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Mark Cousins

IS CHASTITY A PERVERSION?

Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity,* London, Faber & Faber, 1989; 528 pp; £32.50.

To read this book is to find a majestic dream, at once utterly strange and quite familiar. We know of the history of a Catholic Christianity with its institutions of a celibate clergy, of chaste monks and nuns. We know of the history of its denunciation of the flesh, of its awesome concern with sexuality and the institution of Christian marriage, with its tension between procreation and the dangers of pleasure. We know something of the history of Christian vigilance against desire, the scar tissue of Adam's fall, and of the trials and asceticism required to inquire, confess, and struggle against a desire which comes to us as sexuality. We know something of the way in which the fine mesh of sexual prohibitions, exhortations, taboos, and rigours came to stamp the category of the human person in the Latin West. But in systematic form, there is little intellectual awareness of the world out of which these elements hardened into a Catholic orthodoxy, into a general idea of Christian views of sexuality, the body, virginity, and marriage. For what we now recognize as Christian took five centuries to formulate. It was the great work of an articulation that was never inevitable, was composed of disparate and contradictory practices and convictions, and entailed a ferocious mutation from Classical Antiquity. This is the subject of this book, which makes a sublime picture of the strangeness of Christians as they compose themselves into a familiarity we recognize. The uncanniness of seeing a 'tradition' procreate itself out of disparate elements shows something of the violent, patient work of authority.

This book is concerned to map out the transition from the mentality of late Antiquity to Christianity through the investigation of a number of related themes. Central to the book is the displacement of Antiquity's experience of the body as something to be governed and used as an element of the *polis* to the Christian experience of the body as the sign of Adam's fall. Radiating from this are a number of consequential transitions - the betrayal of the city, the denunciation of sexuality, the rise of sexual asceticism in the form of post-marital continence or unmarried chastity, the transition of the status of marriage and the household, the change in the topology of the person through the category of the Christian 'heart'. Peter Brown makes no claim to write a history of sexual practices; we cannot document, except in rare and fleeting glimpses, the sexual 'lives' of people. He recognizes that the historian is limited largely to the discursive event of the formation of a Christian measure of sexuality, the formation of a collective dream by a religious elite. But that

does not limit the scope of the book. Rather his interpretive discretion frees him to describe the formation of the dream in all its discontinuous identity.

The Roman city of the second century needed children. The population was, in the words of John Chrysostom, 'grazed thin by death'. Procreation was a central concern of the city, the married couple its central resource. Certainly sexual intercourse posed problems; it required that the body was brought to the boil and this was expensive for the body's vital spirit. Michel Foucault in *Le Souci de Soi* has underlined the Roman concern with an ascesis in which the body was ruled by the soul. The body must be administered in the public interest of the city. Desire was something to be managed economically, but this wise government did not single out sexuality as a particular or central object of concern. Clement of Alexandria pointed to the difference between this and the emerging Christianity: 'The human ideal of continence, I mean that which is set forth by the Greek philosophers, teaches one to resist passion, so as not to be made subservient to it, and to train the instincts to pursue rational goals.' But for Christians he added, 'our ideal is not to experience desire at all'. This threatened to subvert the city's arbitration of desire and its uses. More radically, by refusing to procreate, the Christians threatened to bring marriage and indeed society to an end. Nothing was more calculated to appal the pagan elite.

This sexual renunciation had Jewish origins, for example, amongst the Essenes who constituted a male Utopia of sexual renunciation. Involved in such renunciation was the Jewish conception of the 'heart'. This differed from the Greek model of body and soul. The 'heart' was the index of the relation to God; it is the 'heart' which is open or hardened to God. This category is paramount in St Paul whose legacy to Christianity is its concern with the flesh. We are all hard-hearted towards God, in which the relation of the flesh to the spirit repeats the rebelliousness of man to God. As he opened the revelation of Christ to Gentiles to create an 'Israel of God', the Christian changed the concept of the body. It was no longer the boundary between the city and nature, but an index of the soul's relation to God. St Paul did not demand sexual renunciation, for without the existence of pious households in the city Christianity would not spread. But he left the idea of marriage in a degraded state. Although he did not want his own celibacy to be taken as a model, it clearly already had attractions for others. It was an issue which would increasingly divide Christians and Jews. For after the destruction of the Temple Judaism increasingly became a religion of the Book and of marriage. Rabbis staked marriage as the guarantee of continuity. But some Christians mocked this continuity through the 'drastic gesture of perpetual chastity'.

In the second century AD it was a common Christian question to ask what difference Christ's coming had made. The Christian philosopher Tertullian answered that it brought the 'present age' to an end. One way in which Christians might mark that was to reverse what was thought to be irreversible. If the Greek conception of the inevitability of sexuality nicknamed the penis 'the Necessity', Christians could think of refusing it, of bringing the 'present age' to a childless close. Jordan would roll backwards and history would be undone. Communities in the Near East began to work out this thought. 'When

Salome asked the Lord, "How long shall death hold sway?" He answered, "As long as you women bear children".' In Antiquity the need to overcome death through procreation had always tinged sex with a sadness at the prospect of mortality. But now the relation was reversed. Sexuality was no longer the remedy for death; it was the cause of death.

The Encratites preached complete sexual renunciation. A Syriac text, *The Acts of Judas Thomas,* denounced marriage. To produce a revolution of everyday life, to put an end to the present age, the womb must be boycotted. In the works of Valentinus this enthusiasm was combined with a Gnostic account of the cosmos. The physical universe was a mistake whose rectification was promised in the coming of Christ. Matter would return to God. Women would be reunited with men. Humans would turn home to their angels. The tragedy of division and separation would be overcome. To refuse sexual intercourse was to begin to refuse to participate in the chaos of the world. In the apochryphal *Acts of John* a young man castrated himself with a sickle, declaring, 'There you have the pattern and cause of all this.'

The rise of the ideal of complete sexual renunciation determined even the arguments of those who opposed the Encratites. Clement of Alexandria, at the end of the second century, defended Christian marriage, but as a marriage which was itself now the space of a long, hard discipline of sexual restraint. Christian sexual intercourse must be deliberate, solemn, and decorous; it must be purged of plebeian excitement and dedicated to the possible issue. The regulation of the body moves from the Greek concern with a daytime politics to the Christian night of the bed. On this piece of furniture the soul's struggle must be decided; it is indeed where the Christian West must be won. A dialectic was established between an absolute chastity from childhood and a Christian marriage bound to the rules of austerity. This was resolved only centuries later in the institutional settlement of a chastity of priests, monks, and nuns and a laity huddled around a massively regulated marriage. But in both terms, the control of the body and sexuality was vital, and the detour of marriage tended just as much away from sexual intercourse as the state of chastity. Until that settlement various figures arise which govern Christian controversy - the young female virgin, the desert ascetic, the pious continent widow, the restrained couple, the pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve. Around these figures the issue of sexuality is worked out to forge a Christian code for the human person.

In the *Symposium* of Methodius, a pastiche of Plato's text, young females discuss virginity. They speak of the 'shudder' of intercourse, of the hot male 'thirst' for progeny, as passing shadows compared with the only fecund union, that of the Church with God. Virginity, for them, is a step on the route from the Fall to salvation, a route that passes from incest to polygamy to monogamy and finally to chastity. Moreover, chastity was becoming an issue, not just of post-marital continence, but of virginity as such. In the writings of Origen, virginity ceases to be a state of suspended sexuality which falls between puberty and marriage, and becomes the very means of preserving an original unity of the soul.

Virginity was embraced by the young. Pagan authorities sometimes

punished Christian virgins by condemning them to brothels, for undermining the social order of the city. In the Near East ascetics began to celebrate virginity by becoming 'walking men', vagrants 'for the Kingdom' - a great virgin mimesis of Christ. Now it was clear that this would not fit the Latin West. A compromise begins to be forged. At the beginning of the fourth century, in his *Proof of the Gospels* Eusebius famously indicated Two Ways, chastity and secular marriage. Christianity would not break from the institution of an austere marriage. But of course, there was nothing specifically Christian about such an institution - it was shared by pagans and Jews alike. So there was also a high valuation placed on the demand, arising in the East, for complete sexual renunciation.

The prototype of this was Anthony, who made the desert a city. Thousands of 'renouncers' went to the desert. Previously, the desert had marked off the world with an ecological boundary. Now it was viewed from outside the world and it became a counter-world, a spiritual city. There, the central temptation was hunger, the central danger was of becoming an animal. But if these were overcome, there was a promise - of regaining Adam's first state. This required years of spiritual work. At first it was necessary to fast and keep vigil so that the body would become clarified. But this merely brought the monk face to face with his own will, 'like a snake hidden in the dung'. He needed a spiritual adviser to teach the discernment necessary to distinguish the Devil. Sexuality was the sign of a heart still closed; nocturnal emissions were the signature of the will. Only when desire is annihilated will the heart open.

The desert was a male city. But at the same time the female virgin was becoming a spiritual model. She lived in seclusion in the household, or in small communities of intense friendship. It was a life of spiritual risk in which the virgin must abandon all the trappings of femininity. Yet the female virgin became the image of purity, of the sweet way to end history. This cult of virginity posed a profound threat to the city. John Chrysostom's *On Virginity* sought to 'rob Antioch of its most tenacious myth - that citizens had a duty to contribute to the continued glory of their native Antioch by marrying'. For John it is the city itself which is the danger, the pleasures that lie beyond the Christian courtyard. The Christian household must gradually erase the urban spaces of the theatre, the hippodrome, and the agora. He thundered against the nudity of bodies in the city, of the rich woman who indifferently appears naked before a servant, of a servant's nudity as a badge of her lack of consequence. John preached an egalitarian modesty against this disorder. The Church should demand an architecture and an urbanism of shame which would oppose the poverty and lust of humans. To feed the poor is the same wish as to clothe them. In Constantinople he consummated his unpopularity with the city by founding a leper colony on the edge of a fashionable suburb. Equality and virginity were an attack upon the city.

In the West, Ambrose elaborated the celebration of virginity. For humans the stain of birth remained permanent. Only virginity could oppose the taint of the polluted 'mixing' of procreation. It led him to elevate Mary as 'a royal hall of undamaged chastity'. Mary's hymen and the doors of the Church constitute a great boundary against the city and sexuality. In the writings of Jerome the

status of continence becomes intransigent: first marriages are regrettable, second marriages are but a step away from the brothel.

This tradition was profoundly inflected by Augustine. He was bishop in Hippo where the Church was so beleaguered that issues like the marriage of clergy could not be central. Schism was the danger, and Augustine moved towards an acceptance of imperial power as the political guarantor of the Church. As a consequence his writings displace the issue of sexuality away from the external observance of continence to wads a great analysis of desire. He defended marriage as a social reality and opposed Jerome. This had profound consequences for his analysis of sexuality. In *On the Good Marriage* and *Holy Virginity* he approved of both virginity and marriage, as the two forms of friendship, two forms of social bond. People could continue to think, as they clearly did, that God created humanity for marriage and procreation. This led him to a rereading of Adam and Eve. Most Christian writers had assumed that there had been neither marriage nor intercourse in Paradise; indeed, they were presented as the consequence of the Fall. But Augustine insisted that Adam and Eve had sexed bodies and would have intercourse and would have peopled Paradise had the Fall not intervened. Paradise would have been a Roman patriarchy. The Fall then was not an entry into sexuality as such but a perversion of the will. It was a permanent alienation of our will from God's will. In this way sexuality was both displaced as the root of sin but returned as the sign of a fundamental dislocation which is internal to humans. As the Fall was the alienation of Adam and Eve from God's will, so our bodies are alienated from our will. Sex and death are the permanent marks of the alienation within us, of our bodies from our will. Sex is always a quotation from death, death is always a repetition of the Fall from Paradise where our bodies and our will had been one. We are punished in our sexuality and death; an involuntary erection is a warning of our death, an orgasm is the memory trace of the Fall.

Desire then is not simply the force of the body which must be tamed by the soul. It is a flaw in the soul itself, for desire is the splitting of our will from God's will. Desire is not just the flesh, but the turn to the flesh which is the essence of our will. In this way Augustine shatters the categories of eastern asceticism. Desire is not a threat which endangers the young but which age and continence can remove. It is the alienation of the soul as such. Sexuality is the point of view in which one catches sight of oneself from the same angle as is seen by God. Sexuality is our just desert, the punishment to fit the Fall. For a representative of eastern asceticism and an opponent of Augustine like Cassian, sexuality was the index of the relation of forces between the body and soul in which there might be a progress towards a purity of the heart. This ascetic hopefulness was not Augustine's; purity was reserved for the City of God.

The claims of the ancient city were undermined by both eastern asceticism and the Augustinian internalization of concern with the body. The body was no longer a link in the chain of being, but a sign of Adam's fall. In the East this had produced an asceticism which sought to break with the present age In the desert and within the household, ascetics had 'made for themselves a world

without marriage and without private fields'. The city was no longer the source of the uses of the body; the ascetic was outside the city. At the same time the family turned inward, away from the city; urban spaces were privatized by households. Even the dead person became a solitary in his tomb, which had ceased to be a product and ornament of the city. The city was now the space of the bodies of the poor, covered with dust and afflictions. It marked the end of Antiquity's relation of the body to the city, in what Le Goff has called the 'rout of the body'. Images of authority were transformed. The continuity and reproduction of social relations were in the hands of a celibate clergy which relied upon supernatural forms of continuity, through baptism and teaching, which had been no part of the ancient city. Continuity was now a holy rather than a civic task.

The dialectic of desire which Peter Brown describes in Augustine complements the work of Michel Foucault in the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality.* It enables us to clarify what kind of history they write, for they touch at a certain methodological point. Both write what might be called *categorial* history. It is, as this book makes plain, not a social history of sexuality, whatever that might be. Nor is it a history of ideas, ideas on the body, sexuality, and virginity. It is a history of categories, through which those objects were, at one and the same time, formed and understood. What is described is a practice of comprehension. This determines the way in which conclusions can be drawn from it. A *categorial* history makes a wager and, at the same time, is an act of discretion. It wagers that the categories it identifies are effective within social relations. We assume that the categories which Peter Brown describes influenced the sexual life of Christian believers. But the categories themselves do not tell us how effective they were. Certainly he hints at the slow, impermeable sexual life which continued outside and even against the ideals he portrays. So we adopt a discretion concerning the effectiveness of the categories. The problem is made more complex by the fact that the description of the categories themselves is not a 'free' construction. For their description is always a conceptual and semantic *measurement,* implicitly or explicitly, from our conceptions and meanings of sexuality. That is, as always, the price of a certain stability of reference in historical writing.

These methodological problems are at their most stark in considering the relation of sexuality and history. Some conceive of sexuality as an economy *as such,* as that which has no history. In this view, whatever the surface changes of sexual regimes, that economy remains its unconditioned condition. Conversely, some consider sexuality to be so plastic that there can be an infinite historical proliferation of sexualities. Neither of these positions can be sustained. Sexuality is a domain, first, of a symbolic system which can be translated into cultural and psychical terms. A categorial history has as its object the cultural translation of that system. It certainly prevents us from considering the ascetic in terms of individual psychopathology. And it also puts our concepts of desire to the question. Augustine's writings are not historical curiosities; they belong to the strange familiarity in which the issue of desire turns and turns and turns.

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Simon Critchley

WITHIN THE REASONABLE LIMITS OF THE TRADITION:

CHRISTOPHER NORRIS ON THE ETHICS OF DECONSTRUCTION

> The slow end of this history, the slow end in which we have long been standing, is the domination of thinking as ratio (in the sense of understanding as well as reason) over the *being* of the essent. *(das sein des seienden.)* Here begins the contest between 'rationalism and irrationalism' that has been in progress to this day in every conceivable disguise and under the most contradictory titles. Irrationalism is only the obvious weakness and failure of rationalism and hence itself a kind of rationalism. Irrationalism is a way out of rationalism, an escape which does not lead into the open but merely gives rise to the opinion that we can overcome rationalism by merely saying no to it, whereas this only makes its machinations the more dangerous by hiding them from view.
>
> Heidegger, *An introduction to Metaphysics*[1]

In a book that is distinguished by fine chapters on Rousseau and Kant,[2] Christopher Norris, in general accord with the orientation of recent work by John Llewelyn, Rodolphe Gasche, and Irene E. Harvey, seeks to draw out the 'philosophical consequences' *(D,* 22) of Derrida's thinking, in order to reassess the literary theoretical appropriation and domination of deconstruction. Norris understands Derrida's thinking from within the context of the dominant western philosophical tradition; indeed, he argues that Derridian deconstruction is at odds with all forms of 'postmodernism' (Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, cf. *D,* 150-71) which claim to have broken with or overcome the exigencies of philosophical modernity. For Norris, it is in relation to the project of modernity, which commences with Descartes and reaches its decisive articulation in the Kantian voice of enlightened and Enlightenment critique, that Derrida's work demands to be understood. This is not to say that Derrida is a traditional thinker: rather, he is a thinker *of* the tradition, which he nonetheless submits to a rigorous rethinking. The radicality of the Derridian position can only be understood, Norris claims, from within the conceptual resources of the philosophical tradition. In his interrogation of, amongst other things, the principle of reason, which has had such a crucial influence on the development of western science, technology, and ideology, Derrida, according to Norris, must be understood from within the tradition of rational critique, even when the attempt is to think the limits of that tradition.

I have argued (and understand Derrida as arguing) that deconstruction is a

> rigorous attempt to *think the limits* of that principle of reason which has shaped the emergence of Western philosophy, science and technology at large . . . . Thus the activity of deconstruction is strictly inconceivable outside the tradition of enlightened rational critique whose classic formulations are still to be found in Kant. *(D,* 162)

For Norris, then, Derrida's proper context is the tradition of rational critique typified by Kant; and although he recognizes that it would be a 'determinate misreading' (D, 148) of Derrida to represent his work as a strict continuation of the Kantian project, Norris claims that the analogy with Kant acts as a corrective to 'those other, equally myopic misreadings which treat Derrida as some kind of transcendental solipsist, labouring under the absurd delusion that there is nothing "real" outside the play of textual inscription' *(D,* 148-9). The radicality of Derrida's work consists in thinking the limits of the tradition of rational critique and in rendering those limits undecidable.

It would, however, be a fearful misunderstanding of Norris's position to infer from the above that he wishes to maintain Derrida's thinking within the limits of *purely* philosophical investigation; for much of his concern is with showing the *practical* consequences of deconstruction in the areas of politics and ethics (cf. chapters 6 and 8). In his discussion of Kant and Derrida, Norris takes up the Kantian distinction between the 'pure' and 'practical' employment of reason, a distinction which divides nature from freedom the sensible from the supersensible, and distinguishes the domains of epistemology and ethics.

In this context, it is Norris's discussion of the relation of the ethics of deconstruction to Kantian practical reason that is of interest. In thinking the limits of the tradition, Norris argues that Derrida's work is analogous with the Kantian project of thinking the limits of pure epistemological explanation. By probing the limits of pure reason, Derrida's thinking, he suggests, opens on to an ethical domain of practical reason that lies beyond epistemology. Thus, for Norris, Derrida's thinking opens out on to an 'ethical dimension' (D, 228) and has definite ethical consequences. With the explanatory tool of the distinction between epistemology and ethics, Norris thus articulates the radicality of Derrida's thinking, a thinking that is hinged upon the difference between the pure and the practical.

One of the major reasons why the deconstructive labour at the limit of the philosophical tradition should open out on to an ethical dimension is provided, claims Norris, by the influence that the ethics of Emmanual Levinas has had upon Derrida's work.

> What Derrida finds in Levinas is an attempt to *think the limits* of this tradition and to make out the points where it encounters the 'violence' of an alien (ethical) mode of thought. (*D,* 231)

Although Norris is aware, through a reading of 'Violence and Metaphysics', that 'Derrida is by no means an uncritical exponent of Levinas' texts' (Z), 233), he also recognizes that 'it is clear that Levinas exerted a deep and lasting

influence on Derrida's thought' (D, 234).

What is one to make of this 'Levinasian' conclusion to Norris's appraisal of Derrida? Let me state first that I believe Norris is correct in claiming that we need to understand deconstruction in terms of 'an ethical injunction' (*D,* 236), and that this aspect of Derrida's work 'has yet to be grasped by most of his commentators' *(D,* 228). Nevertheless, I am sceptical about the way in which Norris formulates these issues and my question to him is the following: by retaining Derrida at the limit and, consequently, *upon* the parameters of Kantian critique and by assimilating his thinking to the distinction between pure and practical reason (or epistemology and ethics), does he not leave the institutions of reason and rationality *intact,* thereby reinscribing those elements of Derrida's thinking that are transgressive of logocentrism back within the reasonable limits of the *ratio?*

I suspect that Norris would not think it entirely unfair if his account of Derrida were labelled a 'rational reconstruction' of deconstruction. Indeed, much of his energy is directed against the notion that deconstruction is 'a species of last-ditch irrationalism' (D, 169). However, can Derridian deconstruction be maintained within the limits of reason and rationality? An approach to this question can best be seen if we turn - *pace* Norris (D, 157-62) - to Derrida's essay, 'The Principle of Reason: the University in the Eyes of its Pupils'.[3] A substantial portion of this text deals with Heidegger - and here I broach what I consider to be the most serious weakness of Norris's book: the absence of any extended discussion of the crucial relation of Derrida's work to that of Heidegger - and pursues Heidegger's interrogation of the status of the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason as the ultimate ground upon which all thinking stands. Briefly, the principle of sufficient reason is the claim that nothing is without reason and consequently that there is a rational explanation for the existence of every entity. But is thinking exhausted by rationality? Is there another ground for thinking other than the principle of sufficient reason? When we ask the question of the reason of reason, the *raison d'etre* or Being of the *ratio,* then is all such inquiry rational? Are there reasons of which reason knows nothing?

For Heidegger, thinking is not exhausted by rationality. When Heidegger examines the principle of reason, *nihil est sine ratione,* he changes the sense of the proposition by placing the emphasis upon the *nihil* and the *sine;* thus for him, it is precisely *nothing* that is *without* reason. According to Heidegger, the question of the Nothing *(das Nichts)* allows access to the question of the Being of entities, of what is, in such a way that the question of Being is not from the start determined on the ground of rationality; i.e. that whatever *is* can be explained rationally. In this way the whole status of the *nihil* becomes problematic and Heidegger is able to ask: 'How is it with the nothing?' *(Wie steht es um das Nichts?).*[4] In Heidegger's 'What is metaphysics?' and elsewhere,[5] he burrows into the ground of the *ratio* and claims that the principle of sufficient reason dissimulates a nothingness, a groundless abyss *(Abgrund),* which, when investigated, permits us to transcend the totality of entities circumscribed by reason and pose the question of the Being of the *ratio.*

In Derrida's reading of Heidegger in 'The Principle of Reason', he seeks to extend these investigations to the question of the university. Derrida claims that the rational structure of the university ('nobody has ever founded a university against reason', *PR,* 7) is suspended over a *nihil,* a groundless abyss which cannot be thought by reason. And, as Norris correctly claims, this meditation upon the *nihil* and the Being of the *ratio* leads to neither nihilism nor irrationalism; for, as my epigraph from Heidegger points out, irrationalism is antithetically dependent upon the principle of reason which it rejects and is thus circumscribed by the arc of a dialectical, metaphysical circle that encloses both the rational and the irrational. Derrida's (and Heidegger's) 'position' is well summarized by the following sentence: 'Reason is only one species of thought - which does not mean that thought is irrational' *(PR,* 16). *Thought* (and Derrida appears to use this term in a thoroughly Heideggerian manner throughout the essay) is not exhausted by the rational; yet this does not mean that thinking becomes irrational, but rather that it is caught in a double bind or double gesture, between rationality and its 'nihilation', clinging to the ground whilst looking down into the abyss.

> There is a double gesture here, a double postulation: to ensure professional competence and the most serious tradition of the university even while going as far as possible, theoretically and practically, in the most directly underground thinking about the abyss beneath the university, to think at one and the same time the entire 'Cornellian' landscape - the campus on the heights, the bridges, and if necessary the barriers above the abyss - and the abyss itself. *(PR,* 17)

To be bound to a double bind means obeying a double necessity: first, we are bound to a modernity that is grounded upon the principle of reason and, secondly, we are bound to ask for the reason of reason, which takes us in a direction that is *otherwise* than modernity (a formulation which seeks to resist the connotations of periodization, epochalization, and completion, suggested by the use of the prefix 'post' in some versions of postmodernism).

Whilst Norris is correct in claiming that Derrida operates at the limits of rational critique, I would wish, in the light of the above, to extend his insight and ask: Can the very thinking of the limits of reason itself be called rational? Should we not rather commit ourselves to a thinking that recognizes the inescapability of rationality, and consequently of modernity, whilst, at the same time, recognizing the necessity of the escape from reason?

I would now like to turn to Norris's implicit use of the distinction between pure and practical reason which is reflected, for him, in the difference between epistemology and ethics. For Norris, Derrida's project of thinking the limits of the tradition is a speculation upon the limits of conceptual, epistemological explanation *(D,* 225). Norris claims that when the epistemological limit is transgressed, one enters into the domain of ethics. Yet, taking as a point of departure Norris's argument that Derrida's work must be considered from within the Kantian tradition of rational critique, it is clear that, for him, the distinction between epistemology and ethics can be assimilated to that between

the pure and practical employment of reason in Kant. Thus Norris embeds both sides of the limit that divides epistemology from ethics into the ground of reason, whether pure or practical. The dual necessity which ties together the Derridian double bind is woven from the nets of reason.

If my portrayal is correct, then my objection is the following: although I believe Norris is justified in arguing that Derrida considers it impossible to imagine dispensing with the conceptual resources of the rationalist tradition of modernity, I believe that he is mistaken in claiming that what lies beyond the tradition, in this instance the ethical (or the non-philosophical), can be understood through the rationalist, categories of Kantian ethics. The double bind of deconstruction is bound both to the rationalist tradition of logocentrism and to the thought of the other to the *logos.* The question is, can the other to the *logos* can be assimilated into the *ratio?* In *Of Grammatology,* in a section entitled 'The Exorbitant Question of Method', when Derrida sketches the 'methodological' presuppositions of his deconstructive reading of Rousseau, he claims that he wanted to attain a certain point of exteriority with respect to the totality of the logocentric epoch, so that a deconstruction of the logocentric totality could be broached from a position that exceeds the orbit of that totality.[6] A deconstructive reading operates by employing the resources of logocentric or rational conceptuality (the *ratio* being a moment in the history of *logos,* or, more precisely, in the history of its translation) in order to engage that conceptuality in a dislocation where it is drawn outside itself and where the rational is led beyond its own reasonable limits. Of course, such a project continually risks falling back inside that which it deconstructs, since it is forced to employ the conceptual resources of the tradition; yet the necessity, for deconstruction, remains that it seek to maintain its exteriority to the tradition. Bearing this in mind, it would be a misunderstanding of Derridian deconstruction to seek to retain it within the parameters of the *logos* and the *ratio.* All rational reconstruction calls for its own deconstruction.

The corollary of the above is that the distinction of pure and practical reason is one that is maintained *within* the logocentric closure and *within* the reasonable limits of the tradition. Thus, in order to maintain an ethical dimension to Derrida's work in a way that is more responsive and responsible to deconstructive reading, the question becomes one of trying to find an ethics that is other to logocentrism and other to Kantian practical reason. The thought of Emmanual Levinas provides, I believe, an approach to this question.

Can Levinasian ethics be assimilated to the model of Kantian practical reason? Although Levinas is generally favourable to Kantian ethics, particularly the second formulation of the Categorical Imperative (the formula of the end in itself),[7] he would diverge from Kant on the question of the claims to autonomy, law, and universality that ground Kant's project. For Levinas, the ethical relation is not ratified by a procedure of formal universalization, where I must consider that my maxim is capable of becoming a universal law in a possible Kingdom of Ends, but rather through the concrete particularity of my relation with the singular other person *(autrui)* whose rights I must respect over my own. For Levinas, the straightforwardness or rectitude (*droiture*)[8] of

the face-to-face relation with the other person takes precedence over the universal rights *(droits)* of 'Man' and of the citizen. However, as Levinas is keen to point out in *Totality and Infinity*,[9] the statement that the ethical relation cannot be reduced (or indeed enlarged) to the claims of a universalizing (logocentric) rationality should not imply that the relation to the other person is mystical or irrational. The ethical relation does not represent a scandal for reason; rather it is the relation to the other which, Levinas claims, founds and sustains reason (a point which Derrida does not fail to recognize in 'Violence and Metaphysics', where he speaks of the Levinasian rupture of the *logos* making possible 'every logos or every rationalism'[10]). Levinasian ethical rationality is a particular, local employment of reason which is founded upon discrete and plural relations to the radical alterity of the other person and which can only be betrayed by the universalizing machinery of the Categorical Imperative procedure. It would be mistaken, therefore, to assimilate Levinasian ethics to the model of Kantian practical reason.

It is at this point, and by way of conclusion, that a distinction can be made between the ethics of the tradition and the ethics of radical alterity. In the tradition, ethics is often conceived to be a collection of laws, general principles, and moral rules, which are capable of (or make some claim to) universality and, therefore, prescribe human action. Invariably, such an ethics is dependent upon a metaphysical or logocentric foundation: practical reason being the subject-matter of the *second* critique, which comes after the *philosophia prote* and prolegomena of the *first* critique (whilst recognizing the claim to the primacy of practical reason). If ethics can perhaps be traditionally determined as the construction of an ethical system which is bound to a universal and rational Moral Law and binding upon particular moral agents, then it is clear that the ethics of alterity is of a different order. The goal of the ethics of alterity is not the construction of a moral system composed of principles and laws; it is rather the attempt to articulate the sense *(sens:* both signification and direction)[11] of the ethical relation, a sense which precedes, informs, and disrupts the articulation of traditional ethics, and which Levinas claims to find in the face of the other person *(autrui).* This sense is an aspect of ethics that has been dissimulated by the logocentric tradition and it can, perhaps, only be betrayed by the construction of a moral system. The face of the other person, in her or his destitution or majesty, the irreducible and wholly concrete alterity of another human, is otherwise than logocentrism and constitutes the basis for an ethics that is itself 'first philosophy',[12] a heteronomous ethical relation that is the condition for the possibility (and impossibility) of the *ratio* and all rationalisms.

As I have elsewhere argued in greater detail,[13] if there is a new possibility of ethics being prepared in Derrida's work, then it is one that would perhaps correspond to the Levinasian ethics of alterity, an ethics which cannot be reduced or assimilated to the principles or procedures of Kantian practical reason. Although, as a recent publication makes clear,[14] Derrida has. many reservations about the word 'ethics' - reticences which echo those voiced by Heidegger in his *Letter on Humanism* - these reservations are themselves in part allayed by the sense that Levinas gives to the word ethics. In a discussion

of Levinas, Derrida says:

> I believe that when Levinas speaks of ethics - I wouldn't say that this has nothing in common with what has been covered over in this word from Greece to the German philosophy of the 19th century, ethics is wholly other *(tout autre);* and yet it is the same word. (70-1)

Levinas's displacement of the sense of the word 'ethics' leads Derrida to conclude that its use may be 'much less restrictive' (71) in Levinas's work than elsewhere. For Derrida, the emphasis in Levinasian ethics upon the irreducible singularity of the relation to the other person renders it capable of exceeding the ethics of the tradition.

> The respect for the singularity or the call of the other is unable simply to belong to the domain of ethics, to the conventionally and traditionally determined domain of ethics. (71)

Indeed, Derrida wonders whether the title 'ultra-ethique' (71) might not be a more fitting description of Levinas's project. The possibility of such an 'ultra-ethics' or ethics of radical alterity is glimpsed over the horizon of the tradition of Kantian critique, in the face of the other person who founds and nourishes a local and plural rationality. To think the ethics of deconstruction is to attempt a thought that cannot be maintained within the reasonable limits of the tradition. Deconstruction is the critique of critique, a dissenting and perhaps unreasonable voice in the Kantian tribunal of reason.

NOTES

1 *Einfuhrung in die Metaphysik* (Tubingen: Max Niemeyer, 1953, 136) in English as *An Introduction to Metaphysics,* trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, Conn, and London: Yale University Press, 1959), 178-9.
2 *Derrida* (London: Fontana Modern Master, Fontana, 1987); after referred to as *D.*
3 In *Diacritics,* XIX (Fall 1983), 3-20; hereafter referred to as *PR.*
4 *Was ist Metaphysik?* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1969), 27, 33. 'What is metaphysics?', trans. D. F. Krell, in *Basic Writings,* edited by D. F. Krell (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 98, 104.
5 cf. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic,* trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984); *The Essence of Reasons,* trans. Terence Malick (Evanston, 111.: Northwestern University Press, 1969); *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: G. Neske, 1957).
6 'Nous voulions atteindre le point d'une certaine exteriorite par rapport a la totalite de l'epoque logocentrique. A partir de ce point d'exteriorite, une certain deconstruction pourrait etre entamee de cette totalite, qui est aussi un chemin trace, de cet orbe *(orbis)* qui est aussi orbitaire *(orbita).' De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967), 231.
7 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.' Kant, *The Moral Law,* trans. H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson, l'H8), 91. Levinas makes a favourable remark on this subject in an interview with *Le Monde* in

1980: 'J'aime la seconde formule de l'imperatif categorique, celle qui dit de "respecter l'homme en moi et en autrui". Dans cette formule, nous ne sommes pas dans la pure universalis, mais deja dans la presence d'autrui.' In *Entretiens avec 'Le Monde'. I. Philosophies* (Paris: Editions la Decouverte, 1984), 146.

8 *Totalite et Infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 33. Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 63.

9 ibid., 176-9; trans. 201-4.

10 *L'ecriture et la difference* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), 145. Trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge, 1978), 98.

11 'Ma tache ne consiste pas a construire l'ethique: j'essaie seulement d'en chercher le sens . . . . On peut sans doute construire une ethique en fonction de ce que je viens de dire, mais ce n'est pas la mon theme propre. *Ethique et infini* (Paris: Fayard/France Culture, 1982), 85.

12 *Totalite et Infini*, 281; trans. 304.

13 cf. 'The chiasmus: Levinas, Derrida and the ethical demand for deconstruction', *Textual Practice*, 3, 1 (1989), 91-106.

14 *Alterites* (Paris: Editions Osiris, 1986). All subsequent page references given in the text.