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Chapter 7

ILLEGIBLE SALVATION: THE AUTHORITY OF LANGUAGE IN *THE CONCEPT OF ANXIETY*

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Language is dangerous, as Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, is well aware. Language makes possible the self-forgetfulness of objective chatter by dividing the self from itself, and even our ability to distinguish good and evil fails when signs vanish into illegibility. Positioning himself as a detached observer, Haufniensis views with suspicion that which thus escapes observation. But although his warnings about the dangers of language are true, I argue that this very illegibility is the condition of possibility for salvation. Language may kill the self by permitting chatter, yet salvation (one might even say *resurrection*) is possible only because language opens the self to alterity and leads us to the atonement that no observations and definitions can access. Haufniensis, the watchman of Copenhagen, thus sets up a guard against the possibility of salvation by resisting the authority of language.

By writing of language indirectly, via a pseudonymous author who distrusts it, Kierkegaard forces us to confront this illegibility that a more direct writing style might have obscured by its very clarity. Directness would risk giving the impression that *this* text, *this* author, had mastered language, but here pseudonymity calls the author's authority into question from the start, which prepares us to realize that the play of language always escapes the bounds that anyone could authorize. Awareness of language's dangers never permits us to control it, and as we discover by considering what Haufniensis does and does not say about language and sin's origin (which prove to be intertwined questions), such grasping for control is precisely sin.

The Inaccessible Origins of Sin and Language

Haufniensis's observations concerning the origin of sin immediately raise a problem that he never adequately addresses: the origin is precisely that which cannot be observed. He acknowledges that if we are to explain sin by its origin, that origin cannot be located outside history: "No matter how the problem is raised, as

soon as Adam is placed fantastically on the outside, everything is confused."[1] Thus, on the one hand, Adam cannot be located radically outside the human race, or else any explanation of his sin fails to explain anyone else's. Yet a dilemma emerges straightaway for, on the other hand, Adam cannot be treated as just another human being within history, such that any of us could have chosen (as Adam could have done) to refrain from sin, or else we deny hereditary sin, thereby succumbing to the Pelagian heresy, which claims that man could potentially be good without God's aid. Summing up the dilemma, Haufniensis explains that "man is *individuum* and as such simultaneously himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the whole race participates in the individual and the individual in the whole race. If this is not held fast, one will fall either into the Pelagian, Socinian, and philanthropic singular or into the fantastic."[2] In short, any orthodox analysis of sin must maintain both that each individual is responsible for his or her own sin and that each individual is, because of Adam, born into a sinful race. And because Adam is neither radically outside the human race nor within the human race in the manner of subsequent individuals, the origin of sin cannot be located on either side of the dichotomy between without and within, exterior and interior. More exactly, the origin cannot be located: it haunts history but slips away as soon as one claims to have found it.

Rather than directly considering this haunting absence of the origin, however, Haufniensis reiterates that although sin enters history with Adam and each individual is therefore born into a sin-tainted history, the individual is still responsible for his or her own sinfulness and cannot blame it on Adam. Thus, "the history of the race proceeds quietly on its course, and in this no individual begins at the same place as another, but every individual begins anew."[3] Adam alone came into an innocent world, yet each individual's sin originates in that individual—a statement that simply displaces the problem of sin's origin by focusing on its origin in each individual. And even as Haufniensis continues to seek the origin, he undermines his investigation by insisting that "the transition that is to be made from innocence to guilt" be understood as a "qualitative leap,"[4] thereby locating an innocent original state radically and inaccessibly outside of history. Indeed, as the starting point of the leap is unobservable and nonlocalizable, the claim that there is a leap at all is impossible to confirm. As Sylviane Agacinski points out, "It is the leap that posits sinfulness and not the other way around: sinfulness already presupposes the leap—but the understanding will have none of that. For philosophy (in other words, the faculties of the intellect, the understanding, and reason), the leap is a blank. And philosophy has always worked hard at filling it in."[5] Filling in this blank is, however, precisely what philosophy is unable to do.

1. CA, 28 / SKS 4, 332.
2. CA, 28 / SKS 4, 335.
3. CA, 34–35 / SKS 4, 314.
4. CA, 43 / SKS 4, 349.
5. Sylviane Agacinski, *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Kevin Newmark (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1988), p. 97 (*Aparté: Conceptions et morts de Sören Kierkegaard* [Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1977], pp. 77–78).

Able to observe only the endpoint—sinfulness—Haufniensis can never determine that it is in fact the endpoint of a leap. Thus, the observer turns away from the reality of sin to pursue an unobservable state of innocence—which, paradoxically, allows him to remain only an observer by giving him an excuse to not grapple concretely with sin. To truly face one's own sin, one must willingly remain haunted by that blank—that is, one must give up one's need to control the narrative by explaining everything.[6] Disinterestedly explaining sin is an attempt to explain it away by pretending that it has no relevance to life.

Interestingly, Haufniensis implicitly warns against this detached manner of proceeding: "Every man loses innocence in essentially the same way that Adam lost it. It is not in the interest of ethics to make all men except Adam into concerned and interested spectators of guiltiness but who are not guilty, nor is it in the interest of dogmatics to make all men into interested and sympathetic spectators of the Atonement [*Forsoning*] but who are not atoned for."[7] Asking how sin originated with Adam amounts to refusing to acknowledge one's own guilt, as though sin were something foreign that one could consider only from the outside, and refusing to admit guilt is refusing the atonement. Yet Haufniensis remains a psychological observer, not an ethicist or a dogmatist, and he insists on a strict demarcation between these sciences.[8] Thus, even as he considers how sin originates in each individual, and not only in Adam, he still examines the problem from the outside. Readers must keep in mind that his analyses will therefore remain disconnected from the lived experiences of sin and atonement—a point that will become crucial as we examine his approach to language.

Indeed, the investigation into sin's origin demands an inquiry into language, for the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was spoken. That prohibition puzzles Haufniensis, for an innocent Adam could not have understood it and therefore, on hearing it, experienced no guilt but rather anxiety in the face of "freedom's possibility."[9] According to this account, language

6. This point recalls Paul Ricœur's conclusions that "we never have the right to speculate about original sin … as if it had a proper consistency … We never have the right to speculate on *the evil already there*, outside the evil that we do … We never have the right to speculate on either the evil that we inaugurate, or on the evil that we find, without reference to the history of salvation." Ricœur, "'Original Sin': A Study in Meaning," trans. Peter McCormick, in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 286 ("Le 'péché originel': étude de signification," in *Le Conflit des interprétations: Essais d'herméneutique* [Paris: Seuil, 1969], p. 282). The detached examination of sin, as though it were irrelevant to our lives and certainly not something from which we need to be saved, is itself sin.

7. CA, 36 / SKS 4, 342. Translation modified.

8. See the Introduction (CA, 9–24 / SKS 4, 317–331) in which Haufniensis carefully distinguishes psychology, dogmatics, and ethics.

9. CA, 44 / SKS 3, 350.

precedes even sin: thus, it is not only the origin of language but language itself that escapes the confines of history and cannot be assigned a location. And if the origin of sin is unobservable, how much more the origin of language! Haufniensis in fact leaves that latter origin a mystery and refuses even to attribute the prohibition to God, asserting rather that "the imperfection in the narrative—how could it have occurred to anyone to say to Adam what he essentially could not understand—is eliminated if we bear in mind that the speaker is language, and also that it is Adam himself who speaks."[10] Haufniensis thus isolates Adam, leaving him alone with language—and he does not ask in what sense one who is alone with language is truly alone. It is true that he briefly acknowledges in a footnote that language interrupts man's ipseity:

> If one were to say further that it then becomes a question of how the first man learned how to speak, I would answer that this is very true, but also that the question lies beyond the scope of the present investigation. However, this must not be misunderstood, as though, through evasive replies in the manner of modern philosophy, I wanted to give the impression that I *could* answer the question in another place. But this much is certain, that it will not do to represent man himself as the inventor of language.[11]

He does not, however, pursue the matter further. That man did not invent language entails that by speaking man enters into relation with an other, even if that other is simply language itself, but Haufniensis, the observer, refuses to be the observed and so does not take this opportunity to consider alterity. In particular, there is no room in his version of the Edenic narrative for God, the divine Other.

One might argue that the absence of God from Haufniensis's version of the story is an attempt to defend God by making it impossible for him to bear the slightest responsibility for Adam's sin. Haufniensis does imply that this is his motivation when he explains why the serpent is such an enigma: God does not tempt anyone, yet attributing the temptation to the serpent also fails, "For the serpent's assault on man is also an indirect temptation of God, since it interferes in the relation between God and man, and one is confronted by the third statement [in James 1:13–14], that man is tempted by himself."[12] If temptation comes from the self, then one who sins turns inward on himself, rejecting any relation to alterity. When one considers sin in this light, Haufniensis's choice to write God out of the narrative appears not as a righteous attempt to justify God but as a suspicious refusal to acknowledge alterity. On the one hand, God is absent from this account of the Fall precisely because sin is a turning away from God. On the other hand, however, Haufniensis's attempt to locate sin's origin serves as a distraction from the lived reality of sin and so reenacts that turning away from God. God's absence from Haufniensis's version of the story can thus be read on two levels: first as

10. CA, 47 / SKS 4, 353.
11. Ibid. Translation modified.
12. CA, 48 / SKS 4, 353.

a natural reflection of sinful man's self-absorption and second as an indication of Haufniensis's own reluctance to acknowledge any other who might observe him or call him out of his detached observation. Although writing God out of the narrative may be a reasonable decision when considered from the standpoint of an observer commenting disinterestedly on sin, that very standpoint is itself problematic.

Chatter: The Dangers of Language

Haufniensis's unwillingness to be observed by any other accords with his suspicion of language, for, as indicated above, language is an other that disrupts the self. Here, we must attend to a crucial nuance: it is not that his claims about the dangers of language are wrong per se but rather that they are selectively chosen truths.[13] Warning that people must not forget their responsibility for sin by falling into a detached objectivity, he states,

> How sin came into the world, each man learns solely by himself. .... That the man of science ought to forget himself is entirely true; nevertheless, it is therefore also very fortunate that sin is no scientific problem, and thus no man of science has an obligation (and the project maker just as little) to forget how sin came into the world. If this is what he wants to do, if he magnanimously wants to forget himself, then he will become, in his zeal to explain all of humanity, as comical as that privy councilor who was so conscientious about leaving his calling card with every Tom, Dick, and Harry that in doing so he at last forgot his own name. Or his philosophical enthusiasm will make him so self-forgetful that he needs a good-natured, level-headed wife whom he can ask, as Soldin asked Rebecca when in enthusiastic self-forgetfulness he also lost himself in the objectivity of the chatter, "Rebecca, is it I who is speaking?"[14]

Thus, we see that language can certainly be dangerous, for it might degenerate into objective chatter, a universalizing attempt to explain everyone in which the individual is lost. One who produces universal explanations will end by forgetting herself so entirely that she is no longer even aware of herself as a speaker. This is a legitimate warning, odd as it may be to find it coming from the pen of one who, for all his insistence on the individual, remains a detached observer. Furthermore, the fact that this warning follows closely on the analysis of the prohibition may further incline readers to view language with suspicion: thus far in the text, we have seen that language conditions anxiety and now that it can lead to a dangerous

13. He does later comment more favorably on language and does not simply view it as bad. As I will argue in section four ("The Illegible Sign"), however, even those more favorable passages still reveal an unwillingness to acknowledge alterity.

14. CA, 51 / SKS 4, 356. Translation modified.

self-forgetfulness. It is thence easy enough to conclude that language primarily leads us astray.

Indeed, commenters have tended to follow Haufniensis in his suspicion of language. Hugh S. Pyper argues, for instance, that "language introduces the possibility of error and therefore of doubt .... Language is inextricably implicated in the genesis of doubt, and therefore of anxiety."[15] Moreover, he proposes that "the serpent *is* the problem of language and its interpretation, the creative potential of counterfactuality, which opens the way to deception and the dizziness of possibility."[16] And Peter Fenves maintains that "the 'problem' of 'original sin' comes down to this: 'chatter,' which is original language, outgrows its origin and corrodes the very language that is determined to bring it to a halt."[17] Yet must we hold language responsible for the possibility of error, and must we accept that chatter is "original language" and ultimately contaminates all language? Let us take the latter question first: it errs by presupposing the quest for the origin that, as I have argued, cannot succeed. If we accept that we cannot find the origin—cannot fill in the blank, to borrow Agacinski's words—and must rather grapple with sin as part of our lived experience, then we can no longer seek an external explanation for error, doubt, deception, and chatter. We ourselves bear the responsibility for them all.

But are we not thereby letting language off too easily? Error, doubt, deception, and chatter are real dangers, and although the self may well be responsible for these failings, it is true that they are possible only because language enables the self to distance itself from itself. One who was perfectly self-identical could never forget herself in chatter, or distance herself from her beliefs to state, deceptively, what she did not accept as true, or waver, divided and doubtful, between two positions, or erroneously call one thing by another's name. If, however, language did not exist, the individual would be unrecognizable. As Steven Shakespeare notes, according to Haufniensis's account, "in the disruptive power of language is the inauguration of the fall. Language cancels our immediate innocence. However, language does not come upon humanity from the outside; it is intrinsic to its very structure."[18] We simply cannot conceive of a nonlinguistic humanity. Language enables the self to enter into relation with the other and also grounds the self's own existence. Moreover, Shakespeare adds that "the text contains no such one-sided equation of language with good or evil. Language is the presupposition of sin, not sin itself."[19] As I will argue, if we read the text attentively, we see that language is also the presupposition of atonement. The self that is interrupted by and conditioned by

15. Hugh S. Pyper, "Adam's *Angest:* The Language of Myth and the Myth of Language," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2001), p. 93.

16. Ibid., p. 95.

17. Peter Fenves, "*Chatter": Language and History in Kierkegaard* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 84.

18. Steven Shakespeare, *Kierkegaard, Language, and the Reality of God* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), p. 72.

19. Ibid., p. 73.

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language may seek to become entirely absorbed in itself in a rejection of alterity (and this Haufniensis will call inclosing reserve)—but language can also lead the self to embrace the relation to the other that constitutes it. Thus, it will turn out that language is certainly dangerous, but the very danger that interrupts and destabilizes the self also saves. In short, Fenves is right to warn against chatter, and Pyper is right to say that language makes error and doubt possible, but what they neglect to consider is that language also makes salvation possible.

Deriving the Self

Before we can properly consider how language makes salvation possible, however, it is necessary to return to the impossibility of locating sin's origin in order to examine in more detail the constitution of the self. Again, Haufniensis insists that the sin of each individual originates with that individual: "To want to deny that every subsequent individual has and must be assumed to have had a state of innocence analogous to that of Adam would be shocking to everyone and would also annul all thought, because then there would be an individual who is not an individual and who relates himself merely as a specimen [*Exemplar*] to his species."[20] The puzzle of the origin of sin in each subsequent individual is, however, no easier to solve than that of its origin in Adam, for innocence has no place in history. Haufniensis himself implicitly acknowledges that it is impossible to speak of the origin:

> While the history of spirit (and it is precisely the secret of spirit that it always has a history) ventures to stamp itself upon the countenance of the man in such a way that everything is forgotten if only the imprint is distinct and noble, the woman on the other hand will make her effect as a totality in another way …. The expression must be that of a totality that has no history. Therefore silence is not only a woman's greatest wisdom but also her highest beauty.[21]

Note the connection between silence and that which cannot be located within a history. One cannot speak of that which has no history—but spirit always does have a history. And that spirit always has a history is its secret, both because spirit wishes to conceal this fact—for spirit longs for an originary time of innocence when it had no history—and also because the absence of an origin must be secret, must be hidden, for an absence cannot be located anywhere. The nowhere of the origin haunts spirit everywhere, for spirit constantly bears within itself the blank space that no attempt to find the origin can fill. Spirit, the uniting of "the psychical and the physical,"[22] is a synthesis with no origin, no moment of innocent prelapsarian self-identity located somewhere outside history. It has always been

20. CA, 60–61 / SKS 4, 365.
21. CA, 66 / SKS 4, 370. Translation modified.
22. CA, 43 / SKS 4, 349.

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constituted precisely by this blank, this absence of any origin, that renders it other than itself.[23]

Although Haufniensis associates womanly beauty with the absence of history, he also states that "in a sense, [woman] signifies that which is derived,"[24] as she was created after Adam. If the origin is always absent, however, then every individual is derived, and Haufniensis acknowledges that "the difference *in pleno* [common] to all subsequent individuals is derivation."[25] Moreover, as he has already observed, "in order to posit the synthesis [spirit] must first pervade it differentiatingly, and the ultimate point of the sensuous is precisely the sexual."[26] The pre-Eve Adam thus appears as another nonlocalizable origin, for he is truly a self only once Eve exists, only once her difference from him constitutes him as well. As Kevin Newmark aptly notes, "Adam must now be understood as himself and his other, as becoming a self only by passing through his own sexual difference in his relation to Eve."[27] Thus, although Haufniensis, still in pursuit of the origin, implies that only *subsequent* individuals are derived (and has less to say about Eve than about Adam), it turns out that Adam too is derived and that he, like all subsequent individuals, can exist as a self only via difference. Eve does come from Adam, yet he comes from her as well: she "signifies that which is derived" not because she came second but because her creation (her derivation from him) was just as much his creation (his derivation from her). To be a self is precisely *not* to be absolutely self-identical. And because Adam (like everyone else) becomes a self only through derivation, he never experienced the ahistoric origin that spirit desires yet can never reach. "[D]eny[ing] that every subsequent individual has and must be assumed to have had a state of innocence analogous to that of Adam" may well be "shocking to everyone,"[28] but we are here led to a conclusion that is more shocking still: we cannot speak of any state of innocence, neither in the case of subsequent individuals nor in the case of Adam. Innocence is, and always has been, a haunting absence.[29] Moreover, the

23. See also Kevin Newmark's remark that "in Kierkegaard, the hidden event that lies in this way beyond the mastery of any subject, the shadowy secret to which the subject constantly bears witness in its faith, is the rapport between the self and its absolutely other, that is to say, the wound of death conditioning the self in its relation to everything else." Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 84–85. At stake in *The Concept of Anxiety* is how language constitutes the self in its relation to the other (or as other than itself) and how the self responds to being thus opened and divided by language.

24. CA, 63 / SKS 4, 368.

25. Ibid.

26. CA, 49 / SKS 4, 354.

27. Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 80.

28. CA, 60–61 / SKS 4, 365.

29. See also Agacinski's remark that "in this sense, innocence is merely dead and absent … The fall is neither a passage, nor a beginning, nor an end; it does not designate a limit where innocence would stop and culpability would begin. Rather, it would be a gap or an opening [*ouverture*] … The fall is the name for the possibility *of* differences." Agacinski,

sexual difference between man and woman appears as a visible reminder that the individual is truly a self only through his or her difference from another, and the impossibility of absolute self-coincidence is thereby inscribed in our very bodies.

The attempt to locate the origin can now appear in its true light: it is an attempt to control one's own identity by filling in this blank, this absence, that constitutes the self by rendering it different from itself. In other words, it is an attempt to erase that difference by tracing the self back to a pure, undifferentiated origin. Furthermore, because it is language that relates the self to its other and constitutes the self as other than itself (as discussed in the preceding sections), this desire to control one's own identity amounts to a desire to control language, to neutralize its differentiating power. Yet as absolute self-identity, independent of language, is impossible to attain, turning away from language destroys the self rather than constituting it as self-identical. Speaking of the genius, who "knows that he is stronger than the whole world,"[30] Haufniensis draws a telling analogy:

> The significance of the genius to himself is *nil*, or as dubiously melancholy as the sympathy with which the inhabitants of the Faroe Islands would rejoice if on this island there lived a native Faroese who astounded all of Europe by his writings in various European languages and transformed the sciences by his immortal contributions, but at the same time never wrote a single line in Faroese, and then at last forgot how to speak it. In the deepest sense, the genius does not become significant to himself.[31]

The genius who is so confident in his own strength ends up losing himself—and it is thereby as if he lost his native language, the language into which he was born and which, having renounced it, he forgot entirely. The analogy is limited insofar as Haufniensis does not suppose that this person abandoned all language, only his native Faroese, but it still stands as a sobering reminder of the intertwining of language and the self.

The Illegible Sign

We now can finally consider how language makes salvation possible. Shortly before introducing the crucial notion of inclosing reserve, Haufniensis remarks in a footnote that "the good cannot be defined at all. The good is freedom."[32] A few

Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard, p. 99 (*Aparté: Conceptions et morts de Sören Kierkegaard*, pp. 79–80). Translation modified. It does not follow that difference is sin. On the contrary, as will become clear in the following section, sin involves the rejection of difference, and the attempt to identify a pre-Fall originary state of innocence, inasmuch as it is the rejection of difference, is sin.

30. CA, 100 / SKS 4, 402.
31. CA, 101 / SKS 4, 404.
32. CA, 111 / SKS 4, 413.

pages later, he adds that "the good, of course, signifies the restoration of freedom, redemption, salvation, or whatever one would call it."[33] The good is beyond definition: when it comes to the good, language slips away from our grasp and cannot be fixed in place with definitions that we would seek to impose. Thus, we are able only to gesture toward the good with words such as "the restoration of freedom, redemption, salvation" and can never turn it into an object that is simply present to us. As the self can never fully comprehend the good, the good always remains other, irreducible to interiority. Given that the disruption of the self is associated with the Fall, one may be tempted to conclude that such disruption is simply bad and that the absolute self-identity associated with the supposed pre-Fall state of innocence would be good, but it now becomes apparent that the good is a disruptive force. Absolute self-identity would be not good but rather inhuman, and as we can finally come to see, sin is the refusal of alterity, the attempt to force language to serve one's misguided desire for such self-identity. It is language that opens us to alterity, and for this reason, the demonic cannot endure it.

Turning now to inclosing reserve, Haufniensis explains that

> the demonic is *inclosing reserve* [*det Indesluttede*] *and the unfreely disclosed* [*Aabenbare*]. The two definitions indicate, as intended, the same thing, because inclosing reserve is precisely the mute, and when it is to express itself, this must take place contrary to its will, since freedom, which lies in the ground of unfreedom, by entering into communication [*Communication*] with freedom from without, revolts and now betrays unfreedom in such a way that it is the individual who in anxiety betrays himself against his will.[34]

The demonic cannot speak—or, more exactly, the demonic does not speak willingly. Haufniensis notes that the involuntary disclosure need not be in words,[35] but language is still operative in such a wordless disclosure, for (as argued above) it is language that renders the individual other than himself, preventing him from closing in on himself in absolute self-identity, and that thereby compels *dis*closure or, in other words, an opening (however unwilling) to alterity. Involuntary disclosure, precisely because it is involuntary and indeed contrary to the will of the demonic individual, indicates that the demonic individual is still divided, and it is therefore the mark of the failure to attain absolute self-identity. One cannot escape language—cannot truly become inclosed on oneself such that alterity is kept out—but insofar as it is possible to exist in opposition to language, the demonic does so. Haufniensis adds that "freedom is always *communicerende* [communicating] (it does no harm to take into consideration the religious significance of the word); unfreedom becomes more and more inclosed [*indesluttet*] and does not want communication."[36] Note that *communicerende* means not only "communicating"

33. CA, 119 / SKS 4, 421.
34. CA, 123 / SKS 4, 425. Translation modified.
35. CA, 129 / SKS 4, 430.
36. Ibid.

but also "taking communion." By rejecting language, the demonic also refuses any form of community with the other, including God, the divine Other.

By thus connecting language and the religious, Haufniensis here portrays language comparatively positively—but his positive observations are restrained, for they are precisely and only *observations*. He asserts that "inclosing reserve is precisely muteness. Language, the word, is precisely what saves, what saves from the empty abstraction of inclosing reserve."[37] Indeed, this is so, for language and freedom cannot be separated. Furthermore, as Haufniensis also acknowledges, the loss of communication is also the loss of the self: "Communication is in turn the expression for continuity …. It might be thought that inclosing reserve would have an extraordinary continuity; yet the very opposite is the case, although when compared with the vapid, enervating falling away from oneself continually absorbed in the impression, it has an appearance of continuity."[38] The attempt to become inclosed on oneself can only destroy the self, as the self's ground is that very blank that opens it to alterity. Again, the self must be other than itself in order to be truly a self. Thus, although the demonic individual may appear continuous, he is actually disintegrating utterly. Only the embrace of language as that which constitutes the self can prevent this destruction.

The problem here is that Haufniensis remains a psychological observer who is concerned with the origin of the demonic. Near the beginning of his analysis of the demonic, he explains that "in relation to innocence [the demonic] is an actuality posited by the qualitative leap."[39] Discussing the demonic in such terms again conceals the fact that there has never been an originary state of innocence. He states that in the demonic "freedom is lost,"[40] which covers over the extent of the problem by suggesting that freedom at some point was *not yet* lost. Even his remark that "language, the word, is what saves" is phrased in a strikingly detached manner (a point the translation unfortunately obscures by inserting the words "the individual"): whom, exactly, does language save? Who needs to be saved? Certainly, Haufniensis has willingly accused all individuals of sin,[41] yet here, precisely at this moment when he asserts that language saves, he does so in as abstract a manner as possible without referring to anyone or everyone. Is this a mere oversight that we might reasonably overlook on the grounds that he does at least recognize that no one *remains* innocent? One could suppose so—and yet, coming from a figure who positions himself as an observer and who has previously expressed suspicion of language, the abstractness of this remark makes it appear as another attempt to distance himself from the lived reality of the demonic. Furthermore, given that the search for an origin is precisely a turn away from alterity and toward the self,

37. CA, 124 / SKS 4, 425–426. Translation modified.

38. CA, 130 / SKS 4, 431. Translation modified.

39. CA, 123 / SKS 4, 424.

40. Ibid.

41. Recall his statement: "*Every* man loses innocence in essentially the same way that Adam lost it." (CA, 36 / SKS 4, 342.) Emphasis added.

it is not surprising that he hesitates, even momentarily, when considering the individual's need for salvation.

This momentary hesitation is unsurprising for another reason as well: language is dangerous, to the point where one might struggle to see how it could save the individual. Recall also that the good lies beyond definition: how then does language relate us to the good? This question becomes even more pressing when Haufniensis marks both inclosing reserve and the good with an *x*. Although at first he marks only the demonic with the *x*, stating, "Let *x* signify the demonic, the relation of freedom to it something outside *x*,"[42] he then tears down that distinction: "Let the inclosing reserve be *x* and its content *x*, denoting the most terrible, the most insignificant, the horrible, whose presence in life few probably even dream about, but also the trifles to which no one pays attention; what then does the good signify as *x*? It signifies disclosure."[43] Disclosure, or the good (and so, by implication, freedom), is thus represented with the same symbol that represents inclosing reserve, raising the terrifying possibility that no distinguishing mark allows us to tell the difference between them. If the *x* may be the mark of the demonic or of salvation, what even is the difference between them? The *x* becomes a horrifyingly illegible sign, communicating nothing, for behind it the demonic and the salvific blend together beyond all possibility of distinction. As Fenves comments, "No longer is there even the pretense that something—the good ....—stands outside the *x*. Nothing can stand outside so long as *x* stands for everything, and the *x* is, once again, this sheer coming outside itself: .... disclosure 'itself,' .... communication no longer capable of communicating anything, communication as ex-communication."[44] On this reading, there is no escape from ex-communication, from the *x* that undoes any possibility of salvation. Communication becomes utterly impossible. Fenves thus concludes his analysis of *The Concept of Anxiety* with the warning that "the drift of the *x* empties every communication" and that "our age" is "an age in which communication again and again crosses itself out."[45] The individual thus cannot look to language for salvation; language simply is this empty, drifting *x* (insofar as we can even write "is" of the *x*). Searching for signs, we find only the *x* blocking our path.

One can, however, read the *x* in another way, a way that does not cut off the possibility of salvation: namely, the *x* is the demonic attempt to flee illegibility, and illegibility is necessary for salvation. Haufniensis can say nothing satisfactory about salvation precisely because it emerges beyond the limits of definition, and so no distinguishing sign can mark it for us. Recall that embracing communication and thereby giving up the pursuit of self-identity is giving up the quest for an originary innocence. And giving up the quest for innocence is abandoning any attempt to exculpate ourselves (to however slight a degree) by insisting that *we*

42. CA, 124 / SKS 4, 426.
43. CA, 126–127 / SKS 4, 427–428. Translation modified.
44. Fenves, *"Chatter,"* p. 111.
45. Ibid., p. 112.

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were good once. In short, embracing communication requires that we give up the desperate fear of being always already caught in sin. It is precisely the demonic that sees a threat in the illegible sign, for if we lose the power to draw distinctions, if guilt and goodness blur together such that we cannot tell them apart, then we have no way to defend ourselves against the charge that we were never innocent. Remember also that the demonic attempts to control language. Here the demonic responds to the inevitable failure of that attempt by concealing with an *x* that which escapes definition, as if it were a temporarily unknown quantity that could yet be discovered and not an ineradicable illegibility that no algebraic manipulations can ever solve for.[46] It is the demonic that seeks to conceal behind the *x* the failure of distinctions, of definitions that fix differences firmly in their respective places. It is not that the *x* is itself an illegible sign; rather, by means of this legible letter, the demonic seeks to cover over the illegibility that it cannot endure. With the *x*, we sign our own writs of excommunication. To be saved by language, one must abandon the attempt to control it, to resist its authority, to fight its ultimate illegibility by imposing definitions and distinctions on that which we do not have the power to read.

This argument should not be mistaken for a false reassurance that salvation is easy or cheap. On the contrary, it indicates that salvation is beyond our power. Even our capacity to distinguish good and evil, which one might have thought essential to salvation, turns out to be a trap, precisely because we *lack* that capacity and therefore cannot put our trust in it. Nor should we suppose that salvation will grant us the ability to find some realm of pure distinctions and fixed definitions. On the contrary, "Whoever lives in daily and festive communion [*Omgang*] with the thought [*Forestilling*] that there is a God could hardly wish to spoil this for himself, or see it spoiled, by himself piecing together a definition of what God is."[47] Note that even here Haufniensis continues to speak abstractly: he refers not to one who lives in communion with God but to one who lives in communion with the *thought* that there is a God. Unwilling to consider the *actuality* of an undefinable God, he stops at the *thought* that such a God exists. One who willingly lets language open him to alterity must face God's actuality, and furthermore she must face it without the aid of definitions that would allow her to abstractly mark out what God is and so reassure her that she really is dealing with God. Thus, error and sin remain, terrifyingly, possibilities, for one might be mistaken about

46. Haufniensis uses the analogy of algebra three times: in a footnote to the beginning of his discussion of anxiety about evil, he notes that he "can indicate the particular state only very briefly, almost algebraically" (CA, 113 / SKS 4, 415); in his analysis of inclosing reserve and disclosure, shortly after introducing the *x*, he asks, "How could I finish even a merely algebraic naming …?" (CA, 128 / SKS 4, 429); and in his analysis of the somatic-psychic loss of freedom, he states that it is "so difficult to talk about these things *in abstracto*, since speech itself becomes algebraic" (CA, 137 / SKS 4, 437). Although these remarks hint at the limitations of the algebraic, the analogy may lead one to suppose that *x* could be solved for.

47. CA, 147 / SKS 4, 447. Translation modified.

who God is—but refusing God through fear of error and sin is itself error and sin. Haufniensis, the psychological observer, falls into this latter error: he cannot endure this unobservable, undefinable God. No sooner does he state that "the true autodidact is precisely in the same degree a theodidact …. Therefore he who in relation to guilt is educated by anxiety will rest only in the Atonement"[48] than he must conclude, for psychological observation can go no farther. Indeed, the observer still cannot resist implying that one can be both an autodidact and a theodidact, although his text has revealed that one cannot teach oneself salvation. Language opens the self to alterity, and salvation comes thereby.[49]

Where Does Language Lead?

As noted above, commenters have tended to accept Haufniensis's suspicion of language, and at this point, it is instructive to consider a particularly noteworthy example. George Pattison does not consider language as potentially salvific and argues that it is dangerous because it bears within itself the threat of meaninglessness:

> That there is that which precedes and constrains the free play of language if language is to "work" as a medium of communication, that not everything can be named at will, is not simply a requirement registered, as it were, by the external world, as if language's first obligation was to be true to external appearance: rather, it is a requirement that Spirit, qua Spirit and therefore freely, places upon itself. It is the task not so much of imposing or constraining meaning but of continually claiming, reclaiming, retrieving, and recollecting meaning; the work of truth/*aletheia* as the endless deliverance of meaning from the tide of forgetfulness and dissipation, and of *poiesis* as the "making" and free rendering of the truth thus delivered.
>
> Here, then, is where we encounter the prohibition: the requirement of the limit, that Spirit, precisely as the agent of language must place upon itself. But also the penalty: for the breach of that limit is, by definition, the giving of Spirit

48. CA, 162 / SKS 4, 460–461.

49. One might ask how inwardness fits with this insistence on alterity. Inwardness and abstraction are incompatible: "The individuality who wants to make himself into an abstraction precisely lacks inwardness" (CA, 141 / SKS 4, 442). Inwardness thus resists the abstractions of inclosing reserve; it is precisely not an attempt to achieve absolute self-identity. Seeking to lose oneself in pure exteriority is just as much a rejection of the divided self as is inclosing reserve: the former seeks unity outside subjectivity, the latter inside. As any flight into abstraction amounts to a rejection of the ultimate illegibility of language, inwardness may be understood as the self's willing acceptance of its essential relation to language and so to alterity, although Haufniensis certainly does not consider it in those terms.

> itself over to meaninglessness, its surrender to a power that leads it where it will not go and, thus, its ceasing to be Spirit, its death.[50]

Spirit, on Pattison's view, falls by giving in to "the free play of language," to meaninglessness. His warning against meaninglessness is all very well so far as it goes, but it tells only half the story. Indeed, communication would be impossible if we simply denied the need for words to have any commonly agreed-upon meanings. But what does it mean to refer to spirit as "the agent of language"? Is spirit the agent who acts on language or the agent who acts in language's service and so is acted on by it? Pattison seems to imply that spirit should act on language, lest it be led to meaninglessness and death. What if, however, "its surrender to a power that leads it where it will not go"—or, at least, where it *cannot, of itself, will to go*—were precisely what is necessary for its *life*? Fearing being led to meaninglessness is itself a grave danger, for that fear leads one to impose abstract definitions on everything and so to resist that alterity, which cannot be reduced to abstract definitions. We see the fear of meaninglessness in Haufniensis's attempt to conceal the illegible with an x, as though there were a sign we could read provided we could follow the map or solve the equation. Like the fear of sin, the fear of meaninglessness may seem virtuous but all too easily becomes sin, becomes the rejection of language's authority and hence of any hope for meaning. Surrendering to the power of language indeed means, for spirit, being led "where it will not go"—that is, to that which cannot be defined. It is true that in the absence of fixed definitions, we have no comforting assurance that we are being led toward life—little wonder, then, that spirit cannot find God without being led![51] But as horrifying as being thus led may seem, it is the alternative that is death.[52]

In his *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, Pattison does not warn against being led astray by language (indeed, he emphasizes that spirit alone is responsible for its fall), but he states that "'grasping at finitude' is, rather, when, having become anxious in the face of its own possibilities and not daring to submit them to the obligation of concrete, responsible communication, spirit flees responsibility for its limitation and projects the responsibility onto another: a forbidding voice, a tempting

50. George Pattison, "The Most Dangerous of Gifts or 'What Did Language Say to Adam?'" *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2001), p. 232.

51. Cf. the passage in *Practice in Christianity* in which, commenting on Christ's call, "Come here to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest," Anti-Climacus states, "All his willingness to help perhaps still would not help if he did not say this word and thereby take the first step, for in the calling out of this word ('Come here to me') he does indeed come to them" (PC, 21 / SKS 12, 32).Translation modified. In other words, we cannot of ourselves go to God; rather, through language, he comes to us and draws us to himself.

52. Pattison's concerns may call to mind Haufniensis's remark that "the purpose of language is to conceal thoughts—namely, to conceal that one has none" (CA, 108 / SKS 4, 410). But using language for concealment is not being unwillingly led by it; rather, one who uses language to conceal a lack of thought is seeking to use language for her own purposes.

serpent."[53] This warning is still incomplete, however, for although we may respond to language's indeterminacy by abandoning any responsibility to convey meaning and simply babbling nonsense, we may also flee that indeterminacy by attempting to establish meanings that are more fixed than is possible. Indeed, these two errors ultimately form but one: we babble nonsense that entirely misses the truth when we seek to establish those impossibly fixed meanings. Our "responsibility to speak the concrete or actual world of truth,"[54] as Pattison puts it, requires that we avoid insisting on definitions where there are none to be had—which is itself a form of objective, abstracting chatter.

In conclusion, it is entirely true that language is dangerous and that indeterminacy makes meaningless chatter possible. Indeed, in an 1854 journal entry, Kierkegaard identifies the dangers of language in a manner that recalls Haufniensis's warning against chatter: "Language, the gift of speech, engulfs the human race in such a cloud of drivel and twaddle that it becomes its ruination. God alone knows how many there are in every generation who have not been ruined by talking, who have not been transformed to prattlers or hypocrites."[55] Yet this warning is not the final word on language, for the very indeterminacy that permits the self to lose itself in "drivel and twaddle" also breaks open inclosing reserve and grounds the self's relation to God.[56] Regretting the gift of language, as though it had cost us some originary goodness, fundamentally misunderstands goodness: the pure self-identity sought by one who insists on investigating the origin of sin would be inhuman, not good. Salvation demands that we give up that attempt to find the origin, which is really a reenactment of the Fall, for it is an attempt to demarcate the boundaries of good and evil.[57] And let us be clear: no legible sign marks salvation, and language is certainly dangerous, even deadly. That

53. George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 82.

54. Ibid.

55. JP 3, 2237 / SKS 26, 392–393 (NB35: 33).

56. Here it is worthwhile to note that in *Christian Discourses*, Kierkegaard conceives of the good as communication such that it benefits all people: "Thus the goods of the spirit are in themselves essentially communication [*Meddelelse*]; their acquirement, their possession, in itself a benefaction to all" (CD, 117 / SKS 10, 128). Communication, or the good, is not confined to the self's relation to God; rather, Kierkegaard suggests that the self becomes rightly related to others through right relation to God. We see also that, despite the critical comments on language in the above-cited journal entry, he does elsewhere make positive references to communication and thus implicitly to language.

57. This point recalls Dietrich Bonhoeffer's argument that the Fall was precisely the desire to judge good and evil for oneself. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "God's Love and the Disintegration of the World," in *Ethics, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles G. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 299–339 ("Die Liebe Gottes und der Zerfall der Welt," *Ethik, Werkausgabe*, Band 6 [München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1998], pp. 301–342).

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it saves (even, perhaps, resurrects) does not lessen the danger. Yet by employing a pseudonym who resists language's authority, Kierkegaard dramatically shows us that such resistance, however reasonable it may seem, is ultimately demonic. It is indeed a risk to be led by language to that which lies beyond all definition, but only through bowing to language's authority and being thus led can we be freed from objective chatter and inclosing reserve.

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