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Acts of Freedom: Revolution and Responsibility

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Introduction: Response to a Demand, Theorizing Between Acts / Within the Act

I wrote this paper in a response to a particular demand: a demand that I theorize an act. In a sense, then, the title of this paper already reveals on my part a refusal to respond, or a hesitation to respond, to this demand in the way that the demand implies. Already there are *acts* rather than an *act*. In choosing such a title, I have begun to declare from the outset my decision to break with the set of options prescribed by the demand. Simultaneously, however, this title does announce a response to the demand in its particularity. The demand has not fallen on deaf ears, nor will it be greeted with a stony silence. I will respond to the demand, but my response will take a form that I hope will refuse and/or exceed the form of the demand.

The aim of this paper is not to theorize an act, nor to theorize multiple acts, but to theorize *between* acts, or *within* an act. Specifically, this paper attempts to trace a fault line, to theorize a relationship of proximity, between two acts: the act of taking (or giving) absolute responsibility as theorized by Jacques Derrida in his *The Gift of Death*, and the act of revolutionary freedom as theorized by Slavoj Žižek in his *The Ticklish Subject*. This relationship of proximity is, as the title suggests, conjunctive, perhaps even intimate. It is a relationship which simultaneously implies identity and difference, convergence and divergence, contact and distance. Whether these two acts are taken as different or as identical, this paper is founded on the notion that what demands to be theorized lies between them or within them. I take it to be my responsibility to theorize that thing which appears alternately/simultaneously as the minimal distance between and/or the irreducible shared kernel at the heart of revolution and responsibility.

As such, the movement of thought within this paper will hope to take the form of a back-and-forth, a bringing together and a tearing apart. I will begin by treating Derrida's act of taking (or giving) absolute responsibility and Žižek's act of revolutionary freedom as distinct, describing each of them in turn. It is my hope that these parallel descriptions will support the hypothesis of identity – that by describing each of the acts separately, they will be seen to converge on a point of similarity. Following this, I will treat the two acts as a single field inquiry, describing them in conjunction. It is my hope that this simultaneous description will support the hypothesis of distance – that by examining the acts together, they will be seen to diverge from a point of difference. It is this point, finally – the point of both similarity and difference, of convergence and divergence – that this paper hopes, if not to theorize directly, then at least to theorize around. For, in its paradoxical and elusive nature, this point suggests the paradoxical and elusive points on which so many other conjunctions rest: the conjunction between theory and practice, between individual and society, between self and other, etc.

Derrida's Act of Taking (or Giving) Absolute Responsibility

The central moment in *The Gift of Death* is the introduction of what Derrida calls the aporia of responsibility. This aporia is an unbridgeable gap that divides responsibility between two competing and opposed meanings, which I will refer to as accountability and absolute responsibility, respectively. "For common sense," writes Derrida, "just as for philosophical reasoning, the most widely shared belief is that responsibility is tied to the public and to the nonsecret, to the possibility and even the necessity of accounting for one's words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them." (Derrida 1995: 60) This first meaning of responsibility, which I will refer to as accountability, concerns an actor's ability or willingness to give reasons for his or her act. To hold an actor accountable is to demand an account, to ask questions of the form: "Why have you done this (to me)?" As such, accountability can be seen to imply a kind of determinism. Insofar as responsible actors are compelled to supply reasons, these reasons appear as causes, and the actors' acts as the effects of those causes. The logic of accountability is thus clearly linked to the notion of a knowing, competent, rational actor who can give reasons, and Derrida traces it historically to Platonism. Within the logic of accountability, irresponsibility comes to be associated with inexplicability, with non-justification, and with actions that are disowned. An actor who is unknowing, incompetent, or irrational cannot be held accountable for his or her acts. It is useful here to bring to mind the convention of insanity as a form of legal defense. The actor who cannot account for why he/she has acted in such and such a way cannot be held accountable.

In contrast to this first meaning of responsibility, Derrida opposes a second meaning that I will refer to as absolute responsibility. Absolute responsibility is "a responsibility that doesn't keep account or give an account, neither to man, to humans, to society, to one's fellows, or to one's own... Tyrannically, jealously, it refuses to present itself before the violence that consists of asking for accounts and justifications." (Derrida 1995: 62) Absolute responsibility emerges as a resistance to the kind of determinism implied by accountability, as it supports actors' potential for free decision-making. Instead of presenting reasons as causes and acts as

their effects, absolute responsibility preserves the actor's decision to act in such and such a way as the sole cause of the act. The absolutely responsible actor refuses to respond to questions of the form: "Why have you done this (to me)?" except with responses of the form: "Because I decided to!" Derrida relates absolute responsibility historically to Christianity, but specifically to a Christianity that is (always) yet to come. (Derrida 1995: 28) In contrast to the knowing, rational actor implied by the logic of accountability, the actor implied by the logic of absolute responsibility, of whom Kierkegaard's knight of faith is the key example, is one who is capable of acting irrationally, of "structurally breach[ing] knowledge" (Derrida 1995: 77), by way of a process of free decision-making. Here, irresponsibility consists precisely in offering an account. By giving reasons for acting in such and such a way, the actor relinquishes his or her responsibility for having made a decision.

For my own purposes, one of the most important implications of the aporia of responsibility concerns the difference between accountability and absolute responsibility in terms of the relationships that they each maintain with language. Derrida works through this difference in his "history of secrecy," (Derrida 1995: 8) which traces a historical progression from the orgiastic, through the Platonic, to the Christian. At the level of a first gloss, the secret, that which is not (cannot be, must not be) rendered into language, has opposite meanings for (Platonic) accountability and (Christian) absolute responsibility. While absolute responsibility demands that the secret be kept, accountability demands that the secret be revealed.

"What distinguishes the moment of the Platonic... from the Christian *mysterium tremendum* that represses it, is the fact that in the first case one openly declares that secrecy will not be allowed." (Derrida 1995: 33) The primary demand of Platonic accountability, the demand expressed in questions of the form: "Why have you done this (to me)?" is that nothing shall remain secret, nothing shall remain unspoken. The reasons for why the actor has acted in such and such a way must be revealed and, because language grounds the possibility for universal comprehensibility, these reasons must be revealed through language. The accounting of accountability can only be accomplished linguistically. An actor can only account for, justify, and own up to his or her acts in front of others by speaking to those others.

Absolute responsibility, on the other hand, comes to be associated, in this first gloss, with silence. Insofar as the absolutely responsible actor refuses to give reasons when summoned to account for his or her act, he/she necessarily remains silent. He/she keeps the secret that Platonic accountability is determined to reveal. "As soon as one speaks," writes Derrida, "as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses... the possibility of deciding or the right to decide." (Derrida 1995: 61) The possibility for decision-making that is founded on absolute responsibility is grounded in a jealous silence in the very same way that accountability is grounded in speech. To speak, to give reasons, is precisely to refuse the absolute responsibility of having made a decision. It is to render oneself irresponsible. Indeed, Derrida goes so far as to assert that this is "the first effect or first destination of language: depriving me of, or delivering me from... my liberty and my responsibility." (Derrida 1995: 60)

However, this first gloss immediately requires further complication for two reasons. First, the archetype of absolute responsibility and Kierkegaard's model for the knight of faith, Abraham, does not in fact remain

silent. Second, although accountability openly declares that secrecy will not be allowed, it is clear from a close reading of Derrida's text that he believes the secret to be, in the end, fundamentally unrevealable.

"When [Isaac] asks him where the sacrificial lamb is to be found, it can't be said that Abraham doesn't respond to him. He says God will provide... Abraham thus keeps his secret at the same time that he replies to Isaac. He doesn't keep silent and he doesn't lie." (Derrida 1995: 59) Derrida repeats and reformulates this first complication of the simple speech/silence dichotomy many times. Abraham "speaks and doesn't speak. He responds without responding. He responds and doesn't respond. He responds indirectly..." (Derrida 1995: 59) In the end, Derrida suggests that Abraham is speaking in "an unintelligible language, in the language of the other," (Derrida 1995: 74) and characterizes this language by "its indeterminacy [which] creates a tension. It opens a sort of reserve of incompleteness." (Derrida 1995: 75)

While I am in agreement with these speculations, I believe that the essential meaning of Abraham's response, the response which refuses to reveal the secret, is more adequately portrayed in Derrida's short exploration of Emmanuel Levinas' "adieu", which appears earlier in *The Gift of Death*. "Adieu," he writes succinctly, "can mean... I speak to you before telling you anything else." (Derrida 1995: 47) In order for Abraham to take on his absolute responsibility as an actor, his responsibility for having made a decision, it is true that he must not reveal his secret. That is, he must not give reasons for acting in such and such a way. However, if he does not speak at all, if he remains totally silent, then he will not appear as an actor at all. He will come to resemble something inanimate or insensible, something which is incapable of making decisions, a force of nature. Thus, in order to fully take on his absolute responsibility, he must speak, he must respond, if only just enough to show that he exists as an actor. He must respond to Isaac's question enough to say "I speak to you," or even "I hear you," while at the same time refusing to tell the secret, refusing to answer the question concerning his reasons. In a sense, Abraham's response to Isaac can be understood to mean "I, Abraham, have decided not to answer your question concerning the reasons for my decision. The only reason is: I have decided."

The second complication of the speech/silence dichotomy concerns the secret itself. Abraham "must keep the secret (that is his duty)," writes Derrida. This much we know already, insofar as it conforms to the logic of absolute responsibility. "But," he continues, "it is also a secret that he *must* keep as a double necessity because in the end he *can only* keep it: he doesn't know it, he is unaware of its ultimate rhyme and reason." (Derrida 1995: 59) That is to say, because the command that Abraham is enacting has come from God, he, Abraham, cannot in the end finally answer the question "why have you done this (to me)?" The best he could do would be to say: "because God commands it", which would absolve Abraham of his absolute responsibility, but only by transferring it onto God, who always "keeps silent about his reasons." (Derrida 1995: 58) In the end, Abraham does keep silent on the matter of the secret. He does not tell Isaac what he might. However, in keeping the secret, Abraham does not keep something he actually has. He merely covers over, in the sense of clothing, veiling, or rendering decent, the terrifying truth that *he does not know* the secret, and thus cannot reveal it. The secret is, in the end, fundamentally unrevealable.

This has profound implications for accountability. If the logic of accountability openly declares that secrets will not be allowed, if it demands total revelation, then what does it mean from the secret to be fundamentally unrevealable? Without mincing words, Derrida concludes that Platonic accountability “amounts to a disavowal.” (Derrida 1995: 85) It is a lie. Accountability is, in the final analysis, fundamentally untenable, insofar as the secret it pretends to reveal is fundamentally unrevealable. What becomes especially interesting in light of this “revelation” is that, because accountability appears as a lie whereas absolute responsibility appears as neither a lie nor the truth, from a certain point of view accountability can be seen to keep the secret much more effectively. “Inauthentic dissimulation [the lie that is accountability] claims to unveil, show, expose, exhibit, and excite curiosity. By unveiling everything it hides that whose essence resides in its remaining hidden, namely the authentic mystery of the person.” (Derrida 1995: 37) In accountability, “everything” is revealed, and there thus appears to be no room left in which the secret, that which necessarily always remains unknown and unspoken, could be hiding. This is how the lie – the notion that the secret must, therefore, have been revealed – is supported. Absolute responsibility on the other hand always retains a veiled space of secrecy, and it thus “reveals” that something remains unknown and unspoken. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that, while both accountability and responsibility keep the secret (they could not do otherwise), absolute responsibility reveals the presence of the secret by keeping something veiled or hidden, while accountability hides the secret much more effectively, precisely through revelation and exposure.

Žižek’s Act of Revolution

The central moment in “The Deadlock of Transcendental Imagination”, the first chapter of *The Ticklish Subject*, is Žižek’s proposal of a new understanding of Kant’s faculty of transcendental imagination. Entering into a debate between Heidegger and Kant, Žižek proposes that the transcendental imagination be considered an *anti-synthetic* faculty “of *tearing apart* sensible elements out of their context, of *dismembering* the immediate experience of an organic whole.” (Žižek 1999a: 31)

Žižek describes the function of this anti-synthetic transcendental imagination in two separate, but related, contexts. The first context is what I will call Žižek’s creation myth. Here, Žižek describes the transcendental imagination as the faculty that grounds what is properly human. As the faculty that allows for “the severing of the links with the *Umwelt*, [for] the end of the subject’s immersion in its immediate natural surroundings,” (Žižek 1999a: 34) Žižek’s anti-synthetic transcendental imagination enables human beings to withdraw from the immersive influence of the animal world into a mad, essentially human, internal world of hallucinatory partial objects. Furthermore, for Žižek, it is this withdrawal that allows language and culture to come into being. As “elements must first be dismembered in order to open up the space for the endeavour to bring them together again,” (Žižek 1999a: 32) it is the anti-synthetic function of Žižek’s transcendental imagination that clears the ground for the synthesizing project of constructing systems of shared meaning.

Although this first description of Žižek's transcendental imagination might allow for an interesting interrogation of Derrida's history of secrecy (specifically the moment in which humanity emerges from the orgiastic), much more relevant to my own discussion is the description that emerges in the second context: what I will call Žižek's revolutionary politics. Not only does Žižek's anti-synthetic transcendental imagination allow human beings to tear themselves free from animal immersion (thereby opening a space for the synthesis of human language and culture), it also allows human beings to tear themselves free from already existing syntheses. That is to say, after human language and culture have been established, the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination grounds a revolutionary potential for human beings to withdraw from the influence of existing languages and cultures, returning them to a state in which the ground has been cleared for a new synthesis.

Žižek explores this notion of a revolutionary potential grounded in the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination by associating it with a particular form of decision-making. For common sense, just as for political reasoning, the most widely shared belief is that the freedom to choose is always grounded in the delimitation of a set of possible choices. In political terms, the rights of the individual only come into existence on the basis of the limitation of the rights of others. Freedom can only ever be supported on the basis of a set of laws which, in their essential function, limit freedom. It is in contrast to this notion of freedom that Žižek describes the radical, revolutionary freedom grounded by the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination. This freedom is a revolutionary capacity to choose without delimitation, or, perhaps more correctly, to choose the very delimitation within which the final choice will be made. Quoting Judith Butler, Žižek asserts that although "every decision is contextualized... contexts themselves are in some ways produced by decisions... There is the first decision to mark or delimit the context in which a decision will be made," (Žižek 1999a: 19) and then there is the second decision that chooses within that context.

Within this model, an existing language or culture (grounded in a set of laws like those mentioned above) exerts its influence over the human subject by pressuring him or her into performing an "ideological act of recognition," (Žižek 1999a: 18) wherein that subject allows the first, preliminary decision (the decision to mark or delimit the context in which a decision will be made) to be made for him or her. Here, "I recognize myself as 'always-already'... interpellated" (Žižek 1999a: 18) into the already synthesized system of shared meaning, and am thus only free to choose from amongst the set of choices that said system presents to me as possible. Žižek's anti-synthetic transcendental imagination proposes itself as a faculty that allows human beings to withdraw from this ideological influence and to make radically free decisions on the first, preliminary level: to decide on the very context within which their decisions will be made. It is on the basis of this understanding of the relationship between the influence of language and culture and the revolutionary potential of the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination that Žižek introduces a language of forced choice and of choosing the impossible. He writes: "'Actual freedom'..." that is, the revolutionary freedom grounded in the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination, "occurs only when, in the situation of a forced choice," that is, under

the pressure to conform to the limits of an existing synthesis, “one ACTS AS IF THE CHOICE IS NOT FORCED and ‘chooses the impossible.” (Žižek 2001: 121)

If enacting the revolutionary potential of the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination involves choosing the impossible, then this immediately begs the question: What is the ontological basis for imagining the possibility of an impossible choice? For Žižek, the answer to this question rests on the notion that every synthesis “is always erratic, eccentric, unbalanced, ‘unsound’... In this precise sense,” he writes, “every synthetic unity is based on an act of ‘repression’, and therefore generates some indivisible remainder.” (Žižek 1999a: 33) In the decision to delimit a set of possible choices, Žižek sees an absolute necessity of repressing some other possibility as impossible. Because any set of choices depends, for its constitution, on distinctions made between those choices, there will always be an indivisible remainder: a choice that confounds those very distinctions. In a situation of forced choice wherein the subject is presented with two possible choices, there is always a repressed third choice, an indivisible remainder that consist in choosing both of the choices or neither of them. And it is this remainder, this other (impossible) possibility, that the subject is granted access to through the faculty of the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination.

In *The Fragile Absolute*, this radically free act of choosing the impossible is renamed “the properly *modern* ethical act,” (Žižek 2000: 154) but clearly retains the characteristics established above. Its aim is to “liberate oneself from the grip of existing social reality” (Žižek 2000: 149) (that is from the influence of an existing synthesis), and it appears as a “‘crazy’, impossible choice” made in the context of “a situation of forced choice.” (Žižek 2000: 150) What makes this iteration of Žižek’s argument particularly valuable, however, is that it supplies the act of radical freedom with a specific narrative structure and some powerful illustrations. “In the situation of a forced choice,” he writes, “the [properly modern ethical] subject makes the ‘crazy’, impossible choice of, in a way, *striking at himself*, at what is most precious to himself... By cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check, the subject gains a space of free action.” (Žižek 2000: 150) Here, one can discern the function of the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination in *cutting* the subject *loose* from an externally imposed influence in order to clear the ground for a radically free decision.

The most powerful example used by Žižek to illustrate his properly modern ethical act is that of Sethe, the heroine of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*:

After [Sethe] has escaped slavery with her four children, and enjoyed a month of calm recuperation with her mother-in-law in Cincinnati, the cruel overseer of the plantation from which she escaped attempts to capture her by appeal to the Fugitive Slave Law. Finding herself in this hopeless situation, without any prospect of escaping a return to slavery, Sethe resorts to a radical measure in order to spare her children a return to bondage: she cuts the throat of her eldest daughter, tries to kill her two sons, and threatens to dash out the brains of her infant daughter – in short, she commits a Medean *act* of trying to exterminate what is most precious to her, her progeny. (Žižek 2000: 152)

Here, the enemy (the overseer) is the representative of the existing social reality (the synthetic legal apparatus supporting slavery) from which the subject (Sethe) wishes to free herself. As such, the loved object (Sethe's children) becomes the means by which the existing social reality exerts its control over the subject. That is to say, implicit in Žižek's reading of *Beloved* is an ultimatum delivered to Sethe by the overseer: "Either your children will be slaves, or I will kill them." "You are free to choose from amongst the set of choices: 1) obey the laws of the existing social reality that limit freedom, or 2) face punishment." Sethe's act, the properly modern ethical act of striking at oneself, thus appears as an act of choosing the impossible, a choice which confounds the very distinction on which the set of possible choices depends. Sethe refuses the ultimatum of obedience or punishment. In an act of radical freedom, she renounces (cuts herself free from) her fantasy of a free, prosperous life for her family, and paradoxically saves her children (both from slavery *and* from execution at the hands of the overseer and the state) by putting them to death herself. She chooses, depending on the perspective one takes, to disobey in a way that prevents her from being punished (neither obedience, nor punishment), or to punish herself (both obedience and punishment).

Convergence: Bringing Revolution and Responsibility Together

At this point, I hope that the link that I intend to draw between Derrida's absolute responsibility and Žižek's revolutionary freedom has begun to show itself. In fact, Žižek asks, "Was not such a gesture [the properly modern ethical act] already that of Abraham, commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, that which mattered more to him than himself?" (Žižek 2000: 150) However, rather than continuing from this point with an interrogation of sacrifice and striking at oneself, I wish to return to the question of language that I raised in the context of Derrida's aporia of responsibility.

As I have already suggested, language appears in the context of Žižek's theory as structurally equivalent to the existing social reality, the synthetic system of shared meaning that attempts to pressure the subject into an act of ideological recognition. The grounds for this equivalence are to be found in the model of structural linguistics that Žižek inherits from Lacan. Within this model, linguistic meaning is dependant upon a system of differences between signifiers. That is to say, the words that make up a language do not, as a rule, take on their respective meanings by referring to real, external objects, but rather by simply being different from each other, by participating in a complicated web of differentiation.

It is here that I hope to establish a strong connection between Derrida's absolute responsibility and Žižek's anti-synthetic imagination. The act of radical freedom, exemplified by Žižek's analysis of *Beloved*, defies an ultimatum by choosing an impossible choice that confounds the differences upon which that ultimatum is grounded. Rather than choosing between obedience and punishment, Sethe chooses neither/both by striking at herself. Viewed in the context of language, this impossible choice must be seen as fundamentally unspeakable. Acts of radical freedom, insofar as they are enacted precisely in order to confound an existing synthetic system of differences, cannot be described or explained within that system. What I wish to

suggest here is that absolute responsibility and radical freedom are inextricably linked through the shared characteristic of unspeakability or unrevealability. Leaving aside the fact that both Žižek and Derrida point, for illustration, to actors who sacrifice their loved ones, both absolute responsibility and revolutionary freedom refer, in their essential structure, to acts that exceed the possibilities of linguistic representation. The secret, the rhyme or reason behind an act of revolutionary freedom, *must* be kept secret, just as with the act of absolute responsibility, because its aim is precisely to disrupt the very system of (cultural/linguistic) distinctions without which revelation becomes impossible. This act cannot be accounted for because its essential purpose is to refuse the social reality that makes accounting possible.

Before I move on to the next part of my analysis, there is one point that I must clarify: It may seem as though I have claimed to reveal the secret that I have nonetheless asserted *must*, as a double necessity, be kept. If I describe the motivation for the act of radical freedom as a desire to disrupt the existing social reality that grounds accountability, am I not offering an account? I will answer this question in the negative on the following grounds: Although the desire to disrupt the existing social reality does appear as a kind of reason, it is an incomplete reason. There still remains the question, “Why would one desire to disrupt the existing social reality?”, or, more precisely, “How does one decide when the act of radical freedom *must* be performed and what form it will take?”

This question, which repeats the original “Why have you done this (to me?)” remains unanswerable. It is at once a decision and something that comes from without. In the terms of theology, it is a decision that comes from God. “God looks at me and I don’t see him and it is on the basis of this gaze that singles me out that my responsibility comes into being. Thus is instituted or revealed the ‘it concerns me’ or ‘it’s my lookout’ that leads me to say ‘it is my business, my affair, my responsibility.’” (Derrida 1995: 91) In the terms of psychoanalysis, it is a decision that comes from the unconscious. “The ‘unconscious’ is... the disembodied rational machine that follows its path irrespective of the demands of the subject’s life-world; it stands for the rational subject in so far as it is originally ‘out of joint’, in discord with its contextualized situation, [the existing social reality].” (Žižek 1999a: 62) Because it is only in terms of (within the language of) the existing social reality that an actor can know and/or speak the reasons for his or her acts, the final reason for an act of radical freedom, an act that is aimed at disrupting that existing social reality, can never be known or spoken in the moment of its enactment. The decision to act in this way *must* be made by God, or at an unconscious level, because it is fundamentally and essentially in opposition to the secular/conscious realm of accountability and knowledge.

Divergence: Tearing Revolution and Responsibility Apart

There arises, at this point, a troubling question concerning the relation between what I will call the transitive nature of responsibility and accountability and the intransitive nature of revolutionary freedom. In simple terms, taking responsibility necessitates a *for*. One must take responsibility *for* something, and thus every act of

taking absolute responsibility seems necessarily to imply or refer to some other act. The fact that this characteristic does not seem to be shared by the acts that Žižek uses to illustrate his notion of radical freedom insists as a troubling or complicating problem for the link that I have drawn between the two. This problem is perhaps best revealed through a closer look at the way in which the story of Abraham and Isaac has appeared here, through the lenses of *The Gift of Death* and “The Deadlock of Transcendental Imagination” respectively. Both of these works cite Abraham and Isaac as an archetypal illustration of the respective acts that they theorize. However, at least in the way that I have presented them, these texts maintain an irreducible distance from each other in terms of the acts to which they refer. While Žižek is concerned with the (narrowly averted) act of sacrifice itself, Derrida is concerned with Abraham’s response to Isaac’s demand that he account for his act. Admittedly, this distance is emphasized (if not constructed) by my own treatment of *The Gift of Death*. Derrida does, in fact, deal explicitly with the sacrifice itself if one moves beyond the first chapter, “Secrets of European Responsibility,” but he does not explicitly acknowledge the distance between the revolutionary act of accepting the call from God on the one hand, and the act of taking absolute responsibility in the face of Isaac’s demand on the other. It is my position that, by maintaining this distance, and interrogating it directly, important insights emerge concerning the relationship between the radical freedom of the subject and the synthesizing function of culture and language.

To begin with, I wish to stay within the framework of the story Abraham and Isaac and to work through an analysis of the story, incorporating both Žižek and Derrida in the way that I have presented them thus far. Following Žižek’s lead in associating Abraham’s acceptance of the command from God with the properly modern ethical act of striking at oneself, I find that I must retroactively assume that Abraham is reacting to the influence of an existing social reality that he experiences as an enemy trying to keep him in check. Following Derrida’s lead (which already follows Kierkegaard) in locating the aporia of responsibility between Abraham’s absolute duty to God as singularity and his ethical duty to God as universal, I find that I must also assume that the existing social reality to which Abraham is reacting is the community of believers that is founded on the universal laws laid out by God (including an injunction to love one’s children). In Žižek’s language, the God that demands Isaac’s sacrifice must therefore be Abraham’s unconscious which, reacting to some unbearable pressure or ultimatum (to which I, as reader, am not privy), demands that he cut himself loose from the precious object by means of which his enemy is holding him in check. Here, Abraham’s enactment of God’s will supports the continued existence of humanity’s capacity for revolutionary freedom, which is being threatened by the deterministic tendencies of the existing social reality.

When Isaac asks Abraham to account for himself, Abraham fundamentally cannot, because the only language he has with which to make an account is itself founded on the very laws that he is in the process of transgressing (in the sense of disrupting, exceeding, or undermining, and not simply disobeying). A complete account would appear here as a profound betrayal of God, because it would reduce the act of sacrifice from a radically free act grounded in the anti-synthetic transcendental imagination to an ethical act determined by the laws of the existing social reality. Moreover, if I continue to accept Žižek’s assertion that the act itself is an act

of revolutionary freedom, then I must admit that a complete account would be not only a betrayal, but also a disavowal, a lie. On the other side of the equation, however, silence would appear here as an equally profound betrayal. If Abraham does not respond to Isaac's demand at least enough to say "I speak to you, I hear you," then he risks appearing not as a human subject, but as something inanimate, insensible, a force of nature. In order to support humanity's continued capacity for radical freedom in the face of a threatening, deterministic social reality, Abraham must take absolute responsibility for his act. He must say something of the order, "I, Abraham, have decided not to answer your question concerning the reasons for my decision. The only reason is: I have decided."

It is here that the vital point must be made. Although Abraham has already committed to the disruptive, anti-synthetic act, although the radically free decision to sacrifice Isaac has been made, there is still room for a betrayal. The revolutionary potential of the properly modern ethical act can still be lost, the existing social reality can still maintain its synthesis in spite of this moment of disruption, *if* the radically free decision that grounded the act is covered over by an account (a disavowal, a lie), or rendered invisible through silence. And here, the strangely paradoxical relation between absolute responsibility and language becomes vitally important. In the act of taking absolute responsibility, the subject speaks – that is, he/she uses the language supplied by the existing social reality – but only as a way of revealing the existence of a secret that remains unspoken. Through this act, the subject reveals the secret, but as an absence rather than as a presence. I find myself compelled to interpret this act as *an act of bringing the existing social reality face to face with the existence of its own excluded, indivisible remainder*.

A synthetic system of shared meaning can maintain a stable coexistence with (domination over) humanity's capacity for radical freedom as long as it is able to avoid any serious confrontation with that capacity through the use of disavowals and silence. It is only when the system is forced to confront radical freedom through an act of taking absolute responsibility that the truly revolutionary potential of radical freedom – its capacity to alter the system itself – can be realized. Let me be clear about what I am proposing here: a particular understanding of the act of theorizing itself. Although I have not brought it up until now, it should be clear on a little reflection that acts of accounting *for*, and acts of taking absolute responsibility *for*, need not refer, in their transitive nature, to acts that one has enacted oneself. It is clearly possible to offer an account for the acts of another actor, and, by extension, to take, or perhaps in this case to give, absolute responsibility for the acts of another as well. And is this not precisely the function of theorizing an act? Does not the theorist necessarily (and this, I would argue, is the primary effect of theorizing) either offer an account for, or take (or give) absolute responsibility for, the act that he/she theorizes? Thus, when confronted with an act which, like Abraham's act, has some revolutionary potential for supporting humanity's continued capacity for revolutionary freedom in the face of a threatening, deterministic social reality, the theorist is confronted with a choice. He/she can offer an account, disavowing the radically free decision that grounded the act, and supporting instead the threatening, deterministic social reality. He/she can remain silent, allowing the act to appear as the effect of an inanimate, insensible force of nature rather than a human subject. *Or*, he/she can take (or give) absolute

responsibility, speaking enough to bring the existing social reality face to face with its own excluded, indivisible remainder, without claiming to reveal the fundamentally unrevealable secret. In retaining a veiled space of secrecy, in revealing that something remains unknown and unspoken, the theorist may be able to open the existing social reality to the possibility of change. By demonstrating linguistically that there is something which irreducibly resists the determining, threatening influence of the synthetic system, the theorist may be able to loosen that system's demand for closure, transparency, and absolute determination.

Conclusion: An Example of Theorizing as Taking (or Giving) Absolute Responsibility

By way of conclusion, I wish to introduce, as an example this notion of theorizing as giving absolute responsibility, my own recent attempt to theorize both the act of suicide bombing and the construction of the thing being built between Israel and the West Bank, which declares itself as a response to that act. It is my hope that, through this example, I will be able to show that the ethical demand faced by the theorist of an act is double. He/she is not only called upon to give absolute responsibility for the act, but also to take absolute responsibility for the act of theorizing itself.

Suicide bombing, and indeed suicide in general, appear as instances of an especially poignant form of act. Clearly, suicide can be interpreted as an act, if not *the* act, of striking at oneself. What is vital to this exploration, however, is the fact that, once enacted, suicide and suicide bombing leave behind no actor who could be held accountable for the act. The suicided actor is, by definition, one who remains absolutely silent, one from whom no account can any longer be demanded, and this is precisely why suicide is such a problematic act for the existing social reality that it confronts. However, if the suicided actor has placed him or herself beyond the reach of demands for accountability, he/she has also placed him or herself beyond the potential for taking absolute responsibility. Although the suicided actor must remain silent on the matter of the secret, he/she must also remain silent on everything else. He/she cannot respond to the demand for accountability while simultaneously keeping the secret. He/she cannot speak even enough to identify him or herself as an actor capable of making decisions. The suicided actor is, after the act, something inanimate, insensible, a force of nature.

In this case especially then, it falls to other actors to theorize - to account for, to remain silent on, or to give absolute responsibility for - the act. As Jean Baudrillard has pointed out in his *The Spirit of Terrorism*, one of the most prevalent responses in America to the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, has been precisely to offer accounts for why this act occurred. In response to the question "Why have they done this (to us)?" American leaders and intellectuals have offered a wide variety of reasons: The terrorists are fundamentally religious, insane, socially manipulated, jealous of America's success, angry at America's abuses, part of a culture of violence and martyrdom, etc. There is a prevailing "inability to contemplate for one moment that these 'fanatics' might commit themselves entirely 'freely', without in any way being blind, mad or

manipulated.” (Baudrillard 2002: 66) And this is almost precisely the language introduced in *The Gift of Death* and “The deadlock of Transcendental Imagination”. The reasons offered by these various accounts act to cover over the possibility that suicide bombing is enacted as a radically free decision that supports the human capacity for revolutionary freedom in the face of a threatening social reality. Rather, in conforming to the logic of absolute revelation, they preserve and maintain the deterministic tendencies of the existing social reality, defending it from any return of the repressed, any need for change. Like Baudrillard, it was my hope that in theorizing the act of suicide bombing as an act of revolutionary freedom, in giving the suicide bomber his or her absolute responsibility for the act, I would be able to bring the existing social reality face to face with the existence of its own excluded, indivisible remainder, to open the existing social reality to the possibility of change.

From this perspective, it became possible to criticize the thing being built between Israel and the West Bank as a tool of disavowal par excellence, a silencing mechanism, a device for permanently severing the existing social reality that grounds Israel, the West, and even the nation state apparatus itself, from any contact with its excluded, indivisible remainder. At the time of my original writing, I did not have access to the language I am using now. I wrote,

I do not want to be pulled into the vortex of insoluble arguments that surround the thing, because I am afraid that my own voice, rather than helping to quiet the tumult, will only add fuel to its ferocity. Nonetheless, I cannot resist the call of thing absolutely. Somehow, to remain silent in the face of this event seems just as dangerous as speaking... I hesitate even to name the thing being built, for in so doing, I inevitably place myself on one side of it or the other... Somewhere in between on the one hand antagonistically naming the thing a “fence” or a “wall”, and on the other hand a terrified silence, I am trying to find a gap of uncertainty in which various concepts can play without making unilateral claims on veracity and legitimacy.

Now, I can offer the following reformulation. To name the thing either a “fence” or a “wall” threatens to enact the betrayal that is accountability, to accept the ultimatum presented by the existing social reality, which demands that I choose between condemning suicide bombing absolutely on the one hand and aiding and abetting terrorism on the other. To remain silent, however, enacts an opposite betrayal, leaving the suicide bomber to appear as something inanimate or insensible, a force of nature. The act of giving absolute responsibility, by contrast, involves on the one hand supporting the notion that the act of suicide bombing is an act of revolutionary freedom, and on the other accepting that it is simultaneously a terrifying, unethical act by the only standards with which I have to judge (those provided by the existing social reality in which I find myself). “In order to assume his absolute responsibility with respect to absolute duty, to put his faith in God’s work, or to the test, [the suicide bomber, along with Abraham,] must also in reality remain” that most horrifying of beings: “a hateful murderer.” (Derrida 1995: 66)

What remains to be said at this point is that my act of theorizing the act of suicide bombing as an act of radical freedom, my act of giving absolute responsibility for the act of suicide bombing, (and, by extension, my

critique of the thing as a tool of disavowal) is itself an act that demands to be theorized. The question “why have you done this (to me)?” becomes “why have you presented the act of suicide bombing as an act of revolutionary freedom? Why have you presented the thing as a silencing mechanism?” And this question demands that I account for my act, remain silent about it, or take absolute responsibility for it. Žižek faces a similar dilemma when he presents “the Stalinist terror [as] the tragic dimension of an emancipatory project going awry... in contrast to Nazism which was an anti-emancipatory project going all too well.” (Žižek 2001: 39) On what grounds does he make this distinction? Although the theorist must respond to this demand for accountability by speaking at least enough to say “I am speaking to you,” or else risk appearing insensible, he/she must nonetheless refuse to absolve him or herself of his or her absolute responsibility. Although one can say that presenting an act as an act of revolutionary freedom (or as an emancipatory project) is motivated by a desire to disrupt the existing social reality that grounds accountability, the further question “how does one decide when the act of giving absolute responsibility must be performed?” remains unanswerable. In his short piece “Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics,” Žižek divides the world into “those who advocate the positivity of the existing global Order of Being as the ultimate horizon of knowledge and action, and those who accept the efficiency of the dimension of the Truth-Event irreducible to (and unaccountable in terms of) the Order of Being.” (Žižek 1999b: 36) As to why one (or more specifically he or I) would choose one side of this division over the other, Žižek remains, as I will, as we fundamentally must remain, silent. One can only say, “it concerns me” or “it’s my lookout, my business, my affair, my responsibility.”

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