

# **THE ABANDONED FIANCÉE, OR AGAINST SUBJECTION**

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*Abstract:*

In this chapter, I argue – in the wake of Michèle Le Doeuff – against the valorisation of subjection that has taken hold of modern theology. Analysing Graham Ward's *Christ and Culture*, I contend that the recent penchant for an ethics of kenosis in religious thought leads ultimately – despite explicit protestations to the contrary – to a conception of subjectivity as constituted in servitude before Christ. However, this criticism is not – *pace* Ward – to apply secular, Enlightenment values to a distinct post-secular realm; rather, in the second half of the chapter, I enter into dialogue with Le Doeuff's criticisms of Søren Kierkegaard, in order to suggest that co-existing with Kierkegaard's misogyny towards his abandoned fiancée, there is also an adherence in his work to a Le Doeuffean ethics of friendship. Thus, I conclude, Christianity is not incompatible with modernity.

This chapter is concerned with conceiving Christianity in ways incommensurable with the subjection of women. It, thus, attempts to unmask such subjection in its different guises – sexual, ethical and theological. I contend that post-Barthian theology with its celebration of the infinite difference separating God and humanity often retraces the very logic by which women have historically been oppressed. Human subjectivity, it is claimed, is possible only in subjection to a higher being. This, I argue, is *not* a necessary theological position.

Thus, in the first part of the article, I briefly explore two *competing* ethical models underlying the rest of the article: G.W.F. Hegel's master/slave dialectic and Michèle Le Doeuff's avowal of friendship. Second, I examine developments in post-Barthian theology (Graham Ward's *Christ and Culture* serves as representative), arguing that the anthropology developed here is grounded in subjection. Finally, I move to counter this trend with a reading of Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* which gestures towards an *alternative model of Christian ethics*.

## 1. THE FRIEND, THE SLAVE AND THE LOVER

The first chapter of the second part of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* – 'Independence and Dependence of Self-consciousness' – has left a remarkable legacy on modern thought. While all subjects, Hegel claims, *desire* mutual recognition in order to communally come to self-consciousness, this is never immediately possible. Instead, it is only through being subjected that one can initially become a subject: coming to self-consciousness is the privilege of the slave – the dominated are to be envied for they are the real humans.<sup>1</sup> It, of course, needs no great insight to see how such an ethical model can be used as a justification for the worst forms of oppression

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<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the lord fails to achieve self-consciousness despite subjecting the slave for that very purpose. That is because the slave becomes as 'unessential consciousness', 'a thing', which – as 'quite different from an independent consciousness' – is unable to give the lord the recognition he requires for self-consciousness. The slave, on the other hand, achieves self-consciousness precisely by becoming this 'unessential consciousness', because the 'dread' she feels at the lord's power 'rids [her] of [her] attachment to natural existence in every single detail'. The slave who has 'experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord' is she who withdraws from her former dependence on things and so becomes free. Hence, Hegel writes, 'Fear of the lord is indeed the beginning of wisdom'. (Hegel 1977 §192-5)

of both women and men. Yet, despite this, first existentialism and then psychoanalysis made the master/slave dialectic one of their central images<sup>2</sup>, and in this article, I will show the crucial role it has also played in theological thought. Following in the wake of Karl Barth, it has become fashionable for this model to be applied to the God relation – the true human is he who is subjected to an all-powerful Lord. This tendency has been most evident in the ‘ethics of kenosis’ propounded in Radical Orthodox circles, and it is no surprise that they look to Hegel for a modern doctrine of kenosis.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely this application of Hegel that I challenge in this article.

Against the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, I oppose Michèle Le Doeuff’s ‘model of radical friendship’ for the development of subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> My article will revolve around the following (long) passage taken from the end of her *The Sex of Knowing*, which adds a third protagonist, Kierkegaard, into the mix:

After *Hipparchia’s Choice* [Le Doeuff’s previous book] was published, Gilles Deleuze wrote to tell me he hoped I would at some point write about the figure of the fiancée in Kierkegaard’s writings.[<sup>5</sup>] I confess I saw no urgent reason to comment upon this personage, a young girl courted by a Pygmalion who, by abandoning her, subtly completes the process of endowing her with a mind. Or rather, I would not see the interest of it if it were not possible to connect this theme to the ending of *The Second Sex*. For Simone de Beauvoir gives the last word to Rimbaud: ‘man... having let her go, she, too, will be a poet’, a strange idea when one thinks of it, especially at the end of *The Second Sex*... Simone de Beauvoir in 1949, Kierkegaard, Rimbaud, and perhaps Deleuze seem to admit that a woman finds her way only in a state of abandonment – for which the initiative must come from the man. And what next? Can we count on the one here named ‘the man’ to leave us to our destinies, whether by abandoning us or otherwise? The figure of the

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<sup>2</sup> For feminist readings of these appropriations, see Butler 1987 and Anderson 2006.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Ward 2005 191-4.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, Le Doeuff is not at all concerned with religion in her writings, but she has been sympathetic to their application in philosophy of religion. See Le Doeuff 2007 320.

<sup>5</sup> Le Doeuff excerpts an initial letter from Deleuze in the new ‘Postscript’ to the Second Edition of *Hipparchia’s Choice* (2007 319); however, the rest of the correspondence (including his reference to the fiancée) has yet to be published. Deleuze does, however, mention Le Doeuff in reference to the figure of Kierkegaard’s fiancée in his last work co-authored with Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (Deleuze and Guattari 1994 71&222) However, in a critical discussion of this passage, Le Doeuff has disassociated it completely from Deleuze’s letters to her, since, she maintains, the published reference is tainted by Guattari’s psychoanalysis (2003b 364-8). She writes, ‘If one compares this passage to Deleuze’s letter, one must think that these pages of *What is Philosophy?* owe more to Guattari, and so to the psychoanalyst, than to my philosopher-correspondent.’ (367. My translation.) For this reason, I refrain (for the most part) from discussing *What is Philosophy?*

rejected fiancée suggests that we are dependent on the other sex for the freedom we may obtain, and that freedom comes through separation from them. All in all, it denies a woman's capacity to take the initiative for establishing even the ever-so-slight distance that emancipation implies. Once again, in this story man thinks he is God; he is the creator who puts the finishing touches to his creation by leaving his creation on her own.<sup>6</sup>

This passage, I contend, should be read as follows. Deleuze had found in Kierkegaard's work an ethics congenial to Le Doeuff's own stance – an alternative to the Hegelian passage to subjectivity through struggle and subjection; and so he proposes it to her as a more congenial substitute. Le Doeuff, however, disagrees: it is but a more subtle version of the same Hegelian dialectic – woman's subjectivity is achieved only in utter dependence to an absolute subjectivity, man or God. The abandoned fiancée is still a slave, even if a slave who achieves self-consciousness on her own.

Key to Le Doeuff's rejection of the master/slave dialectic and its more subtle manifestations is her rejection of the notion of otherness (on which Hegelian dialectic is based). Against the crude duality of same and other, Le Doeuff (following De Beauvoir) posits 'the ideal of reciprocity' (2007 107-8).<sup>7</sup> "No morality is possible without at least the principle of reciprocity, without mutual recognition" (187), she writes. While for Hegel such 'mutual recognition' is merely an ideal, Le Doeuff – 'incorrigible meliorist that I am' (2003 68) – believes it reachable.<sup>8</sup> Subjection is not necessary; equality is a possibility.

How such equality is possible is described in the continuation of the above passage which resumes a topic considered earlier in *The Sex of Knowing* – Harriet Taylor's relations with John Stuart Mill:

However far we go back in the history of their relationship, Harriet Taylor never was a disciple of John Stuart Mill. Still less was she his creation... Each stood up to the other, neither was completely under the 'influence' of, or 'incorporated' by, the other, but each had to defend her/himself against the

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<sup>6</sup> Le Doeuff 2003a 217.

<sup>7</sup> This, of course, provides the basis for Le Doeuff's critique of feminisms of difference, especially Irigaray's (2007 225-9).

<sup>8</sup> That is, Le Doeuff's rejection of Hegel's privileging of the slave need not stop her from endorsing other more optimistic feminist readings of the master/slave dialectic as a means to reciprocity.

other, each had a slight tendency to want too much from the other. (2003 217)

This is the true alternative – an *equality* of autonomous individuals reciprocally caring for and challenging the other to new achievements.<sup>9</sup> Friendship – and so dialogue – not bondage – and so heteronomy – is the way to self-consciousness for Le Doeuff.

In this article, therefore, I will consider Le Doeuff's model of radical friendship in opposition to both Radical Orthodoxy's wholesale appropriation of the master/slave dialectic and Kierkegaard's more subtle one. However, I will argue that the only way to escape the logic of Radical Orthodoxy is not by opposing outright Christian ethics with Le Doeuff's unabashedly secular type, *but rather by finding in Christianity the resources for friendship*. Such resources I will suggest are hinted at in the second chapter of *Philosophical Fragments* ('God as Teacher and Saviour (A Poetical Venture)') where Kierkegaard – still within the theological project – describes personhood as arising out of the reciprocal love of equal individuals.

## 2. ETHICS OF KENOSIS

### 2.1 FROM BARTH TO COAKLEY

Karl Barth's Second Edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* has provided the touchstone by which all subsequent theology has measured itself. The work is notoriously founded on the 'infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity' (Barth 1933 10)<sup>10</sup>, between the finitude of man's existence and God's infinitude. God's lordship resides in his absolutely autonomous mastery over human affairs; his power is 'the supremacy of a negation' – 'an irresistible and all-embracing dissolution of the world of time and things and men' (91). In face of this supremacy, the only

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<sup>9</sup> Le Doeuff rejects relations of dependence for a community of free persons (see 2003a 39 and 2007 xii). The foundations of such a move are to be found in her critique of institutional frameworks of education, in which the pupil is tied to one, dominant master, and access to knowledge can only occur through him. This has led, Le Doeuff contends, to the 'Heloïse complex' in which women are forced to learn about their master rather than their field (1989 104-28). It is to counteract this tendency Le Doeuff suggests pluralizing pedagogic relations (away from pupils dependent on *one* master) to a community of free aspirants working together to reach the truth (2007 59); this 'allows us definitively to rid ourselves of the binding mode of the master-disciple relationship', for, with 'plurality', 'the other's mastery fades away.' (170)

<sup>10</sup> It is significant to note that this phrase is, in fact, taken from Kierkegaard.

ethical stance possible is submission<sup>11</sup>, founded on Paul's exhortation to the Romans to fashion themselves as 'obedient slaves' (6:16). This is seen most clearly in Barth's conception of grace: 'Grace is the divine possibility for men, which robs them, as men, of their own possibilities.' (Barth 1933 200) It signifies, Barth continues, 'the existential submission to God's contradiction of all that we ourselves are or are not'. In short, 'Both sin and grace are existentially conditions of slavery... Slavery defines the totality of our individual human existence.' (216)

Barth's position, however, would be irrelevant – if not repugnant – to feminist philosophers of religion, if it were not for Sarah Coakley's work on submission. Coakley has brought a version of the Barthian God – Lord over an enslaved creation – back into play for non-misogynistic theology.

Coakley attempts to 'bring feminism and Christianity together' (Coakley 1996a 84) through a revalorisation of the concept of *kenosis*. She states, '[I] offer a defence of some version of kenosis as not only compatible with feminism, but vital to a distinctively Christian manifestation of it.' (83)

Kenosis' long and chequered history in Christian theology begins with Paul's letter to the Philippians:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born like other human beings. And being recognised as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and graciously bestowed on him the name which is above every name... (2:5-11)

According to Paul, Christ humbled himself in obedience to the Father, and in so enslaving himself, became the true exemplar of faith – that is, the Father will only glorify those who are subjected in Christ-like slavery before him. Coakley takes up this call to subjection. She writes in debate with the post-Christian theologian Daphne Hampson, 'For Daphne, it seems, *any* sort of "dependence" on God... can be nothing but "heteronomy". Whereas, for me, the *right* sort of dependence on God is not only empowering but freeing.' (Coakley 1996b 170) By emptying oneself in dependence

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<sup>11</sup> Although even this is tempered by the fact that submission – as human – is inadequate.

before God – what Coakley calls, ‘a regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine’ (1996a 107) – one becomes a truly human subject.

Of course, Coakley’s defence of kenosis is far more nuanced than Barth’s celebration of slavery – she realises for example, ‘What a perilous path we are treading here.’ (106) Moreover, in the preface to *Powers and Submissions*, Coakley criticises the ‘valorisation of Christic “vulnerability”... found predominantly in the works of Karl Barth’. She writes, ‘Such a strategy merely reinstates in legitimised doctrinal form, the sexual, physical and emotional abuse that feminism seeks to expose.’ (Coakley 2002 xiv-v) On the contrary, Coakley herself tries to *avoid* conceiving kenosis ‘in terms of victimology’ (33), approvingly citing E.M. Townes’ distinction ‘between abusive “suffering” on the one hand, and a productive or empowering form of “pain” on the other.’ (1996a 109) Coakley searches for the “right” kenosis’ (84) that avoids non-consensual exploitation and rape in favour of ‘willed effacement to a gentle omnipotence’ (110). There is a ‘right’ form of dependence which avoids the more blatant pitfalls of Barth’s position.

Coakley’s influential work in this field has produced a number of imitations, many of which have not been quite so careful in discriminating between ‘suffering’ and ‘pain’. Foremost among these works is Graham Ward’s *Christ and Culture*, and it is to this I now turn.

## 2.1 WARD’S KENOTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Graham Ward’s self-professed intention in *Christ and Culture* is to break out of the Barthian paradigm by showing Christ to be a ‘social animal’ – a human subject communing among other subjects, rather than a lord above them. Yet, I argue, the means by which he attempts to achieve this (invoking a Coakley-inspired ethics of kenosis) actually impede him from this end; Ward, in fact, fails to free himself from the Barthian celebration of subjection due to his use of kenosis.

Ward introduces his Christology as an attack on Barth’s dialectical method (2005 7), since it is precisely the latter’s allegiance to this method which evacuates Christ out from all human relations. For Barth, ‘the work of Christ cannot be characterised in terms of the ordinary human operations of [the] world’; that is, Barth’s subscription to the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ ensures that, in becoming



like humanity, Christ always remains radically different from it. In this regard, Ward quotes Barth himself, ‘Those who believe in Jesus Christ will never forget for a single moment that the true and actual being of reconciled man has its place in that Other who is strange and different from them’. Hence, Ward concludes, ‘Barth’s Jesus Christ is not a social animal; he is an other, an alien’. (9-12)

This is problematic for Ward not just because of its theological inadequacy; there are ethical implications as well. To raise Christ above all human relations is to ignore the ‘relational’ nature of Christian faith, and so fall back into the atomism of *modern* thought: ‘Christ becomes the perfect expression of Cartesian subjectivity: autonomous, self-determining, self-defining, the autonomous subject of a number of distinct properties or predicates.’ Moreover, because Christ is also dialectically other than man, no human individual can possess such subjectivity herself. Being a fully-formed subject is the prerogative of the divine, man has yet to achieve this state. Christ is, therefore, the absolute, perfectly formed subject we, as unformed ethical minors, are subjected to. In Barth’s work, Ward maintains, ‘relations between God and human beings appear autocratic’. (8-12).

In contrast to this, Ward himself claims, faith ‘is an engagement that can take many different forms, not just passive obedience.’ (8) In this way, he attempts a ‘sociology’ of believing in which Christ is brought back into a network of relations. Ward attempts to take Christ’s *humanity* seriously.

Yet, ultimately Ward fails – he remains caught in the Barthian paradigm of autocratic relations – because the fundamental category he uses to refigure Christology is kenosis.<sup>12</sup> He writes,

In the descent Christ empties himself, makes himself void. The verb *keno* is related to the adjective *kenos* meaning ‘void’, ‘devoid of truth’ or ‘without a gift’. With the doctrine of kenosis, then, we investigate exactly what it is to be incarnate. Put systematically, Christology grounds a theological anthropology. (184)

Christology grounds anthropology and both are figured around the central notion of kenosis, the making of oneself devoid of truth: ‘The fundamental experience of human existence [is] one of dispossession’ (213). All human relations take place

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to deny that Ward has much to offer feminist philosophy of religion; his reorientation of religious thought towards the body with the new categories this entails (especially ‘transcorporeality’) will, it is certain, be very influential.

within a 'kenotic economy' in which the subject remains 'in the accusative' (218). Christ's obedient self-voiding on his Father's command is the model on which being human must be founded. Individuals must imitate Christ by dispossessing themselves before God, by subjecting themselves to Him.<sup>13</sup>

This anthropology is taken to its extreme in Ward's discussion of suffering in the final chapter, 'Suffering and Incarnation: A Christian Politics'. This essay contrasts postmodern and Christian conceptions of suffering: both are fundamentally kenotic; yet postmodernity's kenosis is deathly, while Christianity's is life-affirming due to God's guarantee of a corresponding glorification. Thus, in postmodernity, whether it is the infinite deferral of the sign, the endless sublation of love or a self never at rest, all its forms display a 'sacrificial logic', 'a continual wounding presented as a perpetual kenosis'. However, this kenosis is 'sado-masochistic' (251-2) precisely because it is infinite: *jouissance*, meaning and stability never arrive, but are *always à venir* – man (and it is *man*) is 'suspended on the brink of orgasm without being allowed the final release of coming' (263). Christianity concurs with postmodernity in discovering 'a certain suffering... endemic to incarnate living' (262). All human existence is for Ward kenotic: 'Suffering as a passion [is] written into creation.' However, where the Christian understanding of suffering diverges is in God's guarantee that 'suffering [is] also a glorification'.<sup>14</sup> The 'primordial suffering' of life is, from a Christian viewpoint, identified as 'a continuation, a fleshing out and a completing of the suffering of Christ': it is the *imitatio Christi*. (254-5) Therefore, just as Christ subjected himself in order to be exalted, so too are we – by participating in Christ's suffering – promised subsequent glorification: '*Kenoo* is also and simultaneously *plero*. The wounds of love are the openings of grace.' (266) Suffering is valorised for the Christian in the knowledge that it is merely half of the movement which will end in glorification.<sup>15</sup>

Through this move, what Coakley (following Townes) labelled 'abusive suffering' is justified eschatologically. For example, Ward's statement, 'only God can discern and distinguish what is true suffering' (260), forsakes any human responsibility for recognising and so preventing violence. Suffering is intrinsic to life,

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<sup>13</sup> 'The Christic operation is not apolitical; it concerns power and its authorisation. The oneness concerns the submission of all social positions (and the politics of identity) to Christ, and the new orders of power (and its polity) that are engendered by this submission.' (89)

<sup>14</sup> That is, while postmodernity can comprehend the incarnation and the crucifixion, it is unable to come to terms with the resurrection.

<sup>15</sup> As we shall see in the final footnote, there are theological problems with this view as well as ethical.

and, even if it seems ‘abusive’ (which we can never ourselves be sure of), we have to put up with it passively – without condemning it – in the name of imitating Christ! As Ward himself acknowledges with understatement, ‘We are coming dangerously close to a theological justification for suffering.’ (262)

Ward also develops the very same ethics of kenosis in his appropriation of Irigaray’s work. Here, he argues that *sexual identity* is only achieved in subjection to Christ. Ward writes (mimicking Althusser), ‘In order to create a subject there needs to be a reified Subject, an Absolute Subject who can “interpellate” the individual’, and then goes the one step further in quoting Irigaray: ‘To posit a gender, a God is necessary; *guaranteeing the infinite*... As long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity.’ (131) Ward then appropriates this basic model<sup>16</sup>: female subjectivity is constituted in recognising a being which exceeds her. In consequence, sexual difference is founded on ontological difference: sexuality (as well as humanity generally) is produced in kenosis; woman becomes woman in acknowledging her inferiority before Christ.<sup>17</sup> As Ward proclaims,

The encounter with Christ... will install an eroticism that determines the nature of a manifold difference – a theological difference (Trinitarian), an ontological difference (between the Uncreated and Creation) and a sexual difference (between the symbolics of the phallus and the two lips). (157-8)

Ward’s anthropology is, therefore, a ‘celebration’ of difference (151). Yet, as we have already seen, *such difference is always kenotic*; it is the difference between a God who commands and a humanity which makes itself void before Him.<sup>18</sup> This is true of sexual difference, no less than ontological difference. Not only must woman *as subject* empty herself before God, so must she *as woman*: Ward’s theory of gender regresses to a state in which woman can only exist in subjection. Difference is always

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<sup>16</sup> There are three major divergences in Ward’s account: first, he wishes to eschew any talk of absolute subjects in favour of trinitarian operations; second, he argues that Christ himself is able to adequately be God for both male and female sexualities, and third, Ward’s conception of transcendence remains, despite the influence of Irigaray, unashamedly vertical.

<sup>17</sup> Pamela Sue Anderson has similarly criticised Irigaray’s views from a Le Doeuffean perspective. She rebukes Irigaray for her ‘failure to attempt to establish an egalitarian reciprocity between autonomous subjects... result[ing] in an asymmetrical relation between one subject and another.’ (Anderson 2006 45) See also Anderson 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Thus, Ward argues that (while ‘I can understand Christian feminists wanting no part in an idiom that aligned femininity with submission’) through ‘an exploration of the relationship between kenosis, love, difference-in-relation and the Trinity’, ‘submission might then be read... as expressing the active pursuit of obedience to Christ, of being “interpellated” by Christ – an “interpellation” that all Christians must respond to, desirously.’ (152)

kenotic for Ward, which means that – in line with the Barthian paradigm – it always involves oppressive power relations.

### 2.3 AN INITIAL RESPONSE

How can we get beyond Ward, and finally leave behind the Barthian ‘autocratic’ relations that an ethics of kenosis enforces?

One attempt at an answer has been vociferously given by Daphne Hampson, who, especially in her debate with Coakley, has been critical of ethical uses of kenosis. Thus, she writes in *Theology and Feminism*:

That it [kenosis] should have featured so prominently in Christian thought is perhaps an indication of the fact that men have understood what the male problem, in thinking in terms of hierarchy and domination, has been. It may well be a model which men need to appropriate and which may helpfully be built into the male understanding of God. But... for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm. (Hampson 1990 155)

Kenosis as a way of disempowering subjects may well be of use to those who are prone to be too powerful, but to those who have historically been oppressed it is entirely unhelpful. This is not to say (as Hampson makes clear in her ‘Response’ to Coakley) that it is rather the opposite – empowerment – that is required; instead, Hampson claims the binary of powerful and powerless – the master and slave of Hegelian dialectics – is very the pitfall which has to be avoided, but to which talk of kenosis succumbs. Hampson writes,

I do not think that it is either for us to be ‘in control’, having power and self-sufficiency; or, on the other hand, therefore, needing to be broken open, vulnerable and defenceless, inviting the invasion of others... Feminist women, as I understand it, are wanting to deconstruct the dichotomy of power and powerlessness. (Hampson 1996b 122)<sup>19</sup>

For Hampson, the true ethical ideal is of subjects ‘both centred and open’, of individuals working together as autonomous but related. This recalls Le Doeuff’s model of radical friendship, in which Mill and Taylor collaborated in a caring relationship towards both their mutual and their individual ends. Hampson writes,

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<sup>19</sup> There remains a question concerning Hampson’s understanding of the subtleties of Coakley’s conception of kenosis (see Coakley 2002 32), but this – as we shall see – is not relevant to the basic thrust of my argument.

The feminist paradigm is not powerfulness, nor that of the self-divestment of power which is kenosis, but rather (what is not envisaged within the masculinist dichotomy), the mutual empowerment of persons. (1996b 122)

Hegel's dialectic of power relations is rejected in favour of Le Doeuff's ethical friendship.

However, Hampson is forced by the logic of her own argument to go one step further, and become *post-Christian*. This is because, in rejecting the dichotomy between power and powerlessness, that is, the relation between God the Father and his kenotic subjects, Hampson believes herself to be rejecting the foundations of Christianity itself. Thus, Hampson claims, 'Christianity, *by definition*, is not a religion which can allow for full human autonomy. Heteronomy is built into it.' (1996a 2; my emphasis) As such, the master/slave dialectic is an *intrinsic* aspect of the Christian belief system: 'This dichotomy has been written into Christianity with its talk of God as powerful on the one hand, and as giving up on power in... kenosis on the other' (1996b 121). Christianity as such must be discarded.

It is precisely this move, however, that is Hampson's weak-spot, for in distancing her own ethical model from Christianity, she makes it *irrelevant to discussions of Christianity*. The dichotomy she sets up between a Christian ethics of kenosis on the one hand (where the subject is dependent on God) and a post-Christian model of friendship on the other (where the subject retains an element of autonomy), is precisely the same binary employed by recent movements within theology such as Radical Orthodoxy (of which Ward is a representative); yet, while Hampson chooses to be post-Christian, Radical Orthodox theologians choose Christianity and thereby claim to choose – beyond any external criticism – subjection. That is, Radical Orthodoxy chooses subjection in full knowledge of the criticisms levied at it, for such criticisms, the movement maintains, can only occur from *outside the Christian paradigm* – from Enlightenment philosophies unable to grasp the truth on which their religion is founded.<sup>20</sup> Radical Orthodoxy rejects all that is not Christian; thus, it can safely ignore Hampson's post-Christian criticisms.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hampson explicitly affirms that her brand of feminism is to be understood 'as the natural working out of the Enlightenment.' (1996a 1) For Radical Orthodox criticism of the Enlightenment, see (for especial relevance to this chapter) Ward 2005 60 and 115.

<sup>21</sup> The same can be said of using Michèle Le Doeuff to criticise Christian ethics, since she avowedly writes in the 'spirit of secularism' (Quoted in Anderson 2007 385).

Therefore, in order to challenge an ethics of kenosis and the subjection it leads to another line of attack is required. Thus, in the second half of this article, I will attempt to show that kenosis is not necessary *even within Christianity itself*; that is, Søren Kierkegaard – a favourite of Radical Orthodoxy – while on the one hand exemplifying the logic of kenosis (and the misogyny implicit in it) in the ethical model he employs of the ‘abandoned fiancée’, on the other hand points beyond it towards the Le Doeuffean alternative of radical friendship. In the next section, therefore, I will (in part) be arguing against Le Doeuff’s characterisation of Kierkegaard quoted at the beginning of the chapter: in one passage of his oeuvre at least, I will claim, Kierkegaard gestures at a Christian conception of radical friendship untainted by subjection.

### 3. KIERKEGAARD’S ABANDONED FIANCÉE

Søren Kierkegaard straddles the divide between a theological celebration of kenotic difference and an Enlightenment affirmation of equality. On the one hand, he has been appropriated by theologians ever since Barth as a prophet of ‘counter-modernity’. Thus, the Radical Orthodoxy movement has dubbed Kierkegaard one of the ‘great Christian critics of the Enlightenment’.<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard is, in this regard, exemplary of theological affirmers of subjection, and, as we shall see, such subjection reveals its explicitly misogynistic foundations in aspects of his work.

Yet, on the other hand, I will argue, passages in Kierkegaard’s works can be read as continuing – rather than opposing – the Enlightenment tradition of equality. On this view, Kierkegaard erects an ethics in which subjectivity is *not* achieved by means of a dialectical struggle between a powerful God and subjected humans (in their infinite qualitative distinction from each other), but through the project of cooperative friendship. Yet, most significantly of all, Kierkegaard achieves this still *within* a recognisably Christian paradigm. Subjection is *not* the only way for Christian ethics.

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<sup>22</sup> Milbank *et al* 1999 3. See Shakespeare 2005 133-48.

Kierkegaard is tactically useful: he undoes the exclusive binary Radical Orthodoxy wishes to erect between modernity and post-secularity; he straddles both camps, and so points to the places where the two become reconcilable. Thus, in this section, I will first concentrate on Kierkegaard's work as Hegelian, that is, as paradigmatic of an ethics of subjection. This section will outline the model of the abandoned fiancée – a nuanced version of the same basic master/slave dialectic – which Le Doeuff accuses Kierkegaard of propounding. Second, however, I consider a passage which goes beyond Hegel; a passage – I contend – which illuminates a Christian model of ethical friendship. Here, Kierkegaard exceeds Le Doeuff's characterisation of him, and abandons his abandoned fiancée.

### 3.1 THE ROLE OF THE FIANCÉE

Let us revisit Le Doeuff's characterisation of Kierkegaard's fiancée. She calls her, 'This personage, a young girl courted by a Pygmalion who, by abandoning her, subtly completes the process of endowing her with a mind', and continues,

The figure of the rejected fiancée suggests that we are dependent on the other sex for the freedom we may obtain, and that freedom comes through separation from them. All in all, it denies a woman's capacity to take the initiative for establishing even the ever-so-slight distance that emancipation implies. Once again, in this story man thinks he is God; he is the creator who puts the finishing touches to his creation by leaving his creation on her own.

There is obviously a biographical aspect to Le Doeuff's criticisms. Kierkegaard's treatment of Regine Olsen can easily be slotted into the above characterisation; the mute unformed girl brought to happiness only through the man's self-sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> Man is the 'creator' who controls not only the relationship, but the girl's own life course. Regine is the creation Kierkegaard deigns to give life to.<sup>24</sup>

However, it is not biographical judgement that concerns me here, and one need not look far to find the very same pattern at work in Kierkegaard's aesthetic writings. For example, the banquet scene in *Stages on Life's Way* is infamous for its

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Kierkegaard 1967 vol. 5 233.

<sup>24</sup> In her criticisms of Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* (see note 5), on the other hand, Le Doeuff makes the contrary criticism that Kierkegaard's fiancée *is divorced from reality*: she is 'a product of Kierkegaard's phantasmagory, not a woman among others of flesh and blood, who, as alive, have to withstand debates with what surrounds them.' (2003b 367. My translation.) Kierkegaard abstracts from the concrete conditions of real women's lives, in order to dream up a de-realised version of the feminine.

treatment of women as an other to man (Kierkegaard 1988 21-86).<sup>25</sup> As Wanda Warren Berry puts it, ‘This aesthetic orientation is fixated by absolutising the difference between *himself* as male and the *other* as female.’ (Berry 1995 206) George Pattison also comments on the misogyny implicit in this dichotomising, ‘Woman as the “Other” of man is robbed of all independent human status, deprived of identity and denied the possibility of becoming conscious of her own being.’ (Pattison 1987 433) In his aesthetic works, to quote Pattison again, Kierkegaard becomes ‘one of the most significant representatives of the anti-feminine principle in Western religious thought’ (431).

‘The Seducer’s Diary’ in *Either/Or* is perhaps the most notorious example of Kierkegaard’s misogyny; what is more, this piece displays, more than any other, the workings of the model of the abandoned fiancée. Here, Johannes acts as an absolute subject – complete and omnipotent – freely deciding the fate of an unformed woman. It is Johannes who chooses to bring the woman up to his level of subjectivity (‘elevating her’ (Kierkegaard 1987 337)), to educate her towards self-consciousness. Johannes is, as Le Doeuff correctly perceives, God or Pygmalion, sculpting his creation to his own ends. Cordelia, on the other hand, remains the object-like Other, utterly dependent on the man’s action to gain personhood; in Johannes’ words, she ‘is invisible... and only becomes visible, as it were, by the interposition of another.’ (425) Moreover, Cordelia herself writes in a similar vein, ‘I always think of him, just as every thought I think is *only through him*.’ (309; my emphasis) In the end, Cordelia, by her own admission, can ‘rejoice solely in being your [Johannes’] slave.’ (312)

Such a model is an obvious form of sexual subjection. However, Kierkegaard complicates matters: Johannes is teaching Cordelia autonomy and freedom (‘I shall make her free’ (384)), so, therefore, cannot really ‘teach’ her at all. Johannes quite categorically states,

She must owe me nothing, for she must be free... Although she will belong to me, yet it must not be in the unbeautiful way of resting upon me as a burden. She must be neither an appendage in the physical sense, nor an obligation in the moral sense. Between us two, only freedom’s own game will prevail. (360)

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<sup>25</sup> The views expressed in this dialogue are critiqued by Simone de Beauvoir (1997 175 and 218). However, they have also recently been discussed more positively by Christine Battersby (1998 156-65).



Such is the paradox on which Kierkegaard's more subtle form of subjection is based: *Cordelia must become free on her own, but only on Johannes' grace*. 'I complete her thought,' Johannes writes, 'which nevertheless is completed within itself.' (380)<sup>26</sup> There is almost a theological dual perspective by which, on one level, Cordelia achieves full personhood herself, but, on another, Johannes is the secondary cause. Johannes expresses this through an artistic analogy:

It is as if behind a person, who with an unsure hand hastily made a few strokes in a drawing, there stood another person who every time made something vivid and finished out of it. She herself is surprised, and yet it is as if it belonged to her. (420)<sup>27</sup>

Johannes is the divine overarching subject who guides Cordelia towards self-consciousness, even when she believes it to be her own doing. Woman is subjected to the male absolute subjectivity, even if it is a subtle, disguised subjection of which the woman herself is ignorant. Thus, Johannes and Cordelia's engagement is an imperceptible tutorial in becoming a subject, and, when Cordelia herself breaks the engagement, she shows she has finally reached freedom; yet, it forever remains a freedom under the premeditated control of an omniscient male consciousness. Cordelia achieves personhood as an autonomous agent, but at the same time, always, she rules herself only by means of a man's indiscernible rule.

As an aesthetic figure, Johannes is of course criticised by Kierkegaard<sup>28</sup>; yet the model of the abandoned fiancée exemplified by 'The Seducer's Diary' Kierkegaard finds harder to abandon. In fact, I wish now to suggest that this same model of the abandoned fiancée not only grounds the obviously misogynistic aesthetic writings, but also plays a crucial part in Kierkegaard's *religious writings*. The crux of my argument rests on a passage in *Practice in Christianity*. In it, Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard's Christian pseudonym) demonstrates the necessity of indirect communication in matters of faith; thus the section is entitled, 'To deny direct

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<sup>26</sup> This is, of course, a gender-specific version of Kierkegaard's celebrated indirect communication, in which the aim is 'to stand alone – by another's help' (1967 Vol. 1 280); that is, as 'one person cannot have authority in relation to another' (272), 'the teacher and the learner are separated from each other in order to exist' (288): the teacher abandons his pupil to freedom. Johannes himself admits to using 'secret communication' (1987 399) and 'indirect methods' (423-4).

<sup>27</sup> Notice how the abstract language of persons takes on gendered pronouns as if it were self-evident that the 'unsure hand' belongs to the female. The 'Diary' ends with the following comment: 'If I were a god, I would do for her what Neptune did for a nymph: transform her into a man.' (445) Even a fully self-conscious woman is not quite a man!

<sup>28</sup> For a complete survey of such criticisms, see Dewey 1995.

communication is to require *faith*.’ (Kierkegaard 1991 140) According to Anti-Climacus, whereas *direct* communication enforces what it teaches so that there is neither freedom nor choice in accepting the teaching (that is, the recipient of direct communication cannot be *responsible* for her views), ‘faith is a choice, certainly not direct reception’ (141).

To illustrate this, Anti-Climacus hits upon a pertinent analogy: ‘That to deny direct communication is to require faith can be simply pointed out in purely human situations... Let us examine this and to that end take the relationship between two lovers.’ To begin with, the lovers communicate both their love for each other and their subsequent acknowledgement of each other’s love, by means of direct assurances; however, Anti-Climacus continues, the male lover (and the text is gender-specific here) wants to really ‘test the beloved’, and find out whether she does, in fact, have faith in his love:

What does he do? He cuts off all direct communication, changes himself into a duplexity; as a possibility it looks deceptive, as if he possibly could be just as much a deceiver as the faithful lover. This is making oneself into a riddle... In the first instance he asks directly: Do you believe me? In the second instance he makes himself into a question... The purpose of the latter method is to make the beloved disclose herself in a choice; that is, out of this duplexity she must choose which character she believes is the true one... It is disclosed since he does not help her at all; on the contrary, by means of the duplexity he has placed her entirely alone without any assistance whatsoever. (141-2)

It is in a very similar way, Anti-Climacus goes on to state, Christ demands faith from his followers:

The God-man must require faith and in order to require faith must deny direct communication... As the God-man he is qualitatively different from any man, and therefore he must deny direct communication; he must *require* faith and require that he become the *object of faith*. (142-3)

Christ is comparable to the deceitful lover who abandons his fiancée to allow her to choose, and so become a person.<sup>29</sup> The implication, I contend, is that, in a way not

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<sup>29</sup> Climacus writes in the *Postscript* in this vein, ‘No anonymous author can more slyly hide himself, and no maieutic can more carefully recede from a direct relation than God can.’ (Kierkegaard 1992 243) In this regard, Christ plays an important role (second only to Socrates) in Kierkegaard’s unfinished lectures on indirect communication; Kierkegaard writes (confirming the views of Anti-Climacus), ‘Christ continued with the indirect method until the last, for the fact that he was incognito,

dissimilar to Johannes the Seducer, Christ operates by ‘duplexity’: he is the omniscient male consciousness who orchestrates his disciples’ free choices. The task is the same for both the seducer and the God-man: ‘To deceive into the truth.’ (1967 vol. 1 288) Those who disclose their faith in a free act of will are Christ’s abandoned fiancées.

Humanity is the Other – the woman – to Christ’s absolute subjectivity. In Kierkegaardian anthropology, we are dependent on Christ to become free ourselves. Just as in Barth, Coakley and Ward, humanity is the slave who can only achieve self-consciousness in subjection before the Lord. However, unlike these post-Barthian theologians, Kierkegaard at first glance seems to have escaped the Hegelian paradigm: Kierkegaard does not follow Barth in celebrating passive obedience, nor does he follow Ward in recommending an ethics of kenosis; instead, Kierkegaard advocates autonomy, rejecting any direct attempt to impinge on the subject’s freedom of choice. Yet, despite this superficial incongruence, Kierkegaard’s model of the abandoned fiancée still remains a subtle form of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic: freedom is achieved only under the premeditated control of an absolute, dominant consciousness.<sup>30</sup> Le Doeuff is correct in rejecting Deleuze’s suggestion of the usefulness of Kierkegaard, for the Kierkegaardian subject remains the Hegelian subject incognito.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.2 FAIRYTALE ETHICS

I wish to end this article, however, by mitigating these conclusions somewhat, for I think Kierkegaard also points beyond the dialectical ethics of the master/slave towards a form of Christian life more conducive to Le Doeuff’s radical friendship. To demonstrate this, I will concentrate on the second chapter of *Philosophical*

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in the guise of a servant, makes all his direct communication nevertheless indirect, as Anti-Climacus correctly notes someplace in *Practice in Christianity*, II’ (1967 Vol. 1 316).

<sup>30</sup> Battersby (with differing conclusions) has also drawn attention to the master/slave dialectic as the background to Kierkegaardian seduction (160).

<sup>31</sup> It is significant in this regard that Pattison has argued for a continuity of misogyny between Kierkegaard’s aesthetic and religious works (1987 377-9). In this way, Kierkegaard’s treatment of women in his aesthetic writings reveals even more clearly the oppression on which his – and so many others’ – theology is founded. In a later work, Pattison discovers a similar ‘alternative model’ for the God-relation in Kierkegaard’s writings on Luke 7:47 to that which I will now go on propose (2002 205-10).

*Fragments*, ‘The God as Teacher and Saviour (A Poetical Venture)’.<sup>32</sup> This chapter takes the form of a fairytale describing a King’s love for ‘a maiden of lowly station in life’ (Kierkegaard 1985 26); it tries to illuminate the reasoning behind the King’s decision to cast off his riches for love, in an attempt to thereby elucidate Christ’s Incarnation. What is most noticeable in this chapter is that, while the rest of the work (and Kierkegaard’s oeuvre generally) is concerned with the incomprehensibility of the absolute paradox (the God-man) to finite consciousness (that is, it is concerned with the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ so influential in later theology), this chapter conversely is far more interested in *equality* between Christ and humanity. Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Climacus, attempts here to obliterate that infinite qualitative difference altogether.

Love is the ‘basis’ and ‘goal’ of the god’s relation to humanity, and this love manifests itself as the ‘only’ means by which ‘the different [is] made equal’ (25): only love ‘is capable of making unequals equal’ (28). Thus, desire for equality motivates the god’s actions. As Climacus writes (speaking now of the King’s relation to the maiden), ‘Erotic love is jubilant when it unites equal and equal and is triumphant when it makes equal in erotic love that which was unequal.’ (27) The King’s ‘sorrow’, therefore, stems from the fact that his love is ‘unhappy’, that is, there is no equality in situation between him and the ‘maiden’, so they are ‘unable to understand each other.’ (25-6)

The question, then, at the centre of the chapter, is how can the two lovers (and so the god and humanity) become equal and so fulfil their love. Significantly, the first means of achieving this Climacus considers – and which he subsequently rejects – is the elevation of the ‘maiden’ to the level of the King; he writes, ‘The unity [could be] brought about by an ascent. The god would then draw the learner up toward himself, exalt him’ (29). This, of course, is strikingly similar to the method Johannes the Seducer uses in order to have a relationship with Cordelia (and to that which the Christ of *Practice in Christianity* employs in regard to humanity at large): the fully formed male brings the unformed, female Other up into subjectivity. Yet, surprisingly, Climacus here finds fault with it, since ‘the girl would be essentially

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<sup>32</sup> In so reading *Philosophical Fragments* as setting forth a positive ethics, I am opposing those critics, such as Murray Rae (1997), who see Climacus as undermining himself throughout the earlier chapters of the work so as to inadvertently demonstrate philosophy’s futility.

deceived – and one is most terribly deceived when one does not even suspect it but remains as if spellbound by a change of costume.’ (29) *The model of the abandoned fiancée is here rejected*. Even, Climacus implies, if the ‘maiden’ believed she was freely elevating herself and did not notice the indiscernible and indirect guidance of the male consciousness, even then the ascent is still reprehensible, because the ‘maiden’ is not truly free (and so on the same plane as the King) but *just apparently so*: ‘No delusion can satisfy’ (29). The model of the abandoned fiancée fails to achieve equality, since the ‘maiden’ remains subjected and the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ remains in force. In the ascent, love can only be unhappy.

It is indeed the opposite model – that of a ‘descent’ – which Climacus affirms as the only way to truly ensure the equality of the lovers: the god or the king must lower himself to be on an equal footing with the ‘lowly maiden’. Obviously, the issue of deception arises again, and in response Climacus makes clear that the king cannot merely don a ‘plebeian cloak, which just by flapping open would betray the king’ (32); rather, he must actually and fully transform his whole person to be equal with his loved one: lowliness ‘is not something put on... but it is his true form’ (32). Only through a real self-transformation of the male consciousness (which, Climacus goes on to argue, only Christ is able to pull off) can an equal relation be possible between lovers. Thus, Climacus concludes, returning to the god’s relation to humanity:

The god is not zealous for himself but in love wants to be the equal of the most lowly of the lowly... How terrifying, for it is indeed less terrifying to fall upon one’s face while the mountains tremble at the god’s voice than to sit with him as his equal, and yet the god’s concern is precisely to sit this way.  
(34-5)

There are a number of aspects to be picked up in this alternative model to the abandoned fiancée. First: woman is here *not* the Other who revolves around an absolute male subject, orchestrated by him. Instead, it is the female position which is the standard towards which the god/king moves; woman is the benchmark around which a relation of equals should take place. Man is in fact the problem, and it is he who must change for a relation, and so love and mutual understanding, to be possible.

Second: it is Christ’s act of kenosis (his descent) that makes equality possible. This must be distinguished from Ward and Coakley’s affirmation of kenosis. Ward and Coakley conceive of Christ’s kenosis as exemplary: it is the *ethical model* which

all followers ought to imitate – to gain personhood is to empty oneself like Christ. For Climacus, on the other hand, Christ's act of kenosis makes all subsequent kenotic acts *redundant*. There is no longer – once Christ has become a servant – any need for servitude whatsoever. Christ's slavery puts an end to subjection, and allows equality. Christ's initial act of kenosis makes an ethics of kenosis superfluous; it supersedes the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave.<sup>33</sup>

Third: in the model of the abandoned fiancée, the relation between the master and the slave only took place while the master was elevating the slave to free subjectivity; once that had occurred, the slave is abandoned and left on her own, an autonomous atom. In this chapter of *Philosophical Fragments*, however, reaching the same level is *only the beginning*. It is the prelude to the *actual* ethical relation which is one of equal and mutual collaboration in love. In annulling human dependency on him, Christ approaches his fiancée as an equal, and true love can then begin. Here, it seems to me, Kierkegaard is pointing towards a proto-Le Doeuffean ethics of radical friendship.

Kierkegaard presents – I argue – a viable ethical alternative to the master/slave dialectic *within Christianity*. His account of love as a relation of equals in chapter two of *Philosophical Fragments* is a plausible Christian ethics, and, as such, succeeds where Hampson's polemics founder in overcoming the hegemony of subjection in post-Barthian theology. Subjection and Christianity are not equivalent, neither are equality and Christianity incommensurable; Kierkegaard provides another answer, which, in superseding his own model of the abandoned fiancée, gestures towards a genuine Christian ethics of equality.

A final question remains: is my account close to Deleuze's intentions in proposing Kierkegaard's work to Le Doeuff? Am I in the end siding with Deleuze over Le Doeuff in describing Kierkegaard as an ally of the latter? The likelihood, of course, is no: Deleuze does not propose Kierkegaard *tout court*, but rather the Kierkegaardian fiancée as a worthy theme; however, it is only by abandoning the abandoned fiancée, stripping away this aspect of Kierkegaard's thought, that there is

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<sup>33</sup> On a theological level, this makes sense too: humanity does not suffer for Christ, but Christ for humanity. Ward's emphasis on suffering as a continuation of the Crucifixion downplays the efficacy, integrity and uniqueness of the Crucifixion.

any hope of salvaging him as a thinker committed to Le Doeuffean friendship. It still remains possible, however, that this was exactly what Deleuze intended!

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