

Response to *Possibilities of the Impossible: Derrida's Idea of Justice and Negative Theology*

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I first would like to thank Björn Thorsteinsson for a very eloquent and interesting lecture — lectures on Derrida often tend to be the former, but not always the latter. But I very much enjoyed his paper, and also found it quite persuasive — to the point even that I had difficulties finding something to oppose in it. I shall therefore limit my response to two basic questions concerning the core of his lecture, the core being the relationship between Derrida's own thought and negative theology.

Thorsteinsson approaches this subject in two different ways in his paper, as far as I can read. His first point is that the difference between deconstruction and negative theology comes down to a certain *theoretical* disagreement about the hyperessential, whereas *in practice*, he argues, there is hardly any difference to be found at all. And in his longer text he continues: «In their all-consuming penchant for the *via negativa*, Derrida and the negative theologian seem to join hands and form a closed circle; their secret is there for all to see, and there is not any; they are only dancing — around nothing. There's nothing between them — there is no fire and no Christmas tree and, above all, there is no God.»

Now, I agree with Thorsteinsson that there is indeed a difference between deconstruction and negative theology. My question, however, is whether it is not rather the other way around, in other words, that there is very little difference *in theory*, but quite an important difference *in practice*. Let me quickly elaborate on this. The difference in theory, I would argue,

amounts to different ways of viewing what «beyond being» implies. In *Sauf le nom*, for instance, Derrida seems quite clear about the fact that his own non-concepts — in this case *Khôra* — and the God of negative theology *both* are beyond being. The only thing is, they are beyond being in different ways. Whereas the God of negative theology is beyond being in an excessive manner, by being *more* than being, more than real or even sur-real, following a kind of hyper-logic — Derrida's non-concepts rather follow a minimalistic logic: they are beyond being by being *less* than being, less than real or even non-real, or as Derrida himself puts it, they are desert-like places without properties or genus.

Still, I would say, it is not here, on the theoretical level, that the important difference between deconstruction and negative theology is to be found. In theory it only seems to be a matter of slight divergences as how best to articulate something beyond being, something that escapes the grasp of human thought. The essential difference, I would argue, is instead to be found on the practical level. I would not agree that Derrida *as well as* the negative theologian end up dancing around nothing, singing the *Requiem aeternam deo*, as Nietzsche would have it. By stating this, I think one misses the point of negative theology, which is precisely what Jean-Luc Marion has been stressing for some decades now. As Marion has tried to demonstrate, referring to the negative theology of Dionysus the Areopagite, the withdrawal of God from being should not be seen as an attempt to do away with God *as such*,

but rather as an attempt to extract God from a certain kind of metaphysical discourse that tends to diminish God into a conceptual idol.

It is against this background that I would hesitate to say that both Derrida and the negative theologian — *in practice* — are dancing around nothing. *In theory* they might well be doing that, since both deconstruction and negative theology share the same problem, namely a lack of adequate concepts in order to speak about the unspeakable — they end up being able to say nothing. But, as Marion would have it, for negative theology this is not a practical but precisely a theoretical shortcoming, which results from a lack of utterable signification, not from a lack of intuition. In short, God remains incomprehensible, but not necessarily imperceptible.

To try to make my point on a more basic level, let me put it like this, still using the example of Marion. *In theory* Marion would argue that God *is* not, that God could never be caught up in a philosophical concept, because then we would no longer be dealing with God. *In theory*, still, this is exactly the same as Derrida would say about *différance* or *Khôra*. But this does not prevent Marion — as a Catholic believer and to some extent even a mystic — to say his prayer, and still claim a strong intuition of God — in the very phenomenological sense of the word *intuition*. And I believe the same could not be said about Derrida's relation to *Khôra* — *in practice* — and Derrida of course never intended that it should be so either.

Now, let me quickly move to Thorsteinsson's second point, which aims not at the general difference between negative theology and deconstruction, but rather at the specific difference between negative theology and Derrida's idea of justice. The difference according to Derrida, as

Thorsteinsson states it, is that negative theology remains a secret discourse, while the discourse on justice must always be made public. My question, though, is whether Derrida's aim or point in both cases is not actually the same, namely that both discourses *ought to* be made public.

As Thorsteinsson himself points out, there are two concurrent desires that Derrida ascribes to negative theology in *Sauf le nom*: On the one hand this esoteric impulse to keep the secret within a small community of elected people, yet on the other hand an inclusive impulse, a desire to be understood by all. Derrida's endeavor in *Sauf le nom*, as I read it, is precisely to stress this second impulse, in other words to argue for a kind of general apophysis, a mysticism that cannot be restricted to any particular revelation or religious community. And I believe this is precisely what Derrida on other occasions has expressed as *messianism* versus *messianicity*, that is, on the one hand the particular historical religions tied to a tradition and often to the notion of an elected people, on the other hand a more general structure, where central themes of the determinate forms of religion — such as hope, the promise, justice, etc. — are repeated on a more general level, *independently* of the historical revelations.

Derrida has elsewhere described this as a way of repeating the *possibilities* of religion without religion, of making a non-dogmatic duplicate of dogma. And I believe that precisely this gesture explains why Derrida's works are so attractive to scholars of theology and religion today. Derrida's notion of a «religion without religion» points at a possibility to repeat the resources of religion on a level that transcends religion in the strict sense of the word

