live' and the *locus* of 'cultural experience.'<sup>83</sup> But this is why the child is infinitely vulnerable—because it is in 'company' that she is simultaneously liable to violence *and* invited to symbolically mediated interaction. When she is subjected to hurt, therefore, it cannot fail to have the character of a 'cultural message.' We do not need to posit a massive or even a unique 'triggering traumatic event'<sup>84</sup> here. We need posit no more, perhaps, than an intermittent 'primal nonrecognition which would be *everybody's human lot to some degree*,'<sup>85</sup> or a nonrecognition, as Bromberg writes, which 'is equivalent to relational abandonment.'<sup>86</sup> The accusation that asserts of the inadvertent trespasser, even implicitly, that what she does, far from being inadvertent, is entirely, radically under her control forces a distortion of her relation to those who thus grip her. The 'personality' which Kant identifies theoretically by means of an integral fusing of rationality to '*accountability*'<sup>87</sup>—is the scandalized 'self,' the 'sinner' that is *hated* by her own people.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self," *New Literary History* 26, no. 1 (1995): 172.

<sup>80</sup> Antonius C. G. M. Robben, "The Assault on Basic Trust: Disappearance, Protest, and Reburial in Argentina," ed. Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 72.

<sup>81</sup> Rauch: 116.

<sup>82</sup> Davies and Frawley, 23.

<sup>83</sup> See D. W. Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience," in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971), D. W. Winnicott, "The Place Where We Live," in *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 1971).

<sup>84</sup> Davies and Frawley, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Mitchell: 124. My italics.

<sup>86</sup> Bromberg, 258.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Rel 6: 26; 21.

<sup>88</sup> Winnicott lists a number of rather compelling reasons why a mother might hate the infant that she also loves. To summarize and excerpt his detailed list: the baby is "not her own (mental) conception"; "a danger"; "an interference with her private life"; "hurts her"; "is ruthless"; "shows disillusionment about her"; "having got what he wants he throws her away like orange peel"; "[i]f she fails him at the start she knows he will pay her out for ever (D. W. Winnicott, "Hate in the Counter-Transference," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 30 (1949): 73-74.). Pre-scinding from Winnicott's developmental-psychological emphasis on the role of the "holding en-

Once again, this is an experience that recapitulates the phylogenetic trauma of the one(s) submitted to Girard's 'single victim mechanism.' But it is also suggestive of the experience of Kant's liar (no matter what Kant says about the 'dignity' of every human being 'as rational nature'<sup>89</sup>). Worse, it anticipates the experience of the one who, guilty of murder, 'must *die*,' as Kant insists in his *Metaphysics of morals*, because 'there is no substitute that will satisfy justice' and because there can be 'no likeness between the crime and the retribution unless death is judicially carried out.'<sup>90</sup> The experience of *that* one—called to account, accused, condemned, now standing on the brink of an abyssal and henceforth incommunicable familiarity with the *feel* of 'justice'—must, writes, Kant 'still be freed from any mistreatment that could make the humanity in the person suffering it into something abominable.'<sup>91</sup> But this latter, simply impossible prescription belies the fact that what must come to bear on the trespasser is an always and everywhere identical experience of being *hated*.

Perhaps Palaver is right to find 'a proof' of Kant's 'blind spot about the origin of culture' in his 'position on the death penalty.'<sup>92</sup> It is certainly worrisome, however, that Kant's 'blind spot' with respect to capital punishment might distort our understanding of the *ontogenetic* origin of the 'enculturated' individual. Just as the human race finds itself always already engaged in cultural practices—with no memory of any actual 'convention' having been held to establish the initial laws that govern these—linguistic competence, the competence that instantiates what Habermas calls 'the structures of possible mutual understanding in language,'<sup>93</sup> is acquired without the involvement or understanding of the child. The healthy child cannot *not* learn to speak, because she cannot fail to hear (or otherwise to receive), that is, she cannot *fail* to acquire language because she has *no control* over her own attentiveness. The child cannot *not* attend to what her models attend to. She cannot *resist* the urge to imitate these others—implicitly and explicitly—and, to some degree, to channel their perspective on the world. Thus, as Tomasello suggests, 'when the child learns the conventional use of...well-

---

vironment" that is created by the neonate's mother—these aspects of the infant's or the child's trespassive character might well furnish parallel motives for hate in a father or siblings or, for that matter, a lover, a teacher, an employer and so forth. As Ferenczi asserts, the "most frightful of frights [is] the threat from the father is coupled with simultaneous desertion by the mother" (J. Dupont, *The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi*, trans. M. H. Balint and N. Z. Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).; cited in Davies and Frawley, 17.). We can add to this the situation where there is a threat from a sibling (or siblings) that is paired with desertion by *both* parents.

<sup>89</sup> Gr, 46.

<sup>90</sup> MS, 106.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Palaver: 140.

<sup>93</sup> Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking*, 140.

traveled symbols, what she is learning is the ways that her forebears in the culture have found it useful to manipulate the attention of others in the past.<sup>94</sup>

Again, this implies that language acquisition involves the possession, the taking hold of the new communication-participant by the more mature. This is part of what it means to say that ‘linguistic reference is a *social* act.’<sup>95</sup> As Tomasello writes, ‘[i]n imitatively learning a linguistic symbol from other persons in this way, I internalize not only their communicative intention (their intention to get me to share their attention) but also the specific perspective they have taken.’<sup>96</sup> Every symbol is ‘socially “shared” with other persons,’ on the one hand and, on the other, in each instance ‘picks out a particular way of viewing some phenomenon.’<sup>97</sup> Indeed, the symbolic representations that circulate in the vicinity of the *body* of the child mediate the *mainmise* by which the child is henceforth *inwardly* gripped. At the same time, what is ‘within’ me cannot fail to appear to be *my own*.

How can this fail to pose a problem if the perspective in question is the perspective of others on *me*? Both the other’s ‘intention to get me to share their attention’ and ‘the specific perspective they have taken’ become the source of laws (even if only contingent, social laws) that govern my agency or constrain my practical spontaneity. It is here that the specificity of that trauma which arrives in and through language comes to the fore. Trauma that comes in the guise of *accusation* is also *communication*. Insofar as every linguistically mediated *focusing* of attention is also an invitation to embody that focus, spoken language forces the hearer, to the degree that she is defenseless, to imbibe the other’s perspective. All trauma at the hands of others is communicative in this minimal sense. The secret perspective from which one *speaks* and the invisible ear with which one *bears* always already embody these others’ own attentiveness, interest and desire. So too, therefore, do the subject’s ‘own’ visible words and deeds have their subterranean aspect *in others*. One’s perspective on the things is always *internalized*—not essentially ‘mine,’ but originally *ingested*.

*Their* point of view is *embodied* in the child, which is to say, *in her body*. In this way she is possessed by these others. At the *origin* of subjectivity or, more precisely, of *intersubjectivity*, the subject does not have to ‘try,’ as Tomasello claims, ‘to understand things from [others’] point of view.’<sup>98</sup> The social distinction between ‘other persons’ and one’s ‘self,’ along with the integral notion of

---

<sup>94</sup> Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 126.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

'our' likeness, is enabled precisely by the affect arising within the joint attentional scene, the simultaneously *social*, *physiological* and incipiently *intrapsychic* circumstance that one's body has become a focal point of attention whose *source* is the bodies, the gaze, the extended digits, the hands and so forth, of others who now identify one as the *separable* source of occurrences in a *shared* world. They call her to account: but if, in doing so, they also accuse her, identify *her* as a unique, absolutely first, unconditioned cause of these occurrences and, worse, *do not forgive her for them*, then they scandalize her, they block her way.

This attribution of absolute causality to the *one*, frees the *many* from any implication in what the individual brings forth in their midst. This, as Girard argues, is the fundamental *méconnaissance* that is embodied archaically in myths, as too, more recently, in tales of trolls and other malicious outsiders, and in medieval 'texts of persecution' that seek to justify historical pogroms and other atrocities. The 'process by which man conceals from himself the human origin of his own violence' depends upon the attribution of this violence 'to the gods.'<sup>99</sup> This is always a matter of the mob's attributing the effects which *they* have produced to their *victim*. But then too, in modernity, where the one subject is denominated free and accountable by her companions it is equally possible for the *many* to perceive themselves 'as entirely passive *vis-à-vis* [their] victim' (as our ancestors did with respect to their all to human gods, fates, and squabbling hierarchies) and to perceive the *one* as 'the only active and responsible agent in the matter.'<sup>100</sup>

*She*, the subject thus called to account, is unable to resist the urge to adopt, radically, irreversibly (in advance of self-possession, in advance of every *option*) this perspective on herself. It is in this way that scandal *engenders* a distorted idea of practical spontaneity. The idea that other persons are beings like oneself and so accountable for what *they* do arises in an interactive format, embodied in elements of a pre-linguistic life-world or form-of-life that is always already oriented to linguistically mediated imputation and blame (or credit). It is within this horizon that the 'one' human being is drawn into the midst of her conspecifics and incorporated; here, too, that she is individuated.

To one degree or another each of us is first the innocent victim of what is henceforth the origin of one's own 'freedom' and then subsumed in the collective that reproduces this same freedom in others. Perhaps this freedom that both justifies and is inaugurated under accusation is not a freedom that is worth having. We appear first at the centre and then at the periphery, within that social order whose iterable structure is instantiated, once more, when yet another defenseless

---

<sup>99</sup> Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 161.

<sup>100</sup> Girard, Oughourlian, and Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort*, 27.

*one* is surrounded by those who *impute* the effects that she produces in their lives to *her*, wholly and simply.

Eric Gans asserts in this regard that “[v]ictim’ is a central, not a peripheral category.<sup>101</sup> What the archaic victim (the *pharmakon*, the *homo sacer*) knows and what each of *us* knows *qua* victim is that, as Gans says, ‘[c]entrality is personhood.’<sup>102</sup> The ‘modern man,’ the enlightened subject, knows what the goddess, the hero, the siren, the troll, in short, what the *scapegoat* knew all along: what it *feels* like to be wholly and simply *to blame*. There is for us, then, an ineliminable equivalence between personhood, freedom, and this victimary centrality—the centrality of Kant’s liar when he is forced to confess that no matter what degree of natural, not to mention *social*, constraint had come to bear on him, he is uniquely, and worse *radically*, to blame for the ‘disorder’ that his lie has ‘introduced into society.’

If this is true, then how *deep* into the social must our problem go? Mustn’t radical evil or, to have done with Kant’s misleading concept, *original sin* involve the grip in which we are held by our roots, not merely by parents, peers and contemporaries, but by all of the dead that still grip *them*.<sup>103</sup> If both the others’ ‘intention to get me to share their attention’ and ‘the specific perspective they have taken’ become—in the acquisition and ‘use’ of language—the source of laws that govern my agency or constrain my practical spontaneity, then who knows *what* possibilities these laws imply.<sup>104</sup> *Who* is constrained to speak when ‘I’ speak? *Who* is forced to listen when ‘I’ listen?

### *Scandal: two anecdotes*

Let me conclude with a pair of anecdotes. Each illustrates a rather mundane instance of cruelty.

A little girl, five years old, is carried to school by her mother, morning after morning. Her mother, wishing the little girl would walk (but anxious that her

---

<sup>101</sup> Eric Lawrence Gans, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 176.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>103</sup> For a rather startling treatment of a related theme see Nicolas Abraham, “Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud’s Metapsychology,” *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (1987).

<sup>104</sup> If “[a]cquiring a natural language” is a matter of more than the acquisition of a “personal” competence in some technique but also, as Tomasello adds, “serves to socialize, to structure culturally, the ways in which children habitually attend to and conceptualize different aspects of their worlds” (Tomasello, 166.)—then we are dealing with the inauguration of something that will determine the competence, the success-making competence of the speaker or hearer (the individual) *collectively* insofar as she is attended to by a host of others. But this scrutinizing multiplicity fractures the self or means that the self is multiple. This is because, as Tomasello puts it, “to work as a ‘format’ for language acquisition, the joint attentional scene must be understood by the child as having participant roles that are, in some sense, interchangeable” (*ibid.*, 100); cf. Jerome Bruner, *Child’s Talk* (New York: Norton, 1983). But this interchangeability means that the self is not a unified “centre.” The self can be both the *one* centre or can be dispersed throughout the *multitudinous* periphery. The self can be both victim (and so *one*) or victimizer (and so essentially multiple or collective).

daughter might ‘make a scene’) looks fiercely ahead. The little girl looks backwards, her chin resting on her mother’s shoulder, her buoyant hair framing an undefended expression, an open expression that discloses her sadness. These two, mother and daughter, do not look at one another. But the mother presses the girl tightly into her body. Then—as she does each day—the mother puts the girl down and insists that she walk the final few steps.

Sometimes, however, at a sign from the child, the mother relents and picks her up again.

One morning, when the girl asks to be picked up once more—just short of the entrance to the school—I overhear the mother say to her:

*You look ridiculous...*

And again:

*You look ridiculous.*

Then:

*...and I look stupid putting up with it.*

A little boy, six years old, stands on the sidewalk, near the iron fence that borders the schoolyard. His mother crouches down so that he is obliged to look directly into her face. I hear her say:

*Do you want to go to school?*

*Do you want a birthday party?*

The boy nods a weak, perhaps indecisive, response to each of these questions (he doesn’t know, after all, what he is *supposed* to say). His mother continues:

*Then start being nice to mommy and daddy.*

*Stop talking back all the time.*

As I said above, each of these anecdotes illustrates a mundane instance of cruelty. These actions are mundane in the sense that each of us (we who have children) say things like this to our ‘little ones’ from time to time—more or less often.

These scenes have the very simple formal structure described in this essay: the subject stands at the centre-of-attention, hemmed in by an intensely interested circumference or periphery consisting in members of her own community. From there, she is called *forth* as the unique cause or unconditioned source of a crisis into which this community has descended or—more mundanely—the unique source of the discontent, malaise or ennui of its members.

The fact that the subject is thus called to account by a *collective* is, more often than not, implicit. In the first instance cited above, the mother who says that *she* ‘looks stupid’ when she ‘puts up’ with her daughter’s demand to be carried, draws her daughter’s attention to the fact that *many people are watching*. In

the context of this attentiveness—which the child now, mimetically adopts and turns upon herself—the mother imputes, to the little girl (unequivocally and without mercy) the origin of the in fact archaic sense of her own stupidity which, along with so much other ‘accumulated horror,’ she was carrying inside herself long before she was forced to carry this child. This imputation takes place not only through the mediation of language, but precisely as she raises the body of the child into her arms and grips the girl more firmly than before—grips her, as it were, *from the inside*.

In the second instance, in the context of his awareness of the attentiveness of a minimal (and sufficient) collectivity consisting in the parental *pair*, the little boy is called to account as the *one* responsible for his mother’s and father’s unhappiness. This is an unhappiness so profound, he discovers, that *he* (it’s source, whole and entire) might suffer the loss of his birthday party—a happy occasion for the very reason that *there* the always attentive collective will regale him with signs of approbation. Here, too, the attention that is applied to him (by the parents who blame him for their unhappiness as much as by the parents who, come birthday-time, will hail his fortunate existence) is also reproduced *in* him. His own gaze slides along the trajectory of theirs and comes to rest where theirs rests: on *himself*.

Are these children hurt *a great deal* here? They are hurt, I surmise, like each of has been—*enough*. These parents are hurtful *enough*—like all parents. This ‘enough’ bears upon the condition of possibility of these children’s own future acts of cruelty—subtle or catastrophic. This condition of possibility is indeed a ‘radical evil in human nature,’ but it is not ‘inside’ the individual and so, in a sense, it is not very radical after all. It is *here* in ‘the place where we live’ (Winnicott), reproduced in the joint attentional scene (Tomasello), laid down in what I have called ontogenetic scandal and founded within a context-of-origin that *simultaneously* founds the existence of the very *one* to whom it is then mercilessly imputed.

But the thing that is not engendered—Kant’s ‘proper self,’ the *homo noumenon*, the thing that is all that it is and all that it can be no matter what phenomena accompany the first moments of its existence in time and space: such a being is invulnerable to *heteronomy*. And this means, as Kant correctly shows, that there is no *unauthored* distortion sufficiently radical to enable this verdict, aimed at the trembling *homo phaenomenon*:

She is not entirely to blame for what she did.

She is not entirely accountable for what she said.

## Conclusion

‘By following the examples of Peter and Paul,’ Palaver writes, by taking after ‘all the other saints’ and by following ‘in their footsteps we open our hearts to the gift of grace.’<sup>105</sup> Of course, Kant does not countenance any of the key values expressed here: ‘*following*,’ ‘*examples*,’ ‘*gift*,’ ‘*grace*.’ For Kant, the ‘propensity to evil’ in human nature is freely authored by the *one* whose evil deeds it grounds ‘antecedent to every use of freedom in experience.’ An anthropology for which *following*, *examples*, *gift*, and *grace* are not merely indispensable features of human social existence, but ineradicable, constitutive features of human agency is simply incompatible with Kant’s view—whether of the Good or of evil. We may well wish to affirm what Kant does not. However, in our relation to others, in our judgments—above all in the modes of accusation or quasi-moral assessment that involve us collectively—our default perspective is still Kantian. This is not because we are heirs to the Enlightenment, but because we are heirs to an archaic *practice*—in effect, the accusation that opens onto the collective casting of stones—which Kant’s related theories of transcendental freedom, autonomy, and radical evil have served to protect from erosion.

By adopting a version of Girard’s thinking inflected by trauma theory and cultural psychology, I have hoped to lend further credence to the claim that the ground of particular *deeds* cannot be sought in the *freedom* of autonomous or spontaneous individuals of the kind described by Kant. I say, ‘*further* credence’ because it is clear to me that as far as our *thinking* goes, few of us are very Kantian, after all. Many of us do acknowledge the moral relevance of that unintelligibility that persists in our analyses of the grounds of agency. I have not, however, endorsed the influential notion that this unintelligible ground must be sought in nature—at least, not in a straightforward sense—but have claimed that it is to be found in the nature of specifically human interaction that unfolds in the ‘intersubjective field,’ the ‘third area,’ or the joint attentional scene. With reference to language, this means that the ‘ground’ of particular speech acts cannot be sought in the spontaneity or autonomy of accountable speakers. Linguistic competence is not *radically* individual. It is *shared*, held in tandem with speaking and listening others—in society.

A merely intersubjective focus, however, preserves a place for the notion of an unconscious domain that is yet ‘within’ the subject and lies, as it were, ‘under’ the subject’s self-awareness and self-cognizable personality—so that even if they were laid down in interaction with others, the hidden determinants of the subject’s character and deeds are somewhere deep ‘inside’ her. Girard’s notion of

---

<sup>105</sup> Palaver: 146.

*interdividuality*, however, suggests that what is unconscious in the determinants of the individual's 'action and feeling' is the *topos*, as it were, in which she is *gripped*, where she is entangled so radically with others (primary objects above all) that this ground cannot be characterized as *hers* or 'in' her at all. The agent is endowed with spontaneity, but the laws which govern her deployment of this endowment are *out there*.

Insofar as the origin of these laws involves a compromise with violence, Phillip Sollers is correct when he avers, in mock-Lacanian fashion, that '[t]he unconscious is structured like a lynching,'<sup>106</sup> for the great inchoate abyss stretches *out* from the biologically individual human being and into the depths of a sin-distorted social order. But Kant, in true Pietist fashion, insists to the contrary that the relevant 'abyss' extends down into 'the depths...of one's heart' and, he insists, '[o]nly the descent into the hell of self-cognition can pave the way to godliness.'<sup>107</sup>

What is in this abyss for Kant? An obstacle, a *skandalon*. Kant characterizes this as 'an evil will actually present in him.'<sup>108</sup> Even though, for Kant, this obstacle did not come from *without* and lodge itself there in 'the abyss,' it nevertheless rears up in the depths of Kant's 'hell of self-cognition' like Freud's 'piece of unconquerable nature.'<sup>109</sup> The wisdom that consists, for Kant, in the recognition that this thing is something for which I am to be held accountable cannot, as we have seen, derive from scrutiny of the obstacle or its originary 'nomos' *itself*. This scrutiny is both impossible and prohibited.<sup>110</sup> The Kantian *skandalon* remains a monstrous blank, neither autonomous nor heteronomous, but simply and horribly spontaneous. To see through this Kantian blankness, is to see that the trouble is *here* in our midst, between us and around us all the time—in the mimetic conditions of our relating, precisely, linguistically, conditions that sustain no possible object of *my* experience, but objects, as it were, of *ours*.

If Kant is mistaken in his description of moral agency and if, in respect to our persistent *practices*, we are his heirs, then it is a matter of some importance that we bring our practices of blaming, praising, punishing and rewarding more radically under the philosophical and psychoanalytical 'reversal' of Kant that has already been largely effected in important aspects of post-Kantian theory, beginning, for example, with such figures as Hamann, Schleiermacher, Schelling,

---

<sup>106</sup> Phillippe Sollers, "Is God Dead? 'the Purloined Letter' of the Gospel," in *To Honor René Girard. Presented on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday by Colleagues, Students, Friends*. (Saratoga: 1986), 192.

<sup>107</sup> MS, 191.

<sup>108</sup> MS, 191.

<sup>109</sup> *Civilization and its discontents*. Standard Ed. 21: 64-145, 86.

<sup>110</sup> Kant cautions that '[w]e must not...look for an origin in time of a moral character for which we are to be *held responsible*' (Rel, 38; my emphasis).

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Marx, and Freud. These efforts, however, need serious correction. I suggest that we would do well to seek resources for a re-description of the individual's relation to society, of the relation of moments of individuation to episodes of incorporation, in a tradition of theological reflection that continues to shelter the notions of *original sin* and *grace*.

## Bibliography

- Abraham, Nicolas. "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology." *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (1987): 287-292.
- Adorno, Theodor. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. New York: Verso, 1974.
- Al-azm, Sadik J. *The Origins of Kant's Arguments in the Antinomies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, ed. Margaret Canovan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- Bromberg, Philip M. *Standing in the Spaces: Essays on Clinical Process, Trauma, and Dissociation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1998.
- Bruner, Jerome. *Child's Talk*. New York: Norton, 1983.
- Culbertson, Roberta. "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self." *New Literary History* 26, no. 1 (1995): 169-195.
- Davies, Jody Messler, and Mary Gail Frawley. *Treating the Adult Survivor of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Psychoanalytic Perspective*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994.
- Dupont, J. *The Clinical Diary of Sandor Ferenczi*. Translated by M. H. Balint and N. Z. Jackson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Edgar, Andrew. *The Philosophy of Habermas* Continental European Philosophy. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.
- Gans, Eric Lawrence. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- . *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.
- Girard, René, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort. *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research Undertaken in Collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Vol. 1. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative Versus Subject-Centered Reason." In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, ed. Frederick Lawrence, 294-326. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Vol. 2. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*. Translated by William Mark Hohengarten. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*. Translated by B. Fultner. Cambridge: Polity, 2001.
- Hewitt, Marsha. "'to Never Wholly Die,' to Never Wholly Live: Death and Rebirth in the Emergence of Self in the Therapeutic Process." *Psychoanalytic Review* 91, no. 4 (2004): 517-541.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson. Toronto: Harper & Row, 1960.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Mary J. Gregor. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History." In *Political Writings*, ed. H.S. Reiss, 221-234. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Lectures on Logic*. Translated by J. Michael Young. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Unified ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Mary Gregor Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Mary Gregor Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Mary Gregor Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by P. Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

- . *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Robert B. Louden. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Laing, R. D. "Confirmation and Disconfirmation." In *The Self and Others*, 88-97. Chicago: Quadrangle, 1962.
- Luhrmann, T. M. "The Traumatized Social Self: The Parsi Predicament in Modern Bombay." In *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma*, ed. Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, 158-193. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Lyotard, Jean François. "The Grip (Mainmise)." In *Political Writings*, ed. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman, 148ff. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Mitchell, Juliet. "Trauma, Recognition and the Place of Language." *Diacritics* 28, no. 4 (1998): 121-133.
- Palaver, Wolfgang. "Mimesis and Scapegoating in the Works of Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant." *Contagion* 8 (2003): 126-48.
- Rauch, Angelika. "Post-Traumatic Hermeneutics: Problems for Trauma Therapy." *Diacritics* 28, no. 4 (1998): 111-120.
- Robben, Antonius C. G. M. "The Assault on Basic Trust: Disappearance, Protest, and Reburial in Argentina." ed. Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, 70-101. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Scott, Joan W. "Experience." In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, 22-40. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Sollers, Phillippe. "Is God Dead? 'the Purloined Letter' of the Gospel." In *To Honor René Girard. Presented on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday by Colleagues, Students, Friends.*, 191-196. Saratoga, 1986.
- Spiegel, David. "Dissociation, Double Binds, and Posttraumatic Stress in Multiple Personality Disorder." In *Treatment of Multiple Personality Disorder*, ed. B. G. Braun. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1986.
- Tomasello, Michael. *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Velkley, Richard L. *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- Weldon, T. D. *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958.
- Winnicott, D. W. "Hate in the Counter-Transference." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 30 (1949): 69-74.
- . "The Location of Cultural Experience." In *Playing and Reality*, 95-103. New York: Routledge, 1971.
- . "The Place Where We Live." In *Playing and Reality*, 104-110. New York: Routledge, 1971.