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Navigating the Crisis of Movement: Rupture, Repetition, and New Life

To speak of trauma is always to speak too late. Trauma is something we do not see coming. Consider philosopher of neuroplasticity Catherine Malabou's definition: "The word 'trauma' in Greek means 'wound' and derives from *titrosko*, which means 'to pierce.' Trauma thus designates the wound that results from an effraction—an 'effraction' that can be physical (a 'patent' wound) or psychological. In either case, trauma names a shock that forces open or pierces a protective barrier."^[1] Trauma is the experience of an invasive accident. We do not go looking for trauma, and we do not predict its affects or effects. Trauma happens.

Malabou speaks of trauma as a rupture in normal plasticity, the creative process by which human beings synthesize events in our lives so that they make sense. Trauma might also be characterized as a crisis of existential *motion*, a rupture in the normal processes of human mobility. Human experience is a series of starts and stops. To be human is to navigate the reality of time and space, to deal with ourselves in motion, as beings always defined in relation to our ability to move or not move. When we are confronted with events that overwhelm our capacity to synthesize them into everyday life, we find it inconceivable to move forward. We are stalled by suffering, insurmountable guilt, uncertainty about our sudden change in circumstance, or even the paralysis of idle, abstract thinking. In the face of these events, we are halted, unable to move, shell-shocked by life itself. We are frozen in an existential stasis, stuck inside or outside ourselves, waiting for a time when motion seems possible again and life can go on. Trauma is a name for this crisis of motion.

Existential motion is a primary theme for Søren Kierkegaard, whose writing can aptly be described as so many experimental attempts to deal with varying kinds of trauma. Instead of a long philosophical treatise, however, in Kierkegaard we encounter the problem of motion narratively; we see the problem of motion *in motion*, as Kierkegaard shows us examples of seducers, judges, priests, comedians, and others in what appear more like novels or poetry than dry theory. His writing is an attempt to probe the problems of human life, and motion is recognizably one of the most difficult to understand, especially the traumatic loss of motion that comes to us at or beyond the limits of language itself. Despite this difficulty, Kierkegaard nevertheless attempts to give language to these experiences. For Kierkegaard, these traumatic events might be characterized as personal apocalypses, the points at which our lives appear to come to an end.

Perhaps what is most fascinating about Kierkegaard's imagined lives is that their traumatic experiences come not from those dramatic and awful events that *demand* an examination of trauma, for example the victims of posttraumatic stress disorder who forced Sigmund Freud to reevaluate his thoughts on trauma. Instead, Kierkegaard draws his case studies from banal and mundane experiences, thereby bringing the problem of trauma closer than we might otherwise imagine. Trauma, he shows us, is not merely reserved for those extreme cases that we read about or encounter tangentially. Trauma actually happens to each one of us.

Some readers infer that Kierkegaard's engagement with the trauma of everyday life is somehow linked to a romanticized sense of his own dramatic adolescence, dismissing Kierkegaard as a man who simply failed to get his life together. Yet Kierkegaard's way of dealing with trauma allowed him to face up to some harsh realities about religious illusions and to envision alternative possibilities for religious life. What follows, then, is an attempt to consider with Kierkegaard what trauma, as a crisis of motion, might mean for religious life, and in turn, what religion might mean for trauma.

What Trauma Might Mean for Religion

As an interruption of our normal habits of making sense in the world, trauma threatens all that makes us secure and comfortable, a role often de facto occupied by religion. Trauma is the “absence of sense,” as Catherine Malabou explains, the point at which what we took for granted is stripped away.[2] Indeed, even proximity to the traumas of others has a knock-on effect whereby the trauma of someone else forces us to confront our own ways of making sense of the world. What religious person has never confronted the problem of evil while watching a loved one suffer? Who fails to reconsider divine providence after hearing about a tragic accident or catastrophe? Trauma sparks crises of meaning and sudden realizations about ourselves or others; trauma renders all our ways of synthesizing our experience inoperative, particularly those ways that rely on preformatted doctrines or dogmas.

In Kierkegaard's book *Repetition*, his character known simply as the Young Man embodies the kinds of questions that come about when we are faced with the trauma of realizing that life is always subject to change. In a lyrical letter, the Young Man delivers a barrage of paralyzing questions that evince his loss of orientation:

One sticks a finger into the ground to smell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world—it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that world? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks as if I had been brought from a peddling shanghai of human beings? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice?[3]

Alien to the world, foreign to the familiar ground, and abandoned by common sense, the Young Man's protective inner world is pierced, shocked, forced open. In his case, all this comes from the mere recognition that one cannot predict with absolute certainty what will happen tomorrow. In an existentially suspended moment, the Young Man is unable to make the necessary decisional move that allows him to get going. All that remains is a seemingly eternal present, negating any empiricist or philosophical help and still more any theological systems, which might have recourse to a past or future. What good is an experiment or a logical treatise for someone who belongs neither to the world of nature nor the world of sense?

Elsewhere, the Young Man describes his situation as being stuck inside himself. As we read his reflections, we see him repeat the refrain that he is unable to move. “Here I stand,” he writes, “On my head or on my feet? I do not know. All I know is that I am standing and have been standing *suspense gradu* [immobilized] for a whole month now, without moving a foot or making one single movement.”[4] This immobility is compounded by the fact that he is unable to extricate himself from his situation. In the traumatic space, it will not do for us to adopt the position that we should simply pull ourselves together and get on with life. What qualifies trauma as trauma is that it removes any sense of agency or hope; at its worst, it is the total erasure of possibility.

Trauma confronts us with the threat of totally losing our way in the world. For our religious selves, trauma not only dismantles the seemingly cohesive theological structures we inhabit but it also threatens to reduce even our most basic hopes to doubts. Overwhelmed by trauma, the self is unable to collect itself and sits dispersed in the thought that all our imagined possibilities could be illusions. One cannot actualize a life at all, let alone a religious life, if one cannot move forward into some kind of horizon. Trauma brings religious persons face to face with what we really believe in our inmost core. Even and especially when we fail to acknowledge it in our

confessions, the traumatic experience goes underground and haunts us. Trauma is thus the threat of total negation, of complete and utter dissolution. In the traumatic suspension, there is no catechism that will change our circumstance.

What Religion Might Mean for Trauma

Trauma installs itself as the definitive feature for our personal narratives. It stops us in our tracks and absorbs all our energy to move forward. Our conventional means of motion are stopped up, our religious frameworks are suddenly destabilized and troubling rather than founding and comforting. Yet Kierkegaard is unwilling to give trauma the final word. It takes up a significant and even constitutive place in his authorship, yet Kierkegaard dares to think of faith in the wake of trauma. Such a faith, however, will not simply recapitulate a pretraumatic religion that ignores the real questions raised in trauma or the damages it caused.

Where one might expect an existentialist thinker like Kierkegaard to suggest that overcoming trauma requires some great feat of personal resolve, he instead suggests that a recovery is only thinkable when all individual efforts are rendered impossible. Spinning one's wheels to resist trauma often only exacerbates the problem. Because trauma evacuates agency by uprooting us from normal patterns of making sense of our world, its solution cannot therefore come from an agent.

To concretize this situation, and to seek a way out, Kierkegaard turns to Job. In Job's narrative, the world is not received through the tiresome arguments of Job's friends, nor by trying to live in a recollected past, nor even through Job's demand for justice. For Job, it is the voice from a thunderstorm that calls his attention to the vibrant world surrounding him. Job overcomes trauma not because he finally gets the court case he repeatedly lobbies for (Job 9:32–35, 13:18–27) but because the world is given back to him such that he no longer needs such a court case. Thus the renewed world comes not through Job's self-assertion but as a gift, as a counter-interruption, an interruption of the traumatized immobile space that first interrupted the flow of his life; instead of considering faith in terms of recollection, Kierkegaard calls this future-oriented renewal repetition.

Repetition maps onto the Christian notion of grace as that which is given apart from and beyond human effort. In a curious passage, Kierkegaard tells us that in a religious mode, repetition will “come to mean atonement,”^[5] which we should understand as liberation from slavery. We do not, on our own strength, move past trauma; we are *moved* past it.^[6] We accept the gift of being returned to the world. Salvation comes not so that one might simply recollect the moment of salvation, and still less so that one might fixate on a previous traumatic state, but rather so that the saved individual might lead a life unburdened by past chains. In terms of trauma, repetition is the saving moment that comes as a free gift of grace, that which turns the *trauma* of reality itself into the *grace* of reality itself. Whereas the traumatic space eliminated movement, the graced space enables it. The trauma of the real is loss and silence, whereas the grace of the real is gift and call. It is important to note that this change is not some poetic overlay on reality, but the kind of subjectivity or personhood that is called into being upon becoming the recipient of repetition.

Posttraumatic Faith, or the Gift that Keeps on Giving

To be sure, this leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Especially absent is a consideration of those extreme traumatic cases that are irrecoverable, cases explored by thinkers like Catherine Malabou to show the limit and problem of materiality for our philosophical, psychoanalytic, and theological examinations of trauma.^[7] Yet by sketching an outline of more everyday, personal apocalypses, I hope to cultivate a sense of faith that might help those currently experiencing such a traumatic space or those who come alongside them.

It was not until I had my own traumatic event, the sudden illness and death of my father when I was twenty-two, that I could really understand what Kierkegaard meant by repetition. After coming out on the other side of this painful tragedy, one that threw all my convictions and beliefs into utter disarray, I found that Kierkegaard's narratives about the gift of repetition gave language to my own experience. For me, when it seemed like all the ways I had of making sense of the world were torn away and I was cast adrift in despair, suddenly and unexpectedly the world mysteriously began to color itself beautifully again. None of my efforts would restore the world I inhabited before my father's passing, a reality that oppressed me again and again. Yet while trauma came as a surprise, so, too, did repetition. If atonement means something like at-one-ness—to be made whole again and to be liberated unto a new creative life of gratitude—then for me Kierkegaard's suggestion that repetition will come to mean atonement was spot on. Such a realization has not only been retrospectively helpful in making sense of an otherwise senseless situation; it has also helped me to be more empathetic, more open to the future, and, I hope, more faithful to the love and gifts that abound in creation.

None of this is intended to suggest a Christian triumphalism. Christians are not the only ones who are capable of moving through trauma in a healthy way. Instead, Kierkegaard expands the category of the religious to be something more than dogmatic or creedal assent. Religion is a way of living that receives life as a gift and creatively works to proliferate that gift. In faith, a mature religious life no longer needs the doctrinal certainty that stabilizes life through the illusion of concepts. This need not lapse into a naive notion of providence, as though a trauma was somehow necessary to teach us a lesson. It instead resonates with Simone Weil's maxim that Christianity does not seek a supernatural remedy (that is, repression) for suffering but a supernatural use for it.[8] For Kierkegaard, faith is the principle of motion, of actualizing possibilities rather than remaining diffused in unrealized potentials. It takes faith to risk a movement, especially when there really is no providential guarantee. This faith is enabled by the gift of repetition, by the wondrous renewal of one's world as a gift and an opportunity, by the recognition that there is a world at all on which all of us depend, whether we are experiencing trauma or not. Religion, then, is neither a means of escaping trauma into a future world of bliss nor is it the ability to buy dogmatic insurance that tomorrow will not be traumatic. A religious movement is instead one that affirms the contingency and events of life and trusts that these are not ultimate but penultimate.[9] Kierkegaard reveals to us that the traumas of everyday life, those points at which we stop moving, are not final; at any moment, the world might be wondrously, inexplicably returned, not as we remembered it but as the possibility for something new. In faith, we are given the gift to see contingency at work and trust that, despite everything, life is stronger than trauma.[10]

[1] Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*, trans. Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 6.

[2] *Ibid.*, 9. Although Malabou's work deals with victims of severe trauma and especially with those who have had significant brain damage, her insights bear considerably on these more mundane circumstances.

[3] Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. 6, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 201.

[4] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 214.

[5] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 324.

[6] I owe this helpful point to an e-mail exchange with Edward F. Mooney, whose work on repetition thoroughly permeates my reflections here. See especially Edward F. Mooney, ed., "Repetition: Getting the World Back," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Daniel Marino (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 282–307. One might also consult David Kangas's work on *Repetition*,

which considers the text as an examination of how the self cannot ultimately found itself, leading to a subjectivity of dependence and recognition that he links to Meister Eckhart's *Gelassenheit*; see Kangas, *Kierkegaard's Instant: On Beginnings* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 91–124.

[7] In cases like these, Malabou notes that plasticity is impossible, presenting a challenge for philosophy to come up with some other notion of possibility that could address such hopeless evacuations of a renewed life. I would hesitantly suggest that Kierkegaard's repetition might be a candidate for a project like this. Trauma is an accident, so, too, is repetition. See Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn P T. Shread (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), 89–91.

[8] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Willis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 132.

[9] Another insight borrowed from Mooney.

[10] My thanks to Jordan Skinner, Carolyn Mackie, Jazz Feyer Salo, and Edward Mooney for their help in formulating this essay, editorially, philosophically, and otherwise.