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Thodoris Kokkaliaris

Spectres of Kant

Tracing the Fact of the Other within the Fact of Reason

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With a Foreword by Prof. Emilios Christodoulidis

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Foreword

This is an exceptional dissertation for which the author deserves thorough congratulations. Let me say straight away that in a career of over 30 years teaching at Universities in the UK and internationally, I have rarely come across work of such intelligence and imagination. It is an erudite work, of a rare critical ilk, highly ambitious and conceptually adventurous in attempting to bridge theoretical paradigms that are typically seen as unrelated, even unrelatable, by more traditional philosophical approaches.

We might begin from the title. The term 'spectres' denotes the author's synthetic ambition toward the Kantian project and carries the inflection of Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*. The term 'spectres' marks a profound debt to, and a decisive departure from, Kantian deontology. It is borrowed from the deconstructive method, if method does not overstate it, and the reference to 'fact' names the near-impossible bridging that Kant attempts between the near-anarchic promise of freedom harboured in the First *Critique* and the factual 'anchor' that might have embedded it in the phenomenal world.

The way in which Mr Kokkaliaris approaches the aporia of grounding morality in Kant shows an enviable knowledge of Kantian philosophy. At the most general level and the more conventional characterisation, Kantian ethics is depicted as an evacuation of a field of moral content in favour of a morality identified by form, a retreat from prescriptive codes of action pertaining to specific fields and extant situations, in favour of a criterion of proper subjectivity and motive. For the author, this marks the high point of Kant's philosophical offer. The problem, in a nutshell, is how to realise theoretical freedom, with

its sublime promise and unconditionality, in the 'factum' of practical reason.

The analysis proceeds through a careful reading of the role that the principle of 'self-love' plays in moral reason, the question as to whether we can take it as key to the structuring of agency, and its causal dependency on empirical conditions beyond individual control. This dependency makes it inevitable that the agent is 'never free at the moment when she is summoned to determine her action', thus inviting a 'rupture in the machinery of time and natural necessity', which is incarnated in what Kant calls '*freedom*'. The response to the 'antinomy of reason' – 'that freedom is conceptually impossible within the sensible world' – is to insist on the distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal. The way that the author puts this is to contrast two 'standpoints': the phenomenal, where the actor finds herself heteronomously bound by laws of nature, and the noumenal, where the intelligible world is grounded only in reason. It is in the latter that a categorical imperative – which represents an action as objectively necessary of itself – might be formulated. The answer to the foundational question 'What should I do?' must yield to conceptual 'form'. The author puts it succinctly: "This transcendental standing, our standing as the unconditional bearers of freedom under the dome of reason, a standing sculpted by the responsibility that the summons of the moral law awakens in us, is precisely what Kant calls dignity: the incalculable status of human beings regarded as *persons*, that is, as subjects of practical reason, by which we exact respect from all other rational beings in the world'.

The next chapter takes issue with the Second *Critique*, and surveys the various criticisms made of it by Kantian scholars. More specifically, the question is over the 'residence in our consciousness of the factum rationis', what that 'facticity' of the consciousness of the moral law means, in order that noumenal morality and freedom might become embedded in practical reason's activity. The conceptual analysis at this point is sharp, and the author takes the reader along in the twists and turns – the 'aporia', the 'petitio principii' and the 'blind spot' – of his

engagement with Kant. He pushes the argument in the direction of the 'Event' as what – originating outside the noumenal – might still endow reason with its 'practicality', taking a Derridean route out of the aporia, which is more systematically developed in the following chapter.

It is commendable that the author engages directly with Kant's texts and not, as one would expect, through secondary literature. That is not to say that a more systematic engagement with his references to Schopenhauer or Korsgaard's *Sources of Normativity* would not have benefitted the analysis, because it would. But there is something admirable about the courage to take on the critique head-on in this way. Where secondary literature is relied on, it is to forward the argument, and this is done very well, as in the introduction of Stephen Darwall's 'second-person standpoint' into the discussion. Darwall's introduction of the second person, and ultimately his failure (as it is argued) to provide a 'reformation of Kantian theory' on the basis of leveraging 'intersubjectivity' on the Kantian concept of dignity, allows the author to contrast his own, more adventurous, deconstructive reading on the 'hinge' that Darwall has supplied in the discussion. Darwall's weakness is that he pares back intersubjectivity to what 'takes place between agents who are autoposited, sovereign, already embodying a relation to the moral law, whereas it should be precisely their exposure to one another leading to the formation of the rational principle.' It is this failure that allows the author to launch the project in the direction of an understanding of the second person perspective in the radical otherness of Levinas' ethics.

Now it is nearly always the case that work of such combinatory and synthetic ambition will attract some criticism, leave some connections unresolved, and require extra vigilance. One issue that might be usefully developed in further work is the wager, framed in a language of striving and unconditional, sacrificial, and always inadequate openness, that Levinas invites his readers to entertain, a wager that leaves the question of institutionalisation at sea. What is less convincing, in other words, is how the asymmetry between the 'saying' and the 'said', the asymmetry between the ethical (second-person standpoint)

and the institutional (the 'third'), might be thematised in a productive way, or inform a deconstructive reading. 'Saying' carries the Levinasian injunction and the limitless responsibility to the other; the 'said' introduces the 'third', and the limit to the other. There is such a profound disconnect between the second-person and third-person perspective in Levinas, as to raise the question of the juncture that supposedly keeps the institutional perspective 'alive' to the injunction placed upon it by the ethics. Derrida skirts around this endlessly, in *Rogues*, in the 'unconditionality of the incalculable', etc. This is not new – the radical antinomian ethical viewpoint has arguably nothing to offer the law – and it is not clear how any form of 'synchronisation' might inform a disruptive reading at this point, of the kind that deconstruction invites with all the talk of upsetting hierarchies, and of 'dangerous supplements'. I would be fascinated to see how the author might, in future work, thematise the juncture of the institutional, and the more aleatory features that fascinate him in Derrida's 'traces'.

It will have become manifest by now how much I value and admire this work. It is a Masters dissertation that has masterfully developed an original, and ambitious, argument where central Kantian concepts have been invigorated to reach their full critical philosophical potential.

Emilios Christodoulidis, Fellow of the British Academy
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October 8, 2025

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This thesis took a great deal of time and effort to write – I hope this labour is not apparent to the reader. I began working without a very clear idea of what I actually wanted to say and, when I found out, I lacked the strategy to say it. It was thus a huge relief to have the necessary intellectual space to experiment in the process of constructing my argument, to fail, and, ultimately, arrive at something that could be 'said'. For this space, I am deeply indebted to my first supervisor, Prof. Emilios Christodoulidis (University of Glasgow): for encouraging me to explore, for his sharp questions that drove my argument forward, his generous feedback – even if his own work might not be fully in line with my approach – and his critical comments, most of which guide my doctoral research to this day.

Frankfurt is a great place for legal theory research – this is no secret. Having Prof. Klaus Günther as my second supervisor (and current Ph.D. supervisor) has been a great privilege, and I cannot help but feel grateful for the time he took to review my work and his insightful remarks. The support of Prof. Lorenz Schulz and Andrés Santacoloma Santacoloma has also been invaluable: not only in organising such a multifaceted LL.M. curriculum, but, above all, in creating an environment of unconditional academic freedom, thanks to which I felt comfortable developing my line of argumentation.

Yet, I was only able to make the most of the academic freedom I was given in Frankfurt because of an antecedent *gift*. Prof. Vassilis Voutsakis (University of Athens) exposed me to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, allowing me to read – and, perhaps more importantly, 'be read' by – a philosopher whose prose struck a deep, personal chord I was not aware of. Even though, as Derrida contends, true gifts must

remain outside the sphere of economic acknowledgement, I would like to thank him – knowing that such thanks is radically asymmetrical to the gift I received.

Last but not least: borrowing Virginia Woolf's words, I would never be able to 'flow' without the 'rooted' support of my parents; and I would not be able to engage seriously with what I am doing without this touch of lightness that my brother is always sure to provide.

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