

Book Review

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Eddis N. Miller, **Kantian Transpositions: Derrida and the Philosophy of Religion**, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014, ISBN: 978-0-8101-2980-1, xx + 132 pp. \$69.95 (Cloth).

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Derrida's 1996 essay, "Faith and Knowledge," may be the most important text from the last decade of his life. It also happens to be one of the most notoriously difficult things he ever wrote. Any academic work that attempts to give a serious reading of even just a few of its central claims is valuable and worthwhile, especially now when a new generation of scholars is considering the relevance of Derrida's work, twelve years after his death. For this reason alone, Eddis N. Miller's *Kantian Transpositions: Derrida and the Philosophy of Religion* is a welcome addition to Derrida scholarship. I do, however, have a few reservations about Miller's book. In what follows, I will provide a chapter-by-chapter overview of the book, followed by a brief conclusion that raises these worries.

The book is divided into four chapters that are bookended by a short introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1, "A Minimum of Theology: Kant's Spectral God," begins with a brief contextualization of Kant's position in the development of the philosophy of religion. Kant's move was to first demonstrate the failure of traditional philosophical theology and then, more radically, "to reground the idea of God through practical philosophy" (p. 4). The crux of Kant's argument is that autonomy can only be attained if the moral law grounds itself. The difficulty is reconciling the two sides of human nature, the intellectual and the sensible, which correspond in Kant's practical philosophy to virtue and happiness. The attempt to reconcile virtue and happiness produces what Kant calls the "antinomy of practical reason." The goal of the three postulates of practical reason, and specifically the postulate of God's existence, is to find a solution to this antinomy. Finite human reason must, Kant thinks, postulate the idea of God as a possibility. But Miller argues that this minimum requirement of theology turns out also to be its maximum. If God's existence were postulated as something knowable, then the motive of one's moral action would be terror of God's "awful majesty." But if God's existence could not be postulated as a possibility, there would be no hope that the highest good—the union of virtue and happiness—could be attained. God's existence is possible (Kant certainly believes it cannot be refuted), but one must act as if God were dead. Kant's practical philosophy requires, Miller argues, the rational faith in a God that is between life and death, existence and nonexistence, that is, a "spectral God." If God's existence is only possible as a postulate of practical reason, then the moral law takes precedence over all determinate, historical religion. Religion within the limits of reason alone still requires faith. But the faith required is the "reflective faith" in certain postulates that respond to practical reason's needs, and not the "dogmatic faith" that claims to have knowledge of that which exceeds reason's limits.

Chapter 2 of Miller's book, "Parergonality and Fetishism: Deconstructing Kant's *Religion*," presents Derrida's deconstruction of the distinction between reflective and dogmatic faith. This faith is a precondition for understanding what he means by transposing the "Kantian" gesture. The deconstructive lever Derrida pushes on is what Miller calls the "quasi-transcendental structure" of the four "Parerga" that follow each part of Kant's *Religion*. These parerga mark that place where reason runs up against its own limits, where it pursues moral needs that transcend the field of its legitimate use. They are quasi-transcendental because reason requires them to supplement its own internal lack. As such, they are the condition of possibility of rational religion. But since the introduction of these parerga into religion would be a transcendent, and so illegitimate, use of practical reason, they are also the condition of impossibility of rational religion. This quasi-transcendental structure undermines Kant's attempt to strictly delimit the parerga of rational religion from that which is proper to it, that is, the practical grounding of a pure moral religion. In other words, Derrida accuses Kant of operating according to the classical logic of the fetish, which is the attempt to rigorously separate the thing itself from its substitutes.

Miller argues convincingly that Kant's attempt to eliminate the fetish from rational religion is inseparable from his universalization of Christianity as the sole moral religion. Christianity, Kant argues, does not rely on historical revelation. It instead relies only on the good will of the person who acts out of respect for the moral law. And since practical reason belongs to all finite rational creatures, Christianity would be the only moral religion applicable to all. However, since Christianity is in fact an historical religion, Kant must try to separate the thing itself from everything inessential in it. He must show how statutory faith, when it is considered an essential element of the proper service to God, leads to religious delusion. By exposing the quasi-transcendental structure of the parerga, Derrida can turn Kant against himself. If Kant's rational religion relies on a supposedly supplementary faith that exceeds the limits of reason alone, then Kant's rational religion is equally guilty of fetishizing a substitute.

But Miller argues that the attempt to eliminate the fetish is not merely a supplemental occupation, but is rather the "basic gesture of the 'philosophy of religion'" (p. 36). He can argue on the basis of this claim that Derrida is not simply repeating the Kantian gesture in "Faith and Knowledge," but that he is transposing it. Derrida is not trying to eliminate the fetish from the philosophy of religion; he is asking what it would mean to speak of religion today, to speak in such a way that keeps the undecidability of the fetish in play. The key to this is the notion of reflective faith.

Before moving to an analysis of just how Derrida employs this notion of faith, Miller takes a detour through Derrida's relation to Kantian ethics. The main point of chapter 3, "Derrida and Kantian Ethics," is the claim that when Derrida proposes a "universalizable culture of singularities"—which he calls a "messianicity without messianism"—he is trying to bring together the universality of Kant's moral law with the respect for the absolute singularity of the other of Levinas's unconditional responsibility. To make this point, Miller situates himself in the debate concerning the role of normativity in Derrida's work. Miller opposes those like Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley who argue, via Levinas, that deconstruction of itself has an ethical import, which allows them to speak of an "ethics of deconstruction." But Miller maintains, contra Martin Hägglund and others, that there is a prescriptive element to deconstruction, as long as one distinguishes between "deconstruction as such" and "deconstructive reading," and between "deconstructive reading" and "*Derrida's* deconstructive reading" (pp. 43–44). Deconstruction as such is what is already

taking place in the text, yet there is someone who carries out a deconstructive reading, one which often has some kind of ethico-political motivation. This, Miller argues, is the place of normativity in deconstruction. Miller then uses this distinction to explain Derrida's infamous claim in "Force of Law" that "deconstruction is justice." He argues that we need to understand this desire for justice as belonging specifically to Derrida's deconstructive reading. What Derrida does is to expose the aporetic character of justice and law, to which Miller gives the proper names Levinas and Kant, respectively. The remainder of chapter 3 argues this through a deconstructive reading of Kant's account of duty, specifically the claim that one can never know with certainty whether one is acting for the sake of duty (and so from the moral law), or merely in conformity with duty (and so not from the moral law).

Chapter 4, "Faith, Messianicity, and Radical Evil: The 'Kantian' transposition," is the centerpiece of Miller's book. He organizes the chapter around an extended discussion of Derrida's appropriation and deconstruction of J. L. Austin's distinction between constative and performative utterances. But Derrida argues that it relies on a kind of originary, or quasi-transcendental, performativity, namely, that even every constative statement is preceded by a kind of performative. This performative states something like, "I promise, I swear, I am telling you the truth, believe me." No constative, no knowledge claim—no matter how rigorously scientific—is possible without this prior faith in the testimony of the speaker. But this also means, according to Derrida, that lying is always possible. One can never know for certain if another is telling the truth, even though communication is only possible if I have faith in the other's truthfulness. This inextricable possibility of lying as the condition of possibility of any relation to another—and which is structurally identical to the possibility of immoral action—is, Miller argues, Derrida's transposition of Kant's notion of "radical evil." The possibility of radical evil is inseparable from the possibility of community. So, when Derrida proposes a messianicity without any determinate messianism, a hope for a future universalizable culture of singularities, one must situate this proposition within the quasi-transcendental structure of originary performativity. For any culture or community at all to be possible, one must have a reflective faith in this universalizable culture that is nonetheless necessarily impossible.

But then why call this "messianicity," if it cannot be found in any one determinate and historical messianism? Miller concludes his final chapter by attempting an answer to this question. The answer, Miller claims, is found in Derrida's long-running interrogation of the opposition between "revealability" (*Offenbarkeit*) and "revelation" (*Offenbarung*). Which is more originary? Which is the condition of the other? The answer, we've come to expect, is undecidable. Miller argues for the remainder of the chapter that Derrida never ultimately settles the question. Derrida argues that revealability, understood as a universal structure, conditions all determinate revelation. And yet one can never have access to revealability as such, but only determinate revelations, determinate messianisms, such as Christianity. Derrida's transposition of Kantian reflective faith consists, Miller argues, not "in drawing a rigorous line of demarcation between the universal and the determinate . . . but in calling into question the universality of his own universalizing gesture" (p. 92). The result is, Miller concludes, an other tolerance and an Enlightenment to come. It would be a tolerance that never tries to raise any particular faith to the status of a universal, one that respects the singularity of the other; and so it would be an Enlightenment that is always in the future, one that retains the hope for a universalizable culture of singularities, a messianicity without messianism.

With this overview in place, I would like to raise a few concerns before concluding. My first concern has to do with Miller's thesis as he states it in the introduction. There he writes that the thesis of his book "is that an understanding of 'Faith and Knowledge,' and, therefore, an understanding of Derrida's engagement with religion more broadly, requires us not only to understand what Derrida means by 'transposing' the 'Kantian' gesture, but also to read 'Faith and Knowledge' precisely as an attempt to enact such a transposition" (p. xii). I think Miller is successful at arguing the first part of this thesis. Derrida's question, What would it mean to transpose the Kantian gesture, today?, is crucial to a thorough understanding of Derrida's aims in "Faith and Knowledge." And Miller gives a sure-handed interpretation of what this phrase may mean. But even here, Miller sometimes rushes through the argumentation, often leaving to the side some of the trickier aspects of Derrida's text, especially its formal inventiveness.

As for the second claim, that an understanding of this gesture is central to understanding Derrida's engagement with religion more broadly, I think Miller is less successful. He writes in his introduction that Derrida's thinking about religion interrogates "the meaning and possibility of philosophy of religion as a philosophical discipline" (p. xiv), but, aside from a few stray comments in the main body of the book, he relegates his argument for this claim to his brief conclusion. Derrida's diagnosis of the philosophy of religion—that there is an undecidable oscillation between a transcendental religiosity and determinate religions—is difficult to contest. But it seems to me that philosophy of religion does much more than what is contained in this description of it. In short, I think Miller shows the relevance of Derrida's work for determining the *possibility* of philosophy of religion, but does not sufficiently show how this work interrogates its *meaning*.

Moreover, while it is true that Derrida's deconstructive reading of Kant's *Religion* is an important part of the story, Derrida's engagement with religion goes well beyond that text and that historical period. For example, Miller says nothing about Derrida's readings of negative theology and Christian mysticism, which one can trace all the way back to his texts in the 1960s. Nor does he discuss any of Derrida's seminars from the 1990s and early 2000s, all of which go to great lengths to show the Judeo-Christian heritage of so many secular ethical and political concepts in use today. But Miller's most glaring omission is a discussion of Derrida's extensive and complicated elaboration of the Platonic notion, *khōra*. *Khōra* and the messianic are the two names Derrida gives to the "two sources" of religion indicated in the subtitle to "Faith and Knowledge." Insofar as Miller completely omits this second name, he overstates his case that one must read "Faith and Knowledge" as an attempt to enact a transposition of the Kantian gesture.

One final reservation: it is hard not to compare scholarship on Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge" to Michael Naas's 2012 book, *Miracle and Machine*. Yet Miller only mentions Naas's book once, and this only to say that it does not pay sufficient attention to the centrality of Kant to Derrida's essay. But one need simply look at Naas's book to see that it in fact spends a good deal of time addressing Kant's role in "Faith and Knowledge," with Naas even devoting an "observation" on Kant at the end of the book. It is undeniable that Kant is central to Derrida here, but so is Hegel—whom Miller only discusses briefly—and Bergson—whom Miller omits entirely. And, as Naas notes, so is Heidegger, whose name appears more often in "Faith and Knowledge" than Bergson's, Hegel's, and Kant's combined (58 to their 26). Naas's point, one which I would put to Miller, is that while Kant cannot be ignored, Derrida's concerns in "Faith and Knowledge" extend far beyond the limits of Kant's text.

None of this, however, should undermine the value of Miller's book. It is strongly argued and elegantly written. It should be read by anyone interested in Derrida's reception of Kant, or in determining Derrida's relevance to the discipline of philosophy of religion.

Author biography

Daniel J. Palumbo is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at The Pennsylvania State University. His research interests include 20th and 21st century French philosophy, post-Kantian German philosophy, disability studies, and ethics. His dissertation considers, through an interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas's work, the consequences of pain for selfhood and self-understanding, with a focus on survivor testimony and survivor narratives.