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Sade's 'Other': The Religious in Sade's Ethics

This paper will describe the religious elements of the ethics of the Marquis de Sade. Sade is known as one of history's most notorious atheists, but when considering the philosophical and, more importantly, ethical, systems that can be found in his work, Sade's atheism is problematic. Sade's ethics rest upon the transgression of social and moral norms, especially those grounded in religion. In essence, they are an ethics of evil, entirely dependent upon the 'other,' which, to make the very transgression of sinning possible, is God. Sade's ethics are committed to challenging and outraging God, who is both the target of Sade's contempt, and the object of his obsession. Therefore, Sade's ethics refer to and respond to the religious, and actively encourage an ongoing dialogue between religion and philosophy, two interconnected disciplines that have shared a contentious relationship since the Enlightenment.

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Marquis de Sade, Philosophy, Ethics, Postmodernism, Religion, Levinas

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The notorious eighteenth century libertine writer the Marquis de Sade is today less known for the philosophical content of his works than he is for being the namesake for sadism, a dubious honour earned by the extremely violent and erotic content of his novels. In contemporary interpretations of his life, such as the film *Quills* (Kaufman, 2000), Sade's character is often romanticised. Although *Quills* was praised by many reviewers, it has also been criticised for its historical inaccuracies. The film edits out the more distasteful aspects of Sade's life, such as his initial imprisonment for abusing and poisoning prostitutes, and the considerable obesity of his later years, not to be seen in the figure of actor Geoffrey Rush. However, the movie is accurate in portraying Sade as a mostly misunderstood writer. Indeed, it was not until the early twentieth century that the philosophical elements of his work were widely studied. The ethical implications of Sade's philosophy were not explored until even later, because the violent and erotic content of Sade's work is perceived by some to preclude ethics altogether. Given the nature of his writing and his scandalous personal life, it may

seem strange, even controversial, to say that Sade had a relationship with the category of the religious. Sade's avowed atheism is difficult to reconcile with the religious elements of his philosophy that have been identified by several thinkers including Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski. These religious elements are not only significant in considering Sade's philosophy, but demand a reassessment of the ethical implications of Sade's work. Recent developments in ethical theory, coupled with the development of new approaches to the religious in philosophy (what Hent de Vries terms the 'turn to religion' in postmodernist philosophy), make it possible to explore the implications of the religious in ethics in new ways. In the light of postmodernist developments in ethics, and in particular the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, who has been foremost in re-theorising ethics, and Jacques Derrida, who has been the key figure in the 'turn to religion,' this essay will re-examine the consequences of the religious in Sade's ethical system.

Contradictions and Sacrilege in Sade's Atheism

Sade's works contain a number of dissertations supporting atheist positions; however, these positions are so many and varied that it is difficult to say which view, if any, was held by Sade personally. In addition, many of these arguments, while they show Sade to be a man of learning and erudition, do not prove him to be a particularly original thinker. Sade lived in a time when ideas about atheism, materialism and natural theology competed with traditional religious ideas, and the sheer variety of his arguments is evidence of this. It is also worth noting that Sade was, at times, a merciless satirist, so it is difficult to tell which ideas are presented in all seriousness and which are not. For example, in the book *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, the libertine Dolomance reads aloud a short pamphlet entitled 'Frenchmen, Some More Effort If You Wish to Become Republicans,' which suggests that if they are to succeed in freeing France from the monarchy, republicans should cut down the 'tree of superstition' which is the Church (2006, 105). The pamphlet is intended as a parody of some of the political attitudes of Sade's time. His books also contain arguments for the existence of an evil God, a typically Gnostic notion. For instance, the minister Saint-Fond in Sade's novel *Juliette* proclaims: 'there exists a God; some hand or other has necessarily created all that I see, but has not created it save for evil; evil is his essence; and all that he causes us to commit is indispensable to his plans' (1968, 399). The libertine Clairwil counters Saint-Fond's argument with his own materialist argument for a natural order without God, which is a position that Sade explores frequently throughout his works. Yet, even this radical materialism cannot escape becoming a substitute for God, and his theories of Nature which

inform this materialism cannot escape Catholic connotations. Despite his many arguments for a natural order without God, Sade's position as an atheist is difficult to sustain when considering his dependence upon the very religion that he disavows. Moral philosopher Susan Neiman says that Sade's beliefs about God are a 'matter of flux' (2002, 187). Even if Sade's atheistic arguments are taken at face value, as Neiman (2002, 188) explains, 'if Sade was an atheist, he was a God-obsessed one.'

The term 'atheist' is philosophically problematic, and so it is difficult to measure how accurate the term is in any circumstance, especially when it is applied to as ambiguous a figure as Sade. Recently, it has come to constitute complete non-belief in the existence of a divine realm or beings, as well as a dismissal of the authority of scripture, and denial of revelation. This form of atheism is typified by the proselytising atheist writers Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, for whom atheism is a completely materialist philosophy. Nevertheless, historically its meaning has not been so clear: the title of atheist was given to any person who did not adhere to orthodox beliefs, or the state-endorsed religion, regardless of affiliation with other religions. For example, the Greeks charged Socrates with impiety (probably the closest charge to atheism there existed) for failing to endorse the state gods, and later, the third-century Christian scholar Origen accused the classical Greeks and Romans of having a 'polytheist atheism,' since, although they worshipped their own gods, they did not believe in the one true God of Christianity (Bremmer, 22). Even today atheism remains ambiguous, for if the term were to apply only to an absence of belief in gods, it could still encompass non-deist religions, such as Buddhism. The problem is that the religion Sade rejects is absolutely integral to his philosophy. Twentieth-century French writer Pierre Klossowski points out that although Sade's atheism seems 'destined to establish the reign of the total absence of norms,' it cannot fulfil this destiny because the transgression which the libertines frequently affirm to be the source of their pleasure would lose all meaning if social norms and moral categories were to be abolished (1991, 15). In the novel *Justine*, the libertine Saint-Florent observes that 'only crime awakes and stiffens lust' (Sade 1965, 657). In Sade's works, says Klossowski, 'the relationship with God is negative because the libertine's conscience, as we find it in Sade, is not atheistic in a cold-blooded way; rather its atheism is the result of effervescence and therefore of resentment; his atheism is only a form of sacrilege' (1965, 65). Sade's sacrilegious atheism could never succeed in abolishing religion because it is entirely dependent on it. Instead, Sade institutes a system which Klossowski calls 'integral monstrosity' because, Klossowski explains, 'it is not atheism that

conditions or liberates Sadean monstrosity, rather, this monstrosity leads Sade to derationalise atheism as soon as he tries to rationalise his own monstrosity by way of atheism' (1991, 6).

Sade's Law of Nature

Sade's supposed atheism rests upon theories of Nature and natural law which are developed in several different, and sometimes competing, ways throughout his works. These theories are perhaps the most compelling evidence to be presented in defence of Sade's atheism, and yet, even this evidence cannot stand up to scrutiny. Sade's libertines often reference an order of Nature as justification for their libertinism, arguing that natural law logically supports a libertine lifestyle. In *Juliette*, Sade advances the theory that Nature – which is so often referenced to defend morality, especially in Augustinian and Aquinian Catholic natural law doctrine – is in fact indifferent to morality. Indeed, Sade takes materialism to its extreme when he argues that Nature as an entity is fundamentally indifferent to everything, including death. In the eighteenth century, a number of materialist philosophers including Julien Offray de La Mettrie and Baron d'Holbach developed materialism to the point of atheism, contending that matter was the only substance, out of which all things in existence are made, an idea that challenged the more popular ideas embodied in Cartesian mind/body dualism. Sade argues that, since death does not destroy matter, nor make matter inert, the category of death is a human construction which is not recognised by Nature: 'death is only imaginary; it exists only figuratively and has no reality' (1968, 769). The libertine Pope Pious VI uses this theory to justify the act of murder, in the novel *Juliette*:

Bear it ever in mind that there is no real destruction, that death is itself nothing of the sort, that, physically and philosophically viewed ... a man's birth is no more the commencement of his existence than his death is its cessation; and the mother who bears him no more gives him life than the murderer who kills him gives him death; the former produces some matter organized in a certain way, the latter provides the occasion for the renascence of some different matter; and both create. Nothing is essentially born, nothing essentially perishes, all is but the action and reaction of matter. (1968, 772)

Sade equates death with life because through death, matter goes back to the earth, and is given back to Nature, which uses the resources of the decaying matter to fertilise new life. However, although this argument is sufficient to reject God from the realm of material things,

Sade will not be content with anything less than the utter destruction, not only of the spiritual and divine realm, but of the physical, too, and this is the final turn that his philosophy of Nature takes. The next argument, though a consequence of the first, is almost contradictory in the motivations that it ascribes to an apparently apathetic Nature. To the Sadean mind, Nature is a cruel mistress, and humans, with the capacity for cruelty given to them by their creator, which is Nature, must not deny this capacity. Even considering all of his arguments about death and destruction being in accordance with Nature, Sade inevitably sees Nature as a creative force. However, Sade sees destruction as a way of aiding Nature's capacity to create. In *Juliette*, Pope Pious VI gives a long dissertation on the role of destruction in Nature, and argues that, according to the natural order, acts of destruction are greater than acts of creation. His logic is that, if man multiplies, 'he is wrong because he takes away from Nature the honor of a new phenomenon since the result of the laws which govern him is necessarily new creatures. If those who have been issued forth do not propagate, Nature will issue forth new ones and enjoy a faculty she no longer has' (1968, 69). Here Sade references an order of Nature not to dissolve moral categories altogether, but to bolster a unique world view with its own set of ethics, and to support a destructive libertine philosophy.

Sade's Answer to God in Nature

Sade ultimately places Nature in the same position as he placed God, Nature becomes the target of the same insults and rage that God once did because of its position as creator. Klossowski says that in Sade's philosophy, 'we discover in Nature the traits of that God who created the greatest number of men with the aim of making them run the risk of eternal tortures' (1965, 67). As Klossowski points out, Sade's attack on Nature is much like his attack on God, unanswerable and unanswered. Sade's libertines preach vehemently the atheistic arguments which nullify such a rage against Nature, and yet retain that rage, with the result that even though libertines attempt to liquidate moral categories, they remain trapped by them. Klossowski says, '[the libertine's] conscience, though it accepts Nature as the supreme instance, has not yet given up the mechanism of moral categories which, in his struggle against God, has been found to be useful and necessary' (1965, 68).

Sade's philosophy of Nature is as much a challenge to a religious and particularly Catholic order of Nature as it is a consequence of his materialism. Catholic doctrine has, throughout its history, frequently made reference to a God-given order of Nature to support moral prescriptions. Catholicism sees Nature as evidence of a designer's hand, and as such, it is

sacred. Since Nature is a part of creation, the natural order is as inviolate as any God-given law. Thomas Aquinas found sins against Nature to be especially grave: he states in his treatise on fortitude and temperance in the *Summa Theologica* that ‘in sins contrary to Nature, whereby the very order of Nature is violated, an injury is done to God, the author of Nature’ (*Q. 154, art. 12, ad. 1*). Failure to comply with the natural order is therefore a sin against the creator. However, the Church also uses scripture to establish the idea of a natural order, which Aquinas’ views exemplify; he believed that moral prescriptions in scripture are also prescriptive of a natural order, which, while implicit in Nature, as Nature is created by God, must be taught to human beings. In his characteristically ironic and inflammatory style, Sade writes a counter argument to this delivered by a parody of the Catholic Pope, who was a fashionable target for satire in Sade’s time. To conclude his dissertation on Nature in *Juliette*, Pope Pious VI gives numerous examples of instances where, he says, ‘in all ages and everywhere, man has placed his delight in destroying, and Nature hers in permitting it’ (1968, 782). The Pope argues that there is a proclivity to murder and destroy in human beings, a proclivity that was placed there by Nature, the creator. He even claims that religion has been used as nothing more than a ‘cloak’ to legitimise torture and murder, acts which are performed but for the joy of it. Although God is removed from the equation, the idea of a natural order that is religious in essence is inverted. Sade perverts the idea of a sacred natural law, such that sinning becomes an act sanctioned by Nature, instead of an act against Nature.

Sade’s Transgression and the Gnostic Ideal

The basis of Sade’s philosophy is much closer to Gnosticism than strict atheism, and even Klossowski reads in Sade’s work a ‘Gnostic theory of the fall of the spirits’ (1991, 101). Gnosticism, which has been declared a heresy by the Church, is a variant of Christianity which encompasses a number of belief systems. Similar to orthodox Catholics, Gnostics consider the human soul to be transcendent and divine, but, unlike them, believe it to be trapped in a flawed material world. According to the apocryphal Gospel of Philip, the world was created ‘through a transgression,’ not by the true God, but by a flawed being. Scholar of Gnosticism, Kurt Rudolph, explains that Gnosticism casts a ‘negative judgement upon the whole of bodily and physical existence,’ including the natural world, seeing it as a barrier between the human and the sacred realm of God (1987, 83). Although humans are impure in their bodily dimensions, they have a spiritual, divine constituent and can overcome the profane physical world through redemption. Gnosticism sees divine knowledge as a path to redemption: ‘through knowledge, the inner spiritual “man” is redeemed’ (Rudolph 1987,

116). Although Sade's philosophy of transgression may not be in keeping with the practices of the Gnostics, it remains true to the *spirit* of Gnosticism, because transgression is able to overcome the physical world. Sade's transgression influenced early twentieth-century philosopher Georges Bataille's theory of the sacred. Although the sacred, according to Christian belief, excludes all things deemed unclean, such as the erotic and the violent, Bataille calls attention to the enshrinement of these things by the very belief system which has cast them out. The sacredness of the sacrifice of Christ, as violent as it is, cannot be denied. Bataille argues that it is not only the symbol of this sacrifice that is sacred, but the transgressive Nature of the violence itself which provides access to the divine, in this case the divine pardon, only possible through the intense bodily suffering of Christ, and he concludes that 'misunderstanding the sanctity of transgression is one of the foundations of Christianity' (1986, 90). Bataille sees violence, death, sacrifice and the erotic as sacred things because they are transgressive. The sacred is a transgressive force since a transgression is required to break the taboos which keep the mundane, profane world of the everyday separate from the divine, sacred realm. Only the most perverse act of debauchery can break through into the sacred world. The debauchery of Sade's libertines is an expression of a Gnostic sensibility, because it is destructive to the limits of the profane world. Sade's Gnostic desire to destroy the physical world is perhaps even more blasphemous and heretical than an atheistic materialist view of Nature, since the Gnostic interpretation of Nature as profane is directly at odds with Catholic orthodox views of Nature as sacred. The Gnostic, transgressive sensibility of Sade's philosophy is the foundation of his ethics, which, because it is an ethics of evil, is deeply rooted in and dependent upon religion.

The Binary of the Religious and the Secular in Ethics

Although religious systems do not guarantee ethical systems, the relationship between religion and ethics has been regarded as inextricable, even in pre-Christian times. In classical Greece, for example, piety was a virtue, and, according to historian Rowland Smith, there was 'a widespread assumption of pagans that philosophy and piety went hand in hand' (58). In Plato's *Euthyphro*, Socrates and Euthyphro have a dialogue about divine command theory, with Socrates asking: 'Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it's loved?' (2005, 40). This ethical problem is known as Euthyphro's dilemma. The Greeks did not separate piety from good; rather, what was pious was good, and vice versa.

It was not until the Enlightenment that the basis of ethics in religion was called into question in the public sphere, and even then, only by radical philosophers. Although the authority of the religious, and particularly the Church, was being widely questioned in this time, the general consensus was that without religion, social morals would deteriorate. Jonathan Israel, a noted scholar of the Enlightenment, explains that these radical thinkers, in particular Baruch Spinoza and Pierre Bayle, taught that ‘morality, while natural and essential to all human societies, is not innate in men’s minds and cannot be cogently anchored in theology or religious authority’ (2006, 663). They proposed that to break the hold of the religious on society, a secular, rational ethics was needed, one that, as Israel explains, would be ‘anchored in man’s tangible social and political needs alone’ (2006, 665). Spinoza taught that concepts of good and bad are subjective, and that human beings should conform to an ethics based instead on ‘acting, living, and preserving our being ... by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one’s own advantage’ (2001, 180). However, Spinoza maintains the importance of a love of God, and attempts to provide a rational argument for the existence of God. His system of thought is based less on a secular rationality than it is on a natural theology, that is, a theology which is based in reason and empirical observation rather than revelation and scriptural dogma. Sade’s contemporary, Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, formulated the now-famous categorical imperative, which he proposed as the basis for a universally applicable ethics based in reason. The first and most often quoted form of the categorical imperative is: ‘act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’ (2005, 901). However, Kant believed that any earnest attempt to lead a moral life, even according to the categorical imperative, rationally presupposes faith, not necessarily in the dogmatic sense, but belief in God, and revelation. British ethicist John E. Hare explains Kant’s view that atheism ‘makes the moral life harder because it removes the ground for belief in the real possibility of being good’ (2006, 64). Kant believed that any person attempting to lead a moral life must be aware of the potential for moral failure in humanity. Without God to forgive these failures, indeed, to forgive the very potential for failure, the individual either will fall into despair over the impossibility of overcoming moral weakness, or will self-deceivingly take themselves as guarantor in all moral matters, which undermines moral earnestness.

The Problem with Universalising and Dichotomous Ethics

The introduction of a secular ethics does not automatically signify the demise of all religious ethics, nor does it significantly destabilise the basis of religious ethics. The modernist utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, which, put simply, seeks an ethics that will ensure the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, is perhaps the best example of a universalising secular ethics. However, even the nineteenth century Dutch philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, a devout, if anti-clerical, Christian, proposed that ethics could only be chosen, and indeed, that divine command was not ethical, it *transcended* ethics. These theories may show that ethics is divorceable from religion, but they do not prove that it is *necessary* to divorce ethics from religion. The dualistic thinking that assumes that the religious is naturally opposed to the secular has been extensively critiqued in postmodernist literature. Derrida critiques this thinking when he talks of the return of the religious in philosophy. He asks, ‘why is this phenomenon, so hastily called “the return of religions,” so difficult to think? Why is it so surprising? Why does it particularly astonish those who believed naively that an alternative opposed religion, on the one side, and on the other, Reason, Enlightenment, Science, Criticism ... as though the one could not but put an end to the other?’ (2002, 45). Postmodernism questions the universalising aspect of these systems of ethics, and, by extension, the ethical implications of the system of thought underlying it, which is essentially the whole inheritance of European ethical thought. Despite some critics’ claims that postmodernism is amoral, probably due to its moral relativism, Robert Eaglestone explains that postmodernism is first an ethical system, because postmodernism is primarily a reaction to the universalising oppression of Western thought, particularly the universalising and absolutising ethics characteristic of modernist thought. Eaglestone says, ‘it is an ethical response to exactly the idea of a “single pattern” that characterises Western thought and the activity that stems from that “single pattern”’ (2004, 183).

Postmodernism, rather than subsuming all people under a universalising ethics, instead seeks an ethical encounter with the ‘other,’ an idea that derives from the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who theorises ethics, in a post-Holocaust world, as a response to the other. Levinas’s concept of the ‘other’ is of something that is so infinitely other that it is ‘unthinkable, impossible, unutterable’ (Derrida, qtd. in Caputo 1997, 20). Eaglestone explains that the basis of the ethical encounter with the other is a disruption of the ‘metaphysics of comprehension’ (Eaglestone 2004). The metaphysics of comprehension refers to the way that, in the encounter with the unknown other, the knower comprehends the

unknown, but only by reducing it to what the knower understands, that is, the same. Derrida points out in his essay 'Violence and metaphysics' that describing this 'other' even by expressing its non-description, betrays that inexpressibility, submitting the 'other' to the subjugating influence of language (2001, 157-9). This process is problematic because the 'other' is not understood as itself and thus loses its identity. Metaphysically speaking, this process can only subjugate the other to the ideal of uniformity, and some postmodernist thinkers see this as the basis of the subjugation of entire groups of people. Levinas saw his conception of ethics as a critique of Western thought, and defined it as the 'putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other' (1991, 43).

Religion in Ethics and the Language of Deconstruction

An ethical theory based on the encounter with the other cannot entirely escape religion. Philosopher Simon Critchley points out that in Levinas's work, God stands for the absolute transcendence and essential 'unknowability' of the other. Critchley says that for Levinas, 'ethics is religion, but not theology' (1992, 115). The concept of God always comes back, because the concept of the 'other,' taken to the extreme limit of its alterity, that is, difference or otherness, is God. To understand this concept, it is useful to examine the religious tone of deconstruction, as represented by the thought of Derrida. Religious scholar John D. Caputo says that there is a 'religious dimension to deconstruction,' which is recognisable in the 'ethico-religious tone' of Derrida's post-1980s work. Derrida's deconstruction has been compared to negative theology, as both view God as an irreducible 'other' which so transcends us that we cannot know it, and which escapes its name, or any description. Negative theology is nevertheless condemned to attempt to describe God through apophasis, a rhetorical technique which invokes a subject by denying that it will be mentioned. Caputo says, 'like negative theology, deconstruction turns on its desire for the *tout autre*' (1997, 3). Deconstruction has been accused of adapting negative theology's way of describing God to its approach to language and the search for meaning; it views the relationship of signifiers to the 'thing itself' as such that the 'thing itself' 'always eludes the play of signifiers in virtue of which any such so called real thing is signified in the first place' (Caputo 2000, 1). The signifier, or the word, is used to point to an external concept, the signified, and although these things make up the sign, they are not equivalent; the signified is never present in the signifier. The sign points to a meaning, Caputo's 'thing itself' which can never be entirely present, and always slips away, but not without trace, for the trace is that which enables the tenuous link between the textual world of representation and the thing itself. This is the principle of

différance, an important concept in deconstruction. In the trace, the ‘thing itself’ can be seen to make a claim on language, and this is where Caputo believes that Derrida’s faith lies. Caputo says that ‘everything Derrida has written has been directed toward the other of language, toward the alterity by which language is claimed’, while Derrida himself says that ‘deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the other of language’ and that it is therefore absurd to suggest as some critics do that deconstruction denies that there is anything beyond language (Caputo 1997, 16). Like negative theology, which sees God as so ‘other’ as to be indescribable, the faith that Caputo sees in deconstruction rests on its passion for the indescribable ‘other’ that claims language.

The ‘Other’ in Sadean Ethics

Sadean ethics, since it is based in transgression, is indebted to the other because transgression cannot work without the scandalisation of the other. The title of Klossowski’s *Sade my neighbour* is a play on his own argument that the Sadean libertine, and by extension, Sade himself, cannot cast his neighbour, that is, the other, out. As much as the libertine ego is built upon the idea of the autonomous, rational and self-sufficient being, libertines cannot escape the society or the social order against which they transgress. Elena Russo discusses this paradox at the core of the libertine in her article ‘Sociability, Cartesianism and nostalgia in libertine discourse.’

The Sadean libertine oddly combines Hobbes and Rousseau. He draws on the Hobbesian belief that the individual already exists in the state of Nature, prior to socialization, as a free, autonomous subject, but he denies the human impulse towards society, which Hobbes maintains. Like Rousseau, he looks with nostalgia at a lost state of Nature, where everybody could freely express his or her natural impulses, but, unlike Rousseau, he believes it is possible to reintroduce the state of Nature within modern society. He owes this belief to a simplified vision of society as a mere assemblage, a gathering of individuals, in which cohabitation and proximity does not affect the constitution of each subject. *In the hopeless attempt to deny his obvious dependence on the social space that gives him his identity, the libertine does not want to see in the social bond any creative principle, and refuses to acknowledge society's formative power over the individual.* (my italics, 1997, 391)

Sade is unable to resolve the conflict that is caused by the distinct lack of apathy towards the other, who, for the libertine, is both society and the victim, which constitutes an indissoluble

connection to the other that would need to be absent if the libertine's desire for autonomy is to be fulfilled: 'while the libertine constantly tries to emphasize his autonomy, at the same time all his actions go to show that he desperately needs the admiration of others and that without an audience, he is reduced to nothing' (Russo 1997, 395). Although libertines only use the other to their own ends, and even believe that it is an inviolable right of libertinage to do so, this use nevertheless constitutes a relationship, crucially a relationship based on transgression. Like Sade's philosophy, his ethics is an ethics of transgression. This ethics hinges on the encounter with the other, needs that encounter, but does not attempt to subsume or subjugate that other, at least not metaphysically. This is because to subsume the other would be to preclude any opportunity for transgression, since, of course, transgression needs boundaries and taboos to transgress, and an 'other' to witness this transgression, or else it is meaningless. Russo explains, 'the libertine is certainly not a radical reformer: the only action he knows is reaction, he needs the law in order to transgress it, and he never questions traditional boundaries and hierarchies' (1997, 396). Despite the free-thinking ideals that are promoted in his texts, there is no true freedom in the Sadean world. Not only must libertines hide what they are in society, but even their personal freedom is limited by the exclusivity of the libertine life, and their need for a witness in the other. To be free of this bond, to entirely destroy the 'other' as the libertine wishes to do, necessitates a destruction of the self. For libertines, freedom comes only in death, but even death ceases to have meaning on the level of materialism. In the end, the ego of the libertine is too great to advocate its own destruction.

For Sadean ethics, the other is always God, and transgression is always of the religious. The transgressive relationship of libertine to the 'other' has God and the religious as its foundation and as its target. It is clear that there is a level of obsession with religion and particularly Catholicism in Sade's work that goes beyond a desire to express an atheist philosophy. What is expressed, instead, is a hatred of religion and God that is constitutive of and embodied in the transgressions libertines commit against the society they supposedly reject. The relationship between victim as 'other' and libertine has several parallels with the relationship between God as 'other' and libertine. The Sadean libertine compares him or herself to God, and God is found wanting. Libertines would like to believe that God has no power over them because they sin with impunity. However, the libertine also desires to do harm to God, and, unlike for the atheist, these things have meaning to the libertine, who gains pleasure from blaspheming and transgressing. Therefore, the Sadean libertine cannot escape

a moral framework with God as its guarantor. While the libertine concludes the world is better without God, and that Nature can stand in for God, their relationship is impossible to dissolve, and the idea that the libertine can be without God is a fantasy. First, the comparison between libertine and God is only another form of blasphemy, and plays into the libertine dream of achieving complete autonomy. To attain this autonomy necessitates destruction, not only of God, but of the self, a fact which can only fuel hatred of God.

The ethical encounter that takes place between the Sadean libertine and God is unique because the libertine neither wishes God away, nor wants to destroy God, either literally or metaphysically, by attempting to subjugate God to the limits of human understanding. If God did not exist, if there was no grand 'other' to be a witness and a target of outrage, there would be no pleasure in transgression, since the target of transgression would be nullified. Klossowski says that the crimes committed by the libertines are 'provocations addressed to the absent God, as though scandalous provocations were a way of forcing that God to manifest his existence' (1965, 66). The encounter with God would confirm the transgression, and so the Sadean libertine cannot help but desire it. On those grounds, a Sadean ethics of transgression is built upon the notion of the encounter with God, the ultimate 'other.' This ethics encourages a dialogue with the religious which is entirely at odds with the motivations of philosophy in Sade's time, for the Enlightenment was an era in which philosophy began to distance itself from theology, a trend which continued to such extremes that many now consider theology and philosophy to be entirely at odds. Therefore, Sade's ethics of transgression can be seen as a critique of the ethical positions of his contemporaries, who were beginning to question the place of God and the religious in ethics. Sade's ethics may not be based in a traditional religious morality, yet they encourage a dialogue with the religious that is unique.

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