

Toward a More Robust Vision of Spirit: Hegel, Marx, and Kierkegaard

Like the spiritualist tradition, G. W. F. Hegel puts Spirit at the center of communication; unlike it, Spirit (*Geist*) is always embodied and tragically conflicted. Hegel and his renegade disciples Karl Marx and Søren Kierkegaard subscribe to principles that are contrapuntal to the spiritualist tradition: the irreducibility of embodiment, the doubleness of the self, and the publicness of meaning. They are interested in the objective conditions that make the self possible in the first place and are much more attuned to pathology, power, and distortion in intersubjective relations than are the spiritualists. Their analysis of the conditions of possibility of communication is far deeper than most later thinking on that topic. Though Kierkegaard is the only one to write extensively about communication per se, all three—despite their large and crucial differences—offer visions of self, sign, and world that allow for a profound rethinking of what communication might mean today.

Hegel on Recognition

Hegel, like his rebellious intellectual offspring Marx and Kierkegaard, took eros as the principle that held the universe together in an all-embracing totality. This is not to

make Hegel into a romantic, for no one hated romantic Schwärmer (gushing) more than he. He thought the attempt by his erstwhile colleague F. W. J. Schelling to make people at home in the world via the archromantic project of an aestheticized world fell short of a fully rigorous account of the problems that had to be faced to achieve a genuine at-one-ment. Still, the quest for a reconciliation of subject and object is the prime mover of Hegel's mature system—especially his philosophy of nature and of spirit—as it was throughout his intellectual development. I do not consider it unfair to think of this as, at least in part, an erotic principle owing something to the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, two key influences on Hegel. To put words in his mouth, the aim of his entire system is communication: not in the sense of shared information, but in the richer sense as the process whereby a free human world is built collectively.

Hegel interpretation is a vexed business. The same thinker who inspired the young Marx and Dewey with his dynamism has been seen by others as an overweening systematizer, the theorist of the all-devouring bourgeois ego. Marx mocked Hegel for walking about on his head; Kierkegaard made fun of contemporary Danish Hegelians for having huge heads that were threatening to become disconnected from their bodies. Today both liberals and postmodernists find something to oppose in Hegel. As Charles Taylor notes, Hegel suffers from too much originality. In Hegel, various readers have found sources for Marxism, existentialism, atheism, Christian theism, the Victorian family, fascism, and post-structuralism. Part of the conflict of interpretations springs from the diverse points of textual entry into his work. As Vittorio Hösle argues, Hegel is a watershed between the philosophy of subjectivity (from Descartes to Fichte) and the post-Hegelian focus on intersubjectivity. Hence it is difficult to know whether to read him as the last great thinker of the *cogito* or the first thinker of "the other." Hösle's thesis is that a fault line runs in Hegel's system between the *Logic*, which culminates in absolute subjectivity, and his "Realphilosophie" (philosophy of nature and spirit), which is motivated by insights into intersubjectivity, however unevenly they are integrated into the system as a whole. A price Hegel paid for his ultimate systematic coherence, argues Hösle, was the suppression of intersubjectivity; hence the *Phenomenology* is far richer than the *Encyclopaedia* on this topic.¹ Here I focus on the *Phenomenology*, ac-

1. Vittorio Hösle, *Hegels System: Der Idealismus der Subjektivität und das Problem der Intersubjektivität*, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1987). See, e.g., 2:385, 407.

knowledging that a full treatment of sources for a Hegelian theory of communication would have to range much further.²

The *Phenomenology*, an “unusual, early work” as Hegel called it late in life, suggests several doctrines fruitful for rethinking the dominant, spiritualist model of communication as shared consciousness. First, there is no content separate from form. Hegel would eschew the principle of bodily indifference so central to angelology. His philosophical method is a kind of incarnational analysis. “Phenomenology” is the logic of appearances, “the science of appearing knowledge.”³ Hegel does not believe, at least in the *Phenomenology*, that a philosophical doctrine can be understood apart from its embedment in the spiritual and material conditions of its time. One must tread an experiential path to the doctrine, almost viscerally appreciating the conditions and horizons within which it came to be. Philosophy is a relentlessly historical inquiry for which circumstantial details can never be merely accidents. Unlike Augustine, who sees our conveyances through the world as mere extras to be ignored where possible, Hegel cannot separate means from ends. The path of knowledge must be traversed in its full length. To take shortcuts is to miss the wisdom. The summit is found not in the extinction of all appearances, as some versions of Plato might hold, but in the manifold unity of appearance and essence, what Hegel calls a “gallery of images.”⁴ For Hegel there is, to use the language of twentieth-century postwar communication theory, no message apart from a channel. In short, for Hegel Spirit never exists without a body.⁵ This claim has massive implications for how the Hegelian aftermath would consider communication.

Second, communication is a problem of the object as much as the subject. The task is not to fuse one subject with another, but to form a set of historical relations in which subjects are objectively possible. As Charles Taylor puts it, in Hegel’s ontology “the lowliest form of being must be understood as an imperfect proto-form of the highest, which is

2. I have attempted a somewhat fuller reading in John Durham Peters, “The Root of Humanity: Hegel on Communication and Language,” in *Figuring the Self: Subject, Individual, and Spirit in German Idealism*, ed. David E. Klemm and Günter Zöller (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 227–44.

3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807; Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), hereafter referred to as *PhG* with reference first to page number and then to paragraph number. English translations I take from *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

4. *PhG*, 563, par. 808.

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subject."⁶ Nature and history are pregnant with the embryos of subjectivity. The task of Spirit is to play midwife and raise them to maturity. The potential subject, which exists only *an sich*—in itself or implicitly—must become actual—*für sich*—for itself or explicitly. These embryos are often unrecognizable and are mistaken as only matter, not spirit. Subjectivity, much of the time in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is mired in objectivity. This stone, that tree, these hieroglyphics, all the unwritten books only dreamed of, this child, that slave—all of them need to be known from the inside out, for themselves. Each is implicitly part of the meaning of the universe and needs a chance to take part. Genuine knowledge must appreciate the jagged singularities of things and their part in the larger symphony. This revelation of interiority, this coming to be of Spirit, is a kind of interpretation that is also an objective appearance in the world.

Hence "communication" will always be more than the shuttling of mind-stuff. It is the founding of a world. For Hegel communication is not a psychological task of putting two minds *en rapport* but a political and historical problem of establishing conditions under which the mutual recognition of self-conscious individuals is possible. The issue is to reconcile subjects with their embodied relation to the world, with themselves, and with each other. Again the problem is, broadly speaking, an erotic one. The question of mutual recognition in such a way that individual differences are at once overcome and cherished is a leitmotiv of Hegel's thought, especially up to the *Phenomenology*. What Socrates in the *Phaedrus* hopes that philosophical lovers will seek is also, in a way, the chief principle of Hegel's metaphysics: "the union of union and non-union."⁷

Because subjectivity without objectivity is only a dream or a vapor, the self can never be self-sufficient, lord of the signifier or of anything else. To make a premature attempt at lordship is only to isolate and destabilize the self. The *Phenomenology's* famous master-slave drama, often seen in the twentieth century as a master key to the whole system, makes the point that there is no self without an other. As Hegel puts it, "*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.*"⁸ Like a long line of nineteenth-century authors interested in doubles—the German romantics, Hoffmann, Poe, Baudelaire,

6. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 235.

7. G. W. F. Hegel, "Fragment of a System" (1800), in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 312.

8. *PhG*, 139, par. 175; emphasis in original.

Dostoyevsky, and Freud—Hegel considers the self like a Möbius strip: a unity of two sides. But he is less interested in the exquisite pathologies exemplified by doppelgängers than in a rational reconciliation of selves and others in the world. The attempt to attain self-certainty outside historical relations with others is folly. In the rendezvous of two selves, we first encounter the concept of Spirit or *Geist*, which Hegel defines as the experience of the simultaneous diversity and unity of self-consciousnesses, an “I that is We and We that is I.”⁹ As Robert R. Williams writes, “This situation of reciprocal recognition is one of communicative freedom, which Hegel describes as being at home with self in another.”¹⁰ Unlike Fichte and Schelling, who earlier used the formula “I = I” to express the starting point of their systems, Hegel insists on the experience of Spirit within a community: “I = We.”¹¹ It is fair, given the subsequent tradition, to see this as Hegel’s answer to the question of what communication is. The ambiguity here is this: Do the I’s dissolve themselves into the great We, or is it a harmony within diversity? Given Hegel’s principle that the individuality of a moment is dialectically preserved rather than eradicated, I vote with the latter, acknowledging that others have good grounds for less charitable readings of Hegel.

Hegel attacks a core assumption of Lockean and commonsense notions of communication. For Hegel the self has no “inside”—its self-discovery goes on in the daylight of common life in the company of others. To argue that you cannot know what I really think or feel “inside” is an affront to the imperative of communication:

Since the man of common sense makes his appeal to feeling, to an oracle within his breast, he is finished and done with anyone who does not agree; he only has to explain that he has nothing more to say to anyone who does not find and feel the same in himself. In other words, he tramples underfoot the root of humanity [*Humanität*]. For it is the nature of humanity to press onward to agreement with others; human nature only really exists in an achieved community [*Gemeinsamkeit*] of consciousness. The anti-human, the animalistic, consists in remaining standing within feeling, and being able to communicate [*sich mitteilen*] only at that level.¹²

9. PhG, 140, par. 177. Robert R. Williams, “Hegel’s Concept of *Geist*,” in *Hegel’s Philosophy of Spirit*, ed. Peter G. Stillman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 1–20, outlines three competing models of *Geist* in Hegel scholarship: Spirit as a transcendental ego redivivum; as humanity itself; and as social or intersubjective. Both Williams and I favor the third reading.

10. Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 149.

11. Cf. PhG, 257–58, par. 351, and PhG, 471, par. 671.

12. PhG, 56, par. 69.

In this Habermasian passage (every author, as Borges notes, invents his or her precursors), Hegel posits an anthropological urge to reach consensus. The process of recognition, in contrast to this inner oracle, suggests that the self's outside is just as hidden from itself as its inside is from others. For Hegel interiority and exteriority are temporal rather than spatial: one's subjectivity is *an sich* or "implicit" when one has not yet achieved recognition by another. Furthermore, no one really has an oracle in his or her breast, since, for Hegel, the self has no immediate relation with itself. You may not know the details of what remains unexpressed in my inwardness, but I have a similar lack of awareness about how I look to you or what my outwardness is like. I do not know in detail how I appear in public, how others take me, how my actions resound in the world, even what my quirks and mannerisms are.¹³ My self, so plainly revealed to others, is largely opaque to me. My private self is obscure to you, but my public self is obscure to me. You surely have a better sense of me in many respects than I do. My private self, therefore, is also obscure to me, since it is made out of public materials. I have to rely on others for self-knowledge: I have no secret passageway to the holy of holies.

The self thus stands in the same position with regard to itself as to others. In Rimbaud's line, "Je est un autre." To use Kierkegaard's language (intended as a parody of Hegel), the self is a relation that relates itself to another. The American pragmatists took the insight in a productively social direction. As Charles Sanders Peirce says, "The recognition by one person of another's personality takes place by means to some extent identical with the means by which he is conscious of his own personality."¹⁴ Josiah Royce makes a similar point: "One discovers one's own mind through a process of inference analogous to the very modes of inference which guide us in a social effort to interpret our neighbors' minds. . . . Although you are indeed placed in the 'interior' of yourself, you can never so far retire into your own inmost recesses of intuition as merely to find the true self presented to an inner sense."¹⁵ For Hegel, likewise, the self has no privileged access to itself: it only finds itself post facto or in another self, who has recognized it as a self. Self and other

13. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 137, notes the uniquely modern self-alienation of seeing oneself on screen or hearing one's recorded voice. Mirrors are more ancient.

14. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Law of Mind," *Monist* 2, 4 (July 1892): 558.

15. Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 2:138–39. Royce here seems to be commenting on Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 228–50.

intuit themselves in the same objective, public stuff—in *Geist*, which consists precisely in this in-betweenness.¹⁶

Here is no problem of a preexisting self trying to “annex,” as Locke put it, words to its private ideas so that it may communicate with another. Rather, the very ground of its existence as a human being depends on the other’s recognition. Augustine would agree with Hegel, at least in this, that modes of interpretation are not just ways of seeing but constitute one’s place in the universe. Recognition enables humanity. Self-consciousness exists only as it is recognized.¹⁷ The internal loop of self-recognition must pass through the external loop of being recognized by another self-consciousness, a *semblable*. Leo Rauch suggests the Berkeleysque phrase for Hegel: *esse est agnosci*, to be is to be recognized.¹⁸

Finally, Hegel’s conception of *Geist* locates meaning as public rather than private. To think of self-consciousness as existing, quite literally beside itself, in outer, material forms, opens the door to the rest of the *Phenomenology*—a “gallery of images” of distorted forms of intersubjectivity, ranging from the grotesque to the sublime, from the violence of battle to the ecstasy of the community work of art. Locating self and self-consciousness, like Spirit or *Geist*, in the precarious world of material things and mortal others is risky. But as Hegel insists, Spirit is rarely realized without tragedy.¹⁹ That the Incarnation led to the Crucifixion, a fact that is rarely far from Hegel’s thinking, is the highest expression of the glorious catastrophe of embodied *Geist*.²⁰ In his early Frankfurt writings on love, Hegel argued that love destroys all positivity, that is, anything contingent—especially the body. Love, faith, and hope were conceived as utterly worldless, states of spirit without any impress on objects. But from his Jena period on he argues that real love must include all the parts of the lovers, private and public, just as faith must involve real knowledge and hope must be based on conditions of ethical

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16. Josiah Royce, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy: An Essay in the Form of Lectures* (1892; New York: Dover, 1983), 208–9, n. 2, underscores this point by translating Hegel’s *Allgemeinheit*, used in section 436 of the *Berlin Encyclopaedia*, where the self-consciousnesses affirmatively recognize each other as recognizing, by *publicity*.

17. *PhG*, 141, par. 178.

18. Leo Rauch, “Introduction: On Hegel’s Concept of Spirit,” in *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805–6) with Commentary*, ed. and trans. Leo Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 33.

19. See Williams’s excellent discussion in *Recognition*, chaps. 9 and 10.

20. See, for example, G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: The Lectures of 1827*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 465–68.

life. "For love is a distinguishing of two, who nevertheless are absolutely not distinguished for each other."²¹

Since there is no meaningful subjectivity that is not reconciled with its objective conditions, *Geist* or Spirit has both a material and a spiritual form. But there is nothing ghostly about *Geist*. Hegel clearly places it in cultural forms. The higher accomplishments of Spirit—law, the state, art, poetry, religion, and philosophy—do exist in material form (in texts, cities, communities, stone, paint, language, etc.). But they do not exist *as* Spirit without being recognized as having a significance that transcends their embodiment. Recognition always involves interpretation. An animal might see a sculpture, say, as a piece of stone useful for shelter or other purposes but could not recognize it as "sculpture," as an object enjoying a standing and meaning not exhausted by its animal uses and as belonging to a given community or given moment in the history of the human species. To recognize it as a work of art or human expression is to be a member of a world in which the sculpture has meaning and to be capable of practices of intelligent participation.

Geist, then, consists both in the material inscriptions of culture and in the embodied community of interpreters. Works of art or philosophy have a subjective, inward dimension just as human interpreters have an objective one. There is *Geist* in the *Mona Lisa* that is entirely autonomous from any viewer's perception of that painting. The painting is more than the sum of what it is in the eyes of its beholders, and it holds an objective intelligence that can never be reduced to the aggregated individual mental experiences of its viewers, as the Lockean, psychological tradition might have it. If the whole human species somehow became extinct but the *Mona Lisa* survived, it would be unrecognizable as a human thing and might seem to the surviving animals as interestingly patterned matter at best. It would be in the same position as the slave, its voice inward and mute, without audience, recognition, or community of interpretation. Its humanity would be rootless; but it would still have something to say even if no one was there to hear it. Whereas Locke asserts that meanings are in people, Hegel argues the worldliness, the objectivity, of meanings. Hegel is quite willing to see a painting and a human equally possessing subjectivity. Lack of recognition would be fatal to the human status of both.

In arguing that artifacts as well as organisms can be bearers of intelligence, Hegel offers an account of communication apt for an age of transformed conditions of human contact. Meaning, for Hegel, can

dwelling in things as well as people, in matter as well as minds. The nineteenth century would become increasingly familiar with expressions of the human spirit separated in time and space from the bodies of their makers—photographic images, telegraph signals, voices from the phonograph, telephone, and wireless, and moving images. To be sure, Hegel thought of writing as the medium that includes all other media, since he died too soon to see media that actually capture temporal sequences of sensory stimuli.²² For those nourished by the Lockean principle that meanings subsist solely in the private individual, the Hegelian notion of *Geist* has long seemed ghostly or even ghastly. That works of Spirit speak from the dead and do so invariantly is not a source of horror, as for Socrates, but the basis of cultural continuity. Disembodied intelligence might seem uncannily spectral, but without some kind of intelligence that transcends the body, the dream of communication, after all, would be vain. Why should we be shocked to confront intelligence that does not have a human shape? Socrates found handwriting a ghostly, erotic stand-in for the author, but might not this concern be relevant for all signifying emanations from other people, whether voice, touch, or gesture? The excesses of spiritualism and psychical research—producing ghosts in order to explain what is better understood as *Geist*, the patterned material records of human self-expression—are an attempt to avoid facing the inhuman shapes that we, like other creatures, necessarily assume.

To take just one example, consider Sir Oliver Lodge's spiritualist account in *Raymond* (1916) of an old problem in the philosophy of art: the relation between artist and audience. Lodge is not willing to admit that there is intelligence in Beethoven's scores or Rembrandt's paintings per se. Rather, without an originating mind behind them, he argues, music and painting would be only daubs of color or acoustic disturbances. "Deposits in matter" alone, he insists, cannot carry any "emotional influence." Emotion does not lie in the works as such; the colors and sounds serve as channels for a near telepathic hold that the late spirits of Beethoven or Rembrandt still exert over their audiences. He thus evades the more truly ghostly prospect that sonic events and oils could be profoundly meaningful without any superintending mind. He will not grant the autonomy of the text. To keep all meaning anchored in mind, he literally has to conjure spirits to account for the effects of art. Telepathy becomes the general model of communication. "Matter

22. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 1986), 58–59.

is an indirect medium of communication between mind and mind. That direct telepathic intercourse should be able to occur between mind and mind, without all this intermediate physical mechanism, is therefore not really surprising."²³ Like Locke and unlike Hegel, Lodge has no notion of an intelligence that is inscribed somewhere outside the human mind, in material configurations such as texts, sculpture, architecture, or collective forms of life. Hegel's *Geist* is patterned matter interpreting itself historically, but for Lodge communication happens in spite of matter. Lodge does matter dirt, missing the glorious forms of lovable intelligence it can assume. He will not see the intelligence that has no organic life cycle.

Rather than making telepathy the explanation for how texts and readers interact—which involves importing a ghost into each end of the transaction—I would rather make the interaction of text and reader the model of communication in general. To live is to leave traces. To speak to another is to produce signs that are independent of one's soul and are interpreted without one's control.

Hegel invites us to see subjects as intertwined with objects, selves as intertwined with others, and meaning as public rather than psychological. In contrast to the intense faith in Anglo-American culture that only bad people or fascists believe in the objectivity of spirit, Hegel's notion of *Geist* actually provides a more sensible account of how people build common worlds of culture and how they might "communicate" in any sense. He insists on the intelligibility of inhuman forms in the species or larger community, including the living and the dead. Hegel is not calling for an annihilation of individuality; he is showing how it can flourish. *Geist* is found precisely in the commerce of the "I" and the "We," in the communicative practices of a community (leaving this much abused term open for now). Spirit is fundamentally a matter of what Josiah Royce called "interpretation," the signifying life of a body of people. The problem of communication for Hegel is not so much to make contact between individuals as it is to establish a vibrant set of social relations in which common worlds can be made. In contrast to the angelological tradition and its allies within the liberal family of Locke, Hegel sees communication not as a kind of thought transport but as a dangerous, sometimes tragic effort to organize lived conditions so that mutual recognition can be accorded to all. In particular, Hegel's

23. Oliver Lodge, *Raymond, or Life and Death, with Examples of the Evidence of Survival of Memory and Affection after Death* (New York: Doran, 1916), 339. All quotations are from this page. On 340 he argues that there is an evolutionary advantage for the lack of extrasensory communication: we can protect ourselves from the onslaughts of other minds by simply moving out of range.

insistence on the eccentricity of the self to itself and the objectivity of spirit can help cut through bad thinking about communication in our age.

Marx (versus Locke) on Money

Like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Marx's opus can be read as a theory of mediation and a critical account of the distorted expressions that subjectivity can take. A vision of communication lies at the core of his work, especially as an implicit diagnostic category for capitalism's pathologies. Like Hegel, whose "grotesque craggy melody" did not initially appeal to him, Marx does not conceive of communication as the touching of souls; with an explicitly antitheological definition of *Geist* as human rather than inhuman or superhuman, Marx—most explicitly in his early writings (on which I will focus here)—is the analyst of unhappy relations between subject and object. But he also holds to the ecstatic vision of "the reconciling yes!" that Hegel, and before him Plato's Socrates, articulates: the full matching of individualities in love—or, as Marx extended it, in labor.²⁴ As with Hegel, Marx takes Locke's notion of idea matching between private minds as rarefied. Individuality is the result of a collective human life, not the starting point. Marx's analysis of the topsy-turvy worlds of money and the commodity foreshadow much later thought about the uncanniness of mediated communication, with their power to give voice to alien beings. His horror at disembodied intelligence and animated bodies without souls is one response to the inhuman ways of embodying human personality in modernity. Marx's analysis provides us with much of the deep structure of modern media analysis, as it deals, essentially, with the enigmas of recording. Like the *Phaedrus*, Marx criticizes deathly and disseminative media.

Money, after all, is a kind of medium—and not only a medium of exchange, but a medium of representation as well.²⁵ Both Locke and Marx are anxiously fascinated by money's ability to embody and store value as well as other spiritual qualities, and a comparison of their views revisits the contrast between dissemination and dialogue. Before the audiovisual media of the nineteenth century, writing generally held a mo-

24. "Das versöhnende Ja" is a phrase from Hegel, *PhG*, 472, par. 671.

25. Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989); Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Jean-Joseph Goux, *Les monnayeurs du langage* (Paris: Galilée, 1984); Eugene Halton, *Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), chap. 10; Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

nopoly on the storage of intelligence as money did on the storage of abstract value. Socrates' worries about writing's curious powers of preserving and dispersing thought recur in Locke and Marx, who focus on money's strange power of storing value, but with different conclusions. Locke welcomes dissemination, Marx abhors it.

Locke's account of property, as we have seen, rests on the ability of human labor to imprint itself on matter. Property springs from the sovereignty of each individual over his (not her) own life and body: "Every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*; this no Body has any Right to but himself."²⁶ Before money, property was defined by the criterion of finitude—how much one could work. Locke posits a proportionality between the labor one invests and the extent of one's possessions. Not quite Rousseau's noble savage, Locke's primitive laborer is figured as a Native American who via his labor encloses the common world given by God to all. Locke's state of nature is an idyll of reciprocity. Labor there is the equivalent to dialogue in the realm of objects: proportional, unique, personal.

The process of appropriation is naturally limited in scope. In response to the critique that "any one may *ingross* as much as he will," Locke answers decidedly, "Not so. The same Law of Nature, that does by this means give us Property, does also *bound* that *Property* too" (31). In the state of nature, waste sets the upper limit of accumulation. God has given us the world to enjoy, and any fruitless use of it is an infringement on the rights of others to live. "Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy" (31). As soon as we appropriate more than we can use, we surpass the bounds nature or God has placed on property. The natural checks against hoarding goods beyond their durability are the sheer irrationality of waste and the offense against one's neighbor. Most human necessities are "generally things of *short duration*; such as, if they are not consumed by use, will decay and perish of themselves" (46). The limit to just gain is determined by a commodity's ability to last without spoilage; it is not a matter of quantity, but of time. This is the law of propriety in the double sense of property and civility. Private property and human finitude are thus proportionate.

When money comes along, strange things start to happen. No longer is the transience of goods the natural upper limit to accumulation. Money abolishes the "rule of propriety" that limits accumulation. Precious metals can be stored without putrefaction. Locke's contrast is

26. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (1690; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), sec. 27 in original. Parenthetical references are to sections of Locke's *Second Treatise*; emphasis, spelling, and capitalization follow the original.

clear: one kind of accumulation is wrong and wasteful, the king with his vast stores of rotting beef while the peasants starve, but "Gold and Silver . . . may be hoarded up without injury to any one, these Metals not spoiling [sic] or decaying in the hands of the possessor" (50). Locke has found a storage medium subject to neither the corruptions of mortality nor the limits of the human body. More important, in contrast to Marx's insistence that all property is relational—that the beauty of the wealthy is paid for by the misery of the poor—Locke argues that money can be collected without any harm to one's neighbor. Because its value is "fantastical" (a term that Marx employs as well), Locke sees no intersubjective obligation in the accumulation of precious metals, unlike goods immediately useful for life.

When money arrives on the historical scene, a principle of leverage suspends the older interactionist model, and labor can be stored and disseminated beyond the bounds of the original scene. As in the *Phaedrus*, dialogic mutuality is here disrupted by a new technology insensitive to the older bounds, which imposes new bodily distortions and multiplications. The key issue at dispute between Locke and Marx—quite fateful for twentieth-century political and economic life—is whether the original dyad of subject and object remains the normative model or should be surpassed by something more extended and plural. In a great simplification, Locke sees the multiple and crisscrossing relationships enabled by money as a blessing, whereas Marx sees money as bringing a regime of incongruity, inversion, and exploitation. And yet Locke's state of nature and Marx's early dream of communist utopia both involve one-to-one interaction without amplification or distortion.

Since at least C. B. Macpherson, Locke has been sometimes viewed as an apologist for unlimited capitalist accumulation, and thus as a celebrant of money's ability to transcend labor as an engine of the economy.²⁷ But Locke's emphasis on the propriety of property and the sense of stewardship—the inherent responsibility to the object and to one's neighbor in any act of ownership—make him look as much like a medieval Christian as a protocapitalist. Property rests solely in the needs of human life, desires are balanced by a respect for the common world, and there is a just boundary to possessions. Property is more a matter of just care of the common stock than the accumulation of private commodities. Locke's world is not quite one of working-class misery or con-

27. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

spicuous consumption. The crux of the interpretive problem is Locke's reading of the effect of money's limitless power to disseminate and store value. For present purposes, it is enough to note how the appearance of money, a recording medium, turns dialogue into dissemination, just as the telephone, phonograph, and radio would all later play havoc with received ideas of conversation.

Marx deploys a very similar contrast between an original interaction of labor and matter and a mediated system no longer bounded by human requirements, but the interpretive question is less ambiguous. Marx sees money as mass communication, and he hates it. Although Locke's account of money has its occasional grotesque moment or image—rotting venison or spoiled apples—it cannot compare with Marx's analysis for exuberant imagery. Marx's task is to show, contra Locke and his intellectual descendants in classic political economy, how the accumulation of capital can be as unjust as the accumulation of perishables, and he does this by seeing capital as a vampirelike, blood-sucking operation by which the dead prey on the living. Marx unfurls all the key metaphors that have informed commentary on modern media: the living dead, idolatry, and the confusion of subject and object.

In Marx's 1844 manuscripts the products of labor, under a system of private property, confront the laborer as "something alien, as a power independent." We are already in the twilight zone: doppelgängers, confrontations with aliens, and objects that drain human powers dry, all the while claiming "to serve man."²⁸ Like Hegel, Marx is a critic of morbid and marginal forms of intersubjectivity. But Marx's laborer, unlike Hegel's slave, has no out, at least not through the process of work. The alien being facing the worker is a product of the self that it cannot recognize; moreover, the product consists of "labour which has been congealed in an object" (71).²⁹ "The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object . . . the life which he has conferred upon the object confronts him as something hostile and alien" (72). Labor rebounds back on the laborer "as an alien, divine or diabolical activity" (74). The worker has his or her best parts drained off by a greedy alien power. Here the self appears as an other, a prime condition of what Freud called the uncanny. This close encounter leaves no possibility of mutual recognition: no communication takes place between worker and object. Marx echoes the Hegelian master-slave story,

28. This vein of imagery famously continues in Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital*.

29. Parenthetical references in what follows are to pages in the *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1975).

the primal scene of modern communication breakdown, in this dyad of worker and product.³⁰ In a Feuerbachian spirit, Marx hopes to unmask the alien other as just the estranged work of the self. The outer alien, Marx counsels, is nothing to fear. It is just a projection of internal dynamics, a nightmare that will fade when we awaken. Everywhere Marx wants to separate projections from authentic otherness and to diagnose incompletely realized subject-object junctions.

Marx's critical method consists in giving voice to the concealed human powers impressed onto inhuman materials. Private property is the "material, sensuous form" of estranged human labor. Whereas Locke sees private property as a clear and direct expression of personal labor power, Marx takes it to be a fundamentally distorting medium, one that inscribes the labors of our bodies and the works of our hands in damaged ways. Locke sees forms of intercourse that surpass the face to face as a basis of civil society, but Marx greets mass communication (any form of leverage) as corrupt, part of the *bellum omnium contra omnes* that reigns in civil society.

Marx states his guiding interpretive maxim in analyzing the plight of the worker: "All *objects* for him become the *objectification of himself*" (88). Every object is the result of objectification. (Like Hegel, the whole world for Marx is implicitly subject.) Every commodity in the Marxist optic is the scene of a displaced laboring body, a self squandering its powers on alien objects. But Marx does not lament the inevitable entanglement of the subject in the dumb object per se. He celebrates the labor process as the means to produce the world and the human being in concert. His complaint is that the object is alienated from the worker, not that subjectivity is necessarily spread across the field of its projects. Nineteenth-century culture is rife with those border zones between subject and object such as photographs, spirits, commodities, graveyards, phonographs, wax museums, telephones, and money, and one task of Marxism is to keep this border legal.

Marx's critique of money in the 1840s spells out principles for understanding the transgressive new powers of space binding and time binding that are occurring in his moment. Marx considers the "blow-up" powers of money just as fantastic as does Locke, but his evaluation of money's moral status is the opposite of Locke's. Money's crime is its distorting of the normative human relationship of person to person. Marx's vision of just exchange is a reciprocal one. "Assume *man* to be

30. As Marx wrote in the *Grundrisse*, "The presupposition of the master-servant relation is the appropriation of an alien will," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 266. This is also true, as we saw, of mesmerism.

man and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc." (105). The kinds of influences we would exert on each other in such an Arcadia of reciprocity would be commensurate with our personal abilities or arguments and not with externalities such as our power, status, or money. A key passage from Marx not only anticipates Jürgen Habermas's idyll of distortion-free communication but expresses the Platonic-Hegelian dream of authentic individual communion: "Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life. If you love without evoking love in return—that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a *living expression* as a loving person you do not make yourself a *loved person*, then your love is impotent—a misfortune" (105). Every human relationship must be a "specific expression" of one's unique personality. No Lysias, with his scheme of love indifferent to the individuality of the beloved, allowed here! Roles, shortcuts, mediations all fall short. Marx disdains the wastefulness of broadcasting. Two wills must choose each other. Marx, like Socrates, worries about the tragedy of one-way dispersion. The vision at the core of the *Phaedrus* of two souls turning toward each other in philosophical love returns as Marx's normative account of labor, life, and love. The sin of capitalism is to make unrequited love the norm.

And just as mass eros was one of the bad options presented in the *Phaedrus*, questions of erotic distortion are central to Marx's critique of money. "Money is the alienated ability of mankind" (104); as the gatekeeper between wish and reality, money casts an unsettling power over all human and natural relationships. As the mediator of social relations, it is a universal and therefore diabolical go-between. "Money is the pimp between man's need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But that which mediates my life for me, also mediates the existence of other people for me" (102). As in Lysias's scheme, money allows sexual traffic between individuals who care nothing for each other's individuality. Possessing money, "what I am and am capable of is by no means determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women" (103). Marx's critique clarifies the norm that love should be a mutual affair between individuals attracted to each other, not to alien or external elements. Marx's metaphors—money as pimp, its possessor as the procurer of prostitutes—suggest a type of erotic coupling indifferent to personality (or what Socrates would call the soul). Prostitution is public, on display, of open dissemination. Like mass communication, it is open to all comers and

need share little or no history with its audience. Money, Marx concludes, "is thus the general overturning of individualities . . . the confounding and compounding of all natural and human qualities" (105). It makes for a *verkehrte Welt* of topsy-turvy relationships, none of them a "specific expression" of one's "real, individual life."

Though Marx nowhere discusses "communication" in a sustained way, despite many suggestive remarks about *Verkehr* and *Mitteilung*, he offers a model of its just and unjust forms.³¹ Just communication is personal and authentically mutual; unjust is corrupted by externalities and distorted by scale. Like Plato and Hegel, Marx calls for a personal meeting of two souls unimpaired by the distorting mechanisms of money, markets, or media. *Verkehr*—traffic or exchange—is the closest Marx gets to naming communication. *Die Welt der Verkehr*, for Marx, ist eine *verkehrte Welt*!

Marx calls for dialogic relations: private property is a vampire at the systemic level that sucks the blood of the living. With the same logic, media become agencies not only of alienation and cognitive fog (as in the standard Marxist critique) but of distortion and interruption of the face-to-face rendezvous—with nature, the product, the other, and the self—that full humanity requires. As in the *Phaedrus*, the Marxist dream of life, labor, and language conceived of as dialogue is lovely. However much Marx's stock might have dropped since 1989, the dream remains fundamental for assessing the distortions and oppressions of modern life. Though too wedded to the dyad, Marx sees the substance of our communication practices not only as the orchestration of our social worlds but as a criterion of the good society. (Habermas's valiant efforts to develop a systematic theory of communicative action, for instance, seek to reinvigorate the normative core of Marx's critique of communication.) Marxist thinking is a robust answer to the conceit prevalent today in therapeutic and technical discourses, that there is a fix for disturbances in communication without reorganizing the material and cultural structures of social life to allow access, safety, and liberty for all to speak. Marx's vision of communication serves as a salutary reminder that failures of communication often owe less to semantic mismatches than to unjust allocations of symbolic and material resources.

Though far superior to most thinking about communication in the past decades, Marx's vision is still insufficient. It admits into its realm only a small range of communicative practices—the dialogical ones—

31. See *Marx and Engels on the Means of Communication*, ed. Yves de la Haye (New York: International General, 1979). The bulk of this work concerns what we would today call transportation.

which are a poor guide for grappling with the extended strings of talk and interruption that inevitably occur on a large scale and in public life, and in daily life as well.³² Nor has practical Marxist politics had a particularly distinguished record in offering a vision of public communication as anything more than the utopian dialogue of all with all or the manipulation of the many by the few in the name of class consciousness or propaganda. This is not, of course, to blame Marx for the sins of his supposed heirs, but Marx clearly did not value deliberation and speech as primary human activities that authentically define the human condition.³³ Marx, as Charles Taylor notes, "seemed to have been oblivious to the inescapable opacity and indirectness of communication and decision in large bodies of men."³⁴ Marx believed in the ultimate transparency of communication. Modes of human connection and communication that are distanced, mediated, and layered were corruptions rather than necessary or even valuable.

In part Marx believed this because he saw the market (the *agora*), the primordial place of speech, as the source of irrationality and abuse.³⁵ In the *Grundrisse* he also treats the spell of the commodity as derived in part from the geographical displacement of the product from its place of origin.³⁶ The market's distortions of scale are a key part of its abusiveness. Loss of locality and disembodiment are real problems for him. Though some passages in Marx might suggest the neutrality of technology, there is still a deep tropism for the face-to-face as the site of truth and justice. Marx saw the haunting of communication by alien elements as a symptom of dominative social conditions. The alien was to be reintegrated and overcome, an accomplishment whose ultimate completion awaited revolution. To say that some parts of our lives were naturally mysterious was to capitulate to the powers that be. Mystery was always the fruit of mystification. Nature was always history in disguise. Marx found in the uncanny a token of pathology, and he sought a cure. He thought material reorganization sufficient to exorcise the demons. All problems of communication were ultimately resolvable.

As later parts of this book make clear, I do not believe that the ghosts

32. I argue this general point in John Durham Peters, "Public Journalism and Democratic Theory: Four Challenges," in *The Idea of Public Journalism*, ed. Theodore L. Glasser (New York: Guilford Press, forthcoming).

33. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), part 3.

34. Taylor, *Hegel*, 554.

35. Allan Megill, "Über die Grenzen einer gewissen Art von Sozialtheorie: Marx, der Rationalismus und der Markt," in *Republik und Bürgerrecht*, ed. Klaus Dicke and Klaus-Michael Kodalle (Weimar: Böhlau, 1998), 363–98.

36. James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 111.

are escapable or that the animosities and animalities in communication can be expunged from the human estate. Some kinds of alienation are inescapable. In contrast to both Hegel and Kierkegaard, Marx lacks an adequate sense of the tragic. Rather than taking connection and disconnection with other creatures and ourselves as symptoms of our wretchedness, we can also find in them strange lessons of compassion.

Again, it is crucial to be clear. Criticizing Marx is a risky business, as Hannah Arendt noted, since you risk getting lumped together with those who have made a career of it, most of whom you agree with far less than Marx.³⁷ In exposing weaknesses of Marx's normatively dialogic vision of communication, I do not thereby mean to be composing an homage to reification, exonerating the broadcasting industries or praising those who spread doctrines or make policy unaccountably. In the ethical nervousness about criticizing dialogue, it becomes clear just how much rides on it as a principle of justice and authenticity. Dialogue is a principle both of connection and of responsibility: it can satisfy a need for belonging and offer a check on unreflective power. But in itself it is no more exempt from abuse and power than is dissemination. Not only psychoanalysts and feminists, but the mainstream of twentieth-century drama, poetry, and popular song have explored the agonistics and agony at the heart of the private sphere. The Marxist tradition risks writing off dissemination based on its one-way transmission alone, instead of acknowledging the varying relations of justice that might inform it. The task is to think about the justice of diverse kinds of communication free of prejudices about their scale or form. Indeed, part of Habermas's heresy within Marxist circles is to take seriously the liberal faith in dissemination, deliberation, and openness rather than seeing those as delusion and prostitution. I am taking a similar risk: to call for the legitimacy of mass communication, at least in principle.

Kierkegaard's Incognitos

The accidental is absolutely just as necessary as the necessary.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *EITHER/OR*, 1:234

Kierkegaard held to the inescapability of paradox. One key contrast between Marx and Kierkegaard is their stances on the elasticity of the individual body. For Kierkegaard, the individual is incommensurable with reality. The world and the subject are forever out of kilter, the void be-

37. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 79.

tween the two being a structural part of the human lot. For Marx, this analysis is acute enough as a description of a particular historical and class situation—the suspended existence of the bourgeois proprietor who, like Hegel's master, is doomed to fade away.³⁸ But to argue an eternal split between self and world, in Marx's opinion, denies the full fertility of human capacities, which have the potential to remake everything once they are released from exploitative relations of private ownership and production. Kierkegaard, in contrast, thinks some measure of alienation is inevitable as long as we remain mortal beings who live in time. Marx imagines the possibility of ultimate reconciliation—material as opposed to theological, but with all the classic millennial overtones—here on earth, among people. This is Kierkegaard's sharpest disagreement with both Marx and Hegel. For him, no totality can assuage the jagged edge of finitude. If Kierkegaard slights questions of social relations and power, Marx slights questions of time and mortality. Marx faults Hegel for seeing the world upside down and thereby missing the real struggles outside philosophy; Kierkegaard faults Hegel for forgetting his head is connected to his body, that is, that Hegel is ultimately just one more individual doomed to die.

Kierkegaard rarely writes directly about the emerging world of media; dead by 1855, he got to see but little of the full strangeness of electrical communication. But like Marx, Kierkegaard is a keen observer of the topsy-turvy social relations of his time, the shifts in modes of seeing, hearing, and being that modern men and women must face.³⁹ He was a master telegraphist, to use one of his metaphors, of the unseen world. Though thinkers like Locke, Shaftesbury, Hume, Shelley, and Coleridge all used the word "communication" in various ways, and the idealist path of Fichte, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel explored diverse escape routes from the terrifyingly incommunicable thing-in-itself, thus establishing the lasting philosophical framework for the problem of communication, Kierkegaard is perhaps the first to make communication (*Meddelelse*, the Danish cognate for the German *Mitteilung*) per se a philosophical problem.⁴⁰ Here communication is less a matter of better un-

38. T. W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (1933; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), uses this analysis against Kierkegaard.

39. For one account of Kierkegaard as media theorist, see Douglas E. Johnson, "Kierkegaard's Optics" (manuscript, Department of Communication Studies, University of Iowa, 1995).

40. In a broad sense, communication is the theme of all his works. Key sites are Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1848; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 123–44, and Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to "Philosophical Fragments,"* ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1846; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), part 2, sec. 2, chap. 2. Helpful work includes Lars Bejerholm, *Meddelelsens Dialektik*

derstanding than of strategic misunderstanding. As he wrote in an unsent letter to Regine Olsen, his jilted fiancée (and much of what he wrote was, in effect, an unsent letter to Regine): "I thank you for never having understood me, for I learned everything from it."⁴¹ Like Heidegger, who took much from him, Kierkegaard saw communication as a mode of revealing and concealing, not of information exchange.

Many of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous narrators care little for being understood or accounting for themselves, quite like Herman Melville's Bartleby (chapter 4). Kierkegaard gives us a notion of communication that features not the union of hearts, but the impossibility of speech, the resistance to public opinion, the stuntsmanship of irony, and the higher law of inwardness. What Kierkegaard calls communication looks more like obfuscation or breakdown to those used to a technical or therapeutic understanding. In a time of oversupply, the task of communication is to make the elementals strange. "Because everyone knows the Christian truth," he wrote, "it has gradually become such a triviality that a primitive impression of it is acquired only with difficulty. When this is the case, the art of being able to *communicate* eventually becomes the art of being able to *take away* or trick something away from someone."⁴² Kierkegaard saw himself as a religious trickster, breaking convention to recover a sense of the original. The quest for "a primitive impression" was communication sooner than a transfusion of two minds.

Kierkegaard was a master theorist and practitioner of irony. He viewed irony as a sort of spiritual midwifery. Socrates and Jesus are irony's two great practitioners; they stand at the center of his massive dissertation on the concept. The world is full of false bottoms that may drop out at any moment, and for Kierkegaard irony is the rhetorical stance that best suits this condition. Inasmuch as people are always unfolding themselves, communication will never be the transmission of pure thoughts but will be an allusive enterprise of hints and evasions. Kierkegaard is miles distant from the earnest, boring world of "communication" in late twentieth-century therapeutic culture. Take, for example, the epigraph to *Fear and Trembling*, a quotation in German from J. G. Hamann: "What Tarquinius Superbus spoke in his garden with the poppy blooms was understood by the son but not by the messenger."

(Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962), with an extensive English summary, and Peter Fenves, *Chatter: Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

41. Georg Lukács, *Die Seele und die Formen* (Berlin: Egon Fleischl, 1911), 79.

42. Johannes Climacus, quoted in Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, "Historical Introduction," in *Philosophical Fragments*, by Søren Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), xxi; emphasis in original.

Tarquinius's son, in the old Roman story, had gone to live among his father's enemies on the pretense that he had quarreled with his father. Tarquinius, not trusting the messenger with the message he was to carry, took him into his garden and lopped off the tops of the tallest poppies with his sword. He told him to repeat the gesture to Tarquinius's son, meaning that he should kill or banish the leading men of the city. Kierkegaard's epigraph, then, is a cryptic message about cryptic messages—and in a foreign language to boot. It is a guide to decoding the book, but also a warning that if you are not privy to the circuit of prearranged agreements, you may not know what is going on: you will see strange acts of decapitation, gestures of cutting off (as one cuts the knot of an engagement) that would otherwise seem fantastic and arbitrary. The epigraph serves not only as a Rosetta stone for deciphering the book but as an announcement of its themes: fathers, sons, swords, dissemblance, unspoken messages.

Fear and Trembling is offered to the market of public readers, but they are as the messenger, not the son. Like the parable of the sower, the book conceals a private message within a public dissemination. The readers in 1843 Copenhagen might think the book a dialectical lyric about Abraham and Isaac, but she who had ears to hear the hidden meaning of the text was Regine Olsen. Kierkegaard spent his literary career explaining the supremely overdetermined event in which he broke off the engagement with Regine, such that all readers of his pseudonymous works besides Regine are positioned as eavesdroppers. Like Luther, Kierkegaard believed that preaching often requires cloaking the kernel; general messages addressed to whom it may concern might conceal secret messages for those in the know.

Kierkegaard's theory of direct and indirect communication, most fully developed in *Practice in Christianity*, is based on an extreme sensitivity to what speech act theory would later call "performatives." Just as Augustine bases his semiotics on an understanding of the "incarnate Word," so Kierkegaard starts from Christ as the god-man. Christ can say to people in first-century Galilee, directly, "I am the son of God," but this in fact is indirect or apparently counterfactual communication, since the speaker of that utterance is palpably a man rather than a deity. The force of an utterance is inextricably tied to the ethos of its speaker, and Kierkegaard berates modern Christianity for its attempt to preserve the "message" of Christianity while forgetting the person of Christ, since in effect the medium is the message. This point breaks decisively with the spiritualist tradition's central principle, disembodied meaning-content. "A sign is something different from what it immediately is,"

says Kierkegaard, setting up a two-level scheme quite like Augustine's fleshly and spiritual sides of the word. Kierkegaard shares much with Augustine both theologically and semiotically, but whereas Augustine sees the embodied side of the Incarnation as a *vehicle* of the divine, Kierkegaard insists on the necessarily ill-coordinated and paradoxical character of the juxtaposition. Christ was not just a sign of the divine but a "sign of contradiction," a "secret agent" operating under an "incognito," inciting hearers to choose one way or another.⁴³

A natural consequence of Kierkegaard's vision of the impossibility of direct communication is the critique of public life, clear in his review of *The Present Age* and in his notions of preaching. If the Sermon on the Mount exhorts people both to let their lights shine (Matthew 5) and conceal their good works (Matthew 6), it is clearly the latter strand that Kierkegaard follows. "In the Sermon on the Mount it is said, 'When thou fastest, anoint thine head and wash thy face, that thou be not seen of men to fast.' This passage bears direct witness to the truth that subjectivity is incommensurable with reality, yea, that it has leave to deceive." One consciously deceives others in fasting, appearing to be of good cheer, despite the hunger. One puts on appearances to avoid putting on appearances. Thus, while writing *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard "went about in the incognito of a flâneur," making an appearance at the theater every night for at least ten minutes to keep up his reputation as a party animal and to conceal that he was a penitent. "Repentance has a holiness that eclipses the aesthetic. It does not want to be seen, least of all by a spectator, and requires an altogether different kind of self-activity."⁴⁴ The concealment of one's purposes, though sometimes ethically indefensible, is also sometimes necessary to maintain purity of heart. Kierkegaard can be read as a Protestant iconoclast, a foe of the corruptions of visibility and publicity.⁴⁵ Disclosure is a trap.

Again, the mode of communication is inseparable from the "message." In one of those scenes of delicious comic absurdity at which he so excels, in the *Postscript* Kierkegaard imagines someone who set out to communicate that "truth is inwardness." This new convert would proclaim it at every opportunity and soon would have a small army of missionaries spreading the word. Soon "he had even gone so far as to obtain barkers, and a barker of inwardness is a creature worth seeing."

43. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 123–39.

44. Søren Kierkegaard [Johannes de Silentio], *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985), 121, 149.

45. John Durham Peters, "Beauty's Veils: The Ambivalent Iconoclasm of Kierkegaard and Benjamin," in *The Image in Dispute*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 9–32.

The attempt to propagate the insight shows that the insight was never possessed.⁴⁶ The publisher of inwardness finds himself caught in a performative contradiction.

The argument that communication can be not the vehicle but the corrupter of authenticity is also central to *Fear and Trembling*. It was not by obedience to "the ethical" that Abraham became the "father of the faithful," but rather by its suspension. "The ethical" for Kierkegaard usually means something like the Kantian categorical imperative. For Kant the proof of right action comes in one's ability to generalize a given action, to say that it would be right for everyone to do it. Killing one's son does not, needless to say, rank very high on this scale. Abraham's righteousness, acclaimed by generations since, is a problem to be explained. What makes him different from either a would-be murderer or a tragic hero?

The key lies in Abraham's transcendence of the ethical. The universal (which guarantees right action) is both a comfort and a source of despair in its unrelenting command to cast off particularity. As in Adam Smith or Kant, universality is a disciplinary regime. Abraham acts without the comfort or the command of the universal: his is a completely private affair between him and God that cannot be mediated or converted into a spectacle of public heroics. Unlike tragic heroes such as Agamemnon, whose sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia is recognized as just by his whole community, Abraham has no recourse to social recognition, no ultimate balm of ethics or metaphysics. All he has is faith. The tragic hero edits a public book; the knight of faith, a sealed book read only by God. Abraham's truth cannot come out. "The ethical, as such is the universal, again, as the universal it is the manifest, the revealed. The individual regarded as he is immediately, that is, as a physical and psychological being, is the hidden, the concealed." The ethical, in other words, is public, the individual private. Hegel, Kierkegaard complains, brings everything into the light, thereby annihilating the flora and fauna of the night. "The tragic hero renounces himself in order to express the universal, the knight of faith renounces the universal in order to become the individual."⁴⁷ The burden of the knight of faith is that he has only himself to rely on—the universal is a constant temptation, beckoning with its public commendation and ontological security. Like Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in many ways, Abraham is beyond good and evil.

46. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 1:77.

47. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 91, 86.

Kantian ethics, unmodified, cannot grasp Abraham or God, as if any of us can. The point for Kierkegaard is the paradox, the distortion of our categories. The last thing he wants is to rationalize the story of Abraham and Isaac; rather, we must face it in its full horror. We ought not to cheapen it to an edifying story of unrelenting obedience but should be scared to death by a God whose commands transcend the security of our ways and reasons. Like Freud, Kierkegaard knows the healing process can be undermined if the pain is halted too soon. *Fear and Trembling* is quite clear that Abraham's suspension of the universal, of mediation, makes him speechless. He suffers from a God-induced aphasia, unable to disclose to Isaac, Sarah, or Eleazar what he is doing. He would like nothing more than for Isaac to understand that Abraham loves him but that he has to sacrifice him because of his love for God; but Isaac's misunderstanding is precisely part of the sacrifice. "O Lord in heaven, I thank thee," prays Abraham. "After all it is better for him to believe that I am a monster, rather than that he should lose faith in Thee."⁴⁸ Better that Isaac remain forever hurt by Abraham, that their relationship remain broken, than that Isaac know that God could command a father to murder a son.

There are, then, situations in which misunderstanding is inevitable. To try to communicate with Abraham is to make him less than Abraham. In a world of paradox, easy communication is necessarily false. Circumlocution and irony may be what save us. The way to salvation must be thorny. The notion of easy communication is, for Kierkegaard, a clearance sale in the realm of spirit, a lowering of the price of understanding. Right action, faith, other people—these things are a *skandalon*, a stumbling block, not something to be skirted without fear and trembling. (Not by accident does Kierkegaard invoke the Johannine and Pauline concept of *skandalon* here.) The conceit that communication necessarily improves relations or clarifies the underlying reasons of things is insufficiently acquainted with the night.

A similar argument against generality is made in the discussion of marriage by "Judge William" in part 2 of *Either/Or* (1843). The seducer keeps arguing that marriage is an unreasonable form of love. The judge responds that the husband, like Abraham, must refuse the universal. Though the institution itself may be universal, the particular choice of mate is highly partisan and selective. One person is to be privileged above all others on the face of the earth. Kant, like Kierkegaard a lifelong bachelor, thought marriage a concession to our animality. The injunc-

tion "Tell the truth," Kant thought, applies to all rational beings (including angels and spirits), whereas "Do not commit adultery" applies only to creatures with sex organs. To a moral system like Kant's, which makes universalizability the test of the good, there is something absurd about wedded life: one cannot wish that all rational beings would marry one's spouse. Though Kantians will regard this point as a burlesque, suggesting that Kant would say rather that one could universally will that everyone be married, still it reveals the aporia of Kant's ethics when faced with the decision to choose one person, or one path, rather than another. *Either/Or* performs the oscillation between undecidables that such an ethics induces.

Kant's low estimate of the ethical value of embodiment meets a lively response in Kierkegaard. In love, as *Fear and Trembling* says, the particular is higher than the universal. The impossibility of public justification is not a defect but the essence of love: "The moment a lover can answer that objection [why he fell in love with one person among countless possibilities] he is *eo ipso* not a lover; and if a believer can answer that objection, he is *eo ipso* not a believer."⁴⁹ Love and faith alter their being when subject to mediation. Marriage is the giving of one's life to a distinct individual chosen from among one-half of the entire species. The generalization of marriage, in monogamous cultures, is either adultery or seduction. Kierkegaard sees the ways that the activity of communication reshapes the very things it carries. Media mean the multiplication of singular beings for the use of strangers. Kierkegaard knows that scale and circulation matter profoundly to the meaning of our messages and our couplings with others. His insistence on singularity rather than generality as the ruling principle of our relations with each other is a key insight at the dawn of the age of mechanical reproduction, when the images, voices, and words of beautiful and seductive others are proliferating at a rate unknown in previous human history. Amid a population explosion in the spirit world, Kierkegaard exhorts us to remember the limits and loveliness of the flesh. The criterion of truth may lie in what cannot be communicated. Nothing but the regime of falsity and chatter results when people try to fix communication breakdown, for such breakdown, Kierkegaard teaches, can be a well of revelation.

Marx regards the public sphere as a corrupt fantasyland concealing its status as war by other means, a *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Kierkegaard has an equally dour outlook: the public is a phantom, a panorama

49. Quotation from Kierkegaard's journals in Robert Bretall, "Introduction," in *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), xxi.

of abstract infinity.⁵⁰ Participation in public occurs for Marx and Kierkegaard either by force or by subterfuge. But since, in the wake of Hegel, all communication is essentially public—interiority being achieved only via the recognition of the other—these thinkers make us face the clefts at the heart of what we too often want to dream of as the immediate sympathy of angels. Perhaps they do not show us the clearest way to build an inspired public realm, but they do expose the fantasy that all is well in dialogue. They are among the first thinkers to face modern communication in all its troubles. They register an almost anthropological shift in the modes of our existence in an age of time- and space-altering media.

50. Søren Kierkegaard, "The Present Age," in *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 260–69.