

# Exposition and Obligation: A Serresian Account of Moral Sensitivity

Bryan Lueck  
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

## Abstract

In *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, Michel Serres demonstrates, by means of an extended discussion of learning, that our capacity to adopt a position presupposes a kind of disorienting exposure to a dimension of pure possibility that both subtends and destabilizes that position. In this paper I trace out the implications of this insight for our understanding of obligation, especially as it is articulated in the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Specifically, I argue that obligation is given along with a dimension of moral possibility, and not, as Kant thought, as an unmediated fact of reason.

Throughout his entire body of work, Michel Serres has emphasized the priority of disorder to order, of disequilibrium to equilibrium, of noise to information, and of exposition to position. These ideas have their sources primarily in scientific accounts of the world, including everything from Lucretius' clinamen to contemporary developments in complexity theory and information theory. The value of these ideas, though, is not exclusively theoretical; what I would like to argue in this paper is that these ideas also have important implications for our understanding of moral experience. Specifically, I will attempt to show how these ideas yield conceptions of moral sense and moral possibility that challenge radically the account of obligation advanced by Immanuel Kant. In what follows, I will begin with an interpretation of Serres's argument, developed most explicitly in *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, that our capacity to adopt any sort of position presupposes a disorienting exposure to a dimension of pure possibility that both subtends and destabilizes that position. I will then turn to an examination of Kant's account of obligation, emphasizing the ways in which it denies the possibility of such an

open dimension of moral sense. I will conclude by proposing a significantly revised, broadly Serresian account of Kantian obligation.

### **Exposition**

According to Serres, philosophical thought tends to orient itself by reference to fixed, self-identical positions or theses that function as principles.<sup>1</sup> This, he believes, is a mistake with far-reaching consequences. All of Serres's works are dedicated to showing, on the contrary, how position has as its condition of possibility a kind of pre-position or ex-position.<sup>2</sup> The relatively stable world that we encounter in everyday perception, for example, is a function ultimately of something like Lucretius' clinamen, an originary and irreducible deviation from equilibrium. Communication of linguistic messages presupposes various channels across which those messages can be sent. Even God's being depends on relations, made possible by the angels, that he maintains with the created world.<sup>3</sup> We often fail to notice these pre-positional conditions because they typically efface themselves in favor of what they make possible. In order for the meaning of the current sentence to come across successfully, for example, the channels of communication that bring readers into relation with my thought—the colors, sizes, and fonts of the letters, the texture of the paper or of the computer screen, the particular dialect of English in which I write, etc.—must recede into the background. In order for the angels to make manifest the glory of God, they must not draw too much attention to themselves. Pre-positional relations, in sum, support the existence of substantives precisely by disappearing from view.

It is not only philosophers, though, who focus on positions and who overlook the relations that make them possible. This is something we all tend to do in our everyday

practical dealings with the world. We tend, for example, to think of ourselves in terms of fixed identities. I *am* a university professor, an American, a baseball fan, and a native speaker of English. My practical life is oriented by these identities; they support the various projects and commitments that give my life meaning. I strive, for example, to be a good professor and I have a determinate conception of what that entails. I identify with my country and want it to be as good as it can be. I have a well-developed sense of what that means and an idea of what I can do to contribute to that good. To use the language suggestive of fixity and stasis that Serres prefers, I take my practical *stand* on my identities. They determine the *positions* I take on the issues that are important to me. They also determine the relations of conflict and *op-position* that I maintain with those whose identities and projects are incompatible with my own. I want my vision of America's good to prevail over others and I want to hold my ground against anyone who envisions that good differently.

What Serres demonstrates throughout his work is that these practical positions are grounded on a prior exposition. And even more importantly, he shows how this grounding of position is just as much a destabilizing of position. I can *be* an American only if, at a more fundamental level, I am not simply an American. I can *be* an English speaker only if more fundamentally I am something other, and indeed something more, than an English speaker. This something other or something more challenges the certainties of my practical orientation and thereby exposes me to possibilities of living that are unforeseeably different.

In *The Troubadour of Knowledge* Serres demonstrates these points by means of an examination of what it is to learn. It seems as if we can understand learning simply as

the transition from one position to another. For example, let us suppose that I am learning French and that French is the first foreign language I have studied. It seems as if I am transitioning from the state of being monolingual to the state of being bilingual. Serres analogizes this process to swimming across a river. At first I proceed timidly, staying close to the shore. I read sentences in French, but I translate the words into their English equivalents as I go. I see the sentence “Je ne parle qu’une langue” and I say to myself “I do not speak that one language.”<sup>4</sup> In pronouncing the French words I confine myself to the sounds I use in English. At this point in my journey I am obviously not yet bilingual. Even if I do read a French sentence correctly, I do so from the position of an English speaker. If I want to make real progress, then, I will need to venture out farther from the shore. I need to read French sentences according to their own grammar and to speak using properly French pronunciations. Eventually I get closer to the other shore; I know that I am not yet a French speaker, but I also know that it is only a matter of time before I am. Finally, if I am successful, I complete the crossing and take a new stand on the opposite shore. At that point I am truly bilingual.

Although this account of learning seems plausible, it in fact leaves out the most essential part. The analogy as I have presented it suggests that the process of learning is divided neatly into two phases. At first I am an English speaker and I remain one even after I have ventured out into the water. Having gone out only a little, I know that I can come back. “Up to a certain threshold, you hold on to this feeling of security: in other words, you have not really left.”<sup>5</sup> And then, having crossed a certain threshold, I am a French speaker. I may not be all the way there, but I nonetheless feel that my arrival is imminent. I start to experience myself as a French speaker. I take up a position on the

other shore, even if only prospectively. What this account leaves out is the threshold itself, the middle that separates the state of being monolingual from the state of being bilingual. But this middle is what makes all the difference: there can be no change of state without the passage through the middle. In the middle I abandon the security of the first shore without yet being able to take up a position, even prospectively, on the second. Here I take no stand at all, I belong to neither shore. All of the “reference points lie equally far.”<sup>6</sup> This is the point at which I stop translating each French word into English and at which I cease to pronounce the words using the sounds I already know, but without yet knowing how to read and to pronounce French on its own terms. Here in the middle my reading, listening, and speaking are no longer oriented by English and not yet by French. I am disoriented. I try to pick up on the cadence of spoken French, but I don’t yet have the feel for that cadence. I try to form my mouth into the shapes necessary to pronounce French correctly, but I experience those shapes as entirely unnatural. In the middle I am exposed, literally put out, deprived of the security of solid ground and stable orientation. This exposure is the condition of possibility for my becoming a French speaker. Having taken up a new position on the other shore, however, I easily forget the disorienting moment of exposure that made it possible.

Exposure is given experientially as an openness to possibilities that one cannot render determinate in terms of the position one already occupies.<sup>7</sup> So, for example, when I venture into the middle of the river and try to hear French on its own terms, without translating what I hear into English, I find myself oriented toward a sense that is given as opaque. Having temporarily lost the experience of sense as something already neatly articulated by the English language, I become attuned to the sense of what is being said,

but without knowing what the sense is or how it is being articulated. I am oriented toward sense, in other words, as an unactualized possibility. That I find myself oriented toward this possible sense at all suggests that even if English is still the only language I really know, I am nonetheless not *just* an English speaker. The experience of exposure, then, reveals a dimension of possibility that both subtends and destabilizes position.

Serres provides a second example of this point that will be helpful toward bringing out what is essential in the phenomenon of moral obligation:

Have you ever tended goal for your team, while an adversary hurries to take a clean, close shot? Relaxed, as if free, the body mimes the future participle, fully ready to unwind: toward the highest point, at ground level, or halfway up, in both directions, left and right; toward the center of the solar plexus, a starry plateau launches its virtual branches in all directions at once, like a bouquet of axons.<sup>8</sup>

The point here is that *being* a goalkeeper entails having the capacity to maintain a kind of exposure. That is to say, the goalkeeper must be able *virtually* to occupy several different positions at once. To simplify for the sake of illustration, let us suppose that there are seven places where the attacker might put the ball: the upper left, upper right, middle left, middle right, lower left, lower right, and in the center of the net. The goalkeeper, of course, does not know in advance where the attacker is going to try to put the ball. During the brief time when the attacker is preparing to shoot, then, the goalkeeper must be poised to move in all seven of these directions. If she commits too early to one of the positions, she will almost certainly fail. She must remain exposed, outside of any given position, in order to have a reasonable chance at success. Eventually, of course, the goalkeeper will have to choose a direction. When she does this, we will tend to notice the

position she took and overlook the exposure that made it possible. But it is precisely that capacity for exposure, for virtually occupying many different positions at once, that makes her a goalkeeper at all. Again, the condition of possibility for position is exposition.

The goalkeeper's exposure in all directions produces a state that Serres calls sensitivity (*sensibilité*). While preparing to defend against the shot on goal, the goalkeeper certainly adopts a kind of position. But her position is not at all like that of "a stone or a statue that is immobilized according to the laws of static, resting on its pedestal and around its center of gravity, stable, balanced, abandoned to the rules of rest."<sup>9</sup> The position of the statue is fixed. The position of the goalkeeper, on the other hand, is "overflowing with possibility and capacity."<sup>10</sup> Her body is sensitive to multiple possible futures, prepared to respond to whichever of them comes to be actualized. Its position is open. This state of sensitivity is not an abstraction, but rather an experience that is given bodily in a wide variety of contexts. The musician, for example, who improvises along with other musicians can *feel* this openness right in his hands. He must be prepared to follow any number of leads that might be suggested by his fellow musicians. The musician experiences sensitivity especially vividly when he holds himself back, when he does not allow himself to resort to the chord changes or phrasings to which he is most accustomed and which he thus finds most comfortable.<sup>11</sup> We can see the same phenomenon in the example of learning. When I venture out far from the shore and cease to read or hear French from the position of an English speaker, I find myself especially sensitive to the nuances of the language I am struggling to learn. I hear the sound "ne" and I hold back from mechanically translating it into English as "not": I need to listen

very closely for a “pas” or a “que” or a “guère” that will make all the difference to the meaning of the sentence. That very brief moment between the “ne” and the “pas,” “que,” or “guère” is a moment of sensitivity that everyone who has learned French as a second language has felt very keenly.

### **Harlequin Emperor of the Moon**

Serres provides a compelling image of the dimension of pure possibility that subtends position in his retelling of Nolant de Fatouville’s seventeenth century farce *Arlequin empereur dans la lune*. Harlequin, of course, is a stock character in the commedia dell’arte tradition, recognizable by his multi-colored patchwork costume. He is usually depicted as a comically unintelligent and unscrupulous servant in love with Columbine, a maid whom he attempts incompetently to court. In *Arlequin empereur dans la lune* Columbine is depicted as a servant to Dr. Balouard, who is obsessed by the idea that there is a civilization on the moon that resembles the civilization here on Earth. In the opening scene Harlequin overhears Dr. Balouard telling Pierrot that three men—an apothecary, a baker, and a farmer—have asked him for Columbine’s hand in marriage. Recognizing that his opportunity to win Columbine’s heart is slipping away, Harlequin adopts a succession of disguises, hoping to gain access to Dr. Balouard’s home and thus to his beloved. In one scene Harlequin disguises himself as a woman, trying to convince the doctor’s wife to take him in as her chambermaid. Later he attempts unsuccessfully to impersonate the apothecary, the baker, and the farmer who had requested Columbine’s hand in marriage. And most comically, Harlequin presents himself to Dr. Balouard as an ambassador from the Emperor of the Moon, on whose behalf he requests permission to

marry the doctor's daughter, Isabelle. In the final scene, Harlequin arrives in the guise of the Emperor of the Moon himself.

In Serres's retelling, Harlequin is presented at a press conference, where he is giving a report on his most recent inspection of his lunar territories.<sup>12</sup> The press are all excited to hear about how life on the moon differs from life on Earth. But Harlequin's presentation leaves everyone disappointed: everything on the moon, he insists, is just as it is here. The press cannot believe that this is true: surely there must be *some* differences to report. But Harlequin continues to insist that everything is the same. This scene corresponds to the well-known final scene of *Arlequin empereur dans la lune*, where Harlequin presents himself to Dr. Balouard and his household as the Emperor of the Moon. Dr. Balouard happily grants the Emperor permission to marry his daughter. Since his advanced age will prevent him from accompanying Isabelle to her new home, however, the doctor takes advantage of the Emperor's presence to ask as many questions as he can about life on the moon. In response to each question the Emperor gives a description of lunar life that could pass just as well for a description, albeit satirical, of life on Earth. On the moon people are governed by self-interest and ambition, wives spend too much of their husbands' money, and the treatments that doctors give their patients are worse than the original illnesses.<sup>13</sup> In response to each of these descriptions, the various members of the household declare "*c'est tout comme icy*," "it's just like here."

In the original play, the other characters were excited to learn that the lunar world was just like their own. In Serres's retelling, however, the press remain incredulous. Although Harlequin continues to insist that everything is exactly the same, the press

observe that his own appearance belies that claim. “You who say that everywhere everything is just as it is here, can you also make us believe that your cape is the same in every part, for example in front as it is on the back?”<sup>14</sup> Harlequin’s patchwork costume evidences his multiplicity, his exposure to alterity while his words bespeak nothing but unity and sameness. Caught in this embarrassing contradiction, Harlequin’s only solution is to remove his costume, showing thereby that his multiplicity is only apparent. It turns out, though, that under each layer of clothing there lies yet another patchwork. Eventually we learn that even Harlequin’s skin is a patchwork: he is multiplicity and exposure all the way down.

Harlequin is full of possibility, very little in himself and potentially almost anything at all. This is reflected in his patchwork costume, but also in his presenting himself in so many different guises. Harlequin appears as everything from a chambermaid to a farmer to the Emperor of the Moon. Indeed it is not at all obvious how we could answer the question, Who is Harlequin *himself*? There does not seem to be any “true” Harlequin standing under his multiform appearances. Rather Harlequin’s defining characteristic just is his holding himself back, his not fixing himself in any determinate position. Serres expresses this understanding in his retelling of the story by showing how, at the conclusion of his undressing, Harlequin becomes Pierrot:

Now then, when everybody had his back turned, and the oil lamps were giving signs of flickering out, and it seemed that this evening the improvisation had ended up being a flop, someone suddenly called out, as if something new were playing in a place where everything had, that evening, been a repetition, so that the public as a whole, turned back as one, all looking toward the stage, violently illuminated by the dying fires of the floodlights:

“Pierrot! Pierrot! The audience cried, “Pierrot Lunaire!”<sup>15</sup>

Pierrot is another of the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, recognizable most readily by his all white costume. His whiteness represents, at least in Serres's version of the story, pure indetermination, unconstrained possibility, the nothing that is also everything.<sup>16</sup> Harlequin's blank indeterminacy and possibility are not at all incompatible with his rigidly fixed position, his insistence that everywhere everything is the same. In fact these qualities are two sides of the same coin. As we have seen, exposition and preposition are the necessary conditions for position. On the one hand, Harlequin is certainly exposed to radically different conditions of life on the moon and on the earth. Indeed as Serres points out, the emperor is more exposed than anyone else. He owes his success, and ultimately his very life, to a finely developed sensitivity for the people's various needs and grievances.<sup>17</sup> But on the other hand, Harlequin assimilates these differences, integrating them into a fixed position that comes to seem entirely natural and self-evident. Having established himself in this new position, Harlequin loses some of his capacity to experience genuine otherness. He encounters everything new merely as a variation of what he already knows: “Everywhere everything is just as it is here, identical in every way to what one can see ordinarily on the terraqueous globe. Except that the degrees of grandeur and beauty change.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Obligation**

These ideas of exposition, sensitivity, and possibility, gathered together in the image of Harlequin Emperor of the Moon, have far-reaching implications for our understanding of the moral phenomenon of obligation. According to Immanuel Kant, it belongs to the essence of our experience of obligation precisely that it *not* include any

dimension of unactualized moral possibility. The content of our obligation, he insists, is unambiguous: “What is required in accordance with the principle of autonomy of choice is easily and without hesitation seen by the commonest intelligence;” it “is plain of itself to everyone.”<sup>19</sup> Our common human reason has the principle of morality “always before its eyes and uses [it] as its standard of judgment. It would be easy here to show how, with this compass in its hand, it knows its way around very well in all the cases that come before it, how to distinguish what is good, what is evil, what conforms to duty or is contrary to duty. . . .”<sup>20</sup> There is nothing here that corresponds to the experience of trying to follow a conversation taking place in a foreign language, where the sense is given at once as opaque and as potentially manifest. Even if I were to find myself in a situation for which nothing in my previous experience had prepared me, I would still be able to discern clearly and without hesitation what I was obligated to do. Borrowing one of Kant’s own examples, let us suppose that I am threatened by my sovereign with certain death unless I make a false deposition against an honorable person.<sup>21</sup> Although the situation is entirely unprecedented in my experience, its moral sense is given immediately and unambiguously: I must resist my fear of death and refuse to make the false deposition. The situation thus yields up its moral sense in a manner completely different from the way a foreign language yields up its sense. As regards obligation, there is only one language and we all speak it fluently.

But one might object here that our wills are not determined exclusively by the moral law and that we do therefore experience a dimension of moral possibility when we are called upon to act. Confronted with the sovereign’s order to lie, for example, I obviously retain the option of disregarding what the moral law commands, despite the

clarity with which I conceive it. As Kant himself argues, the faculties of desire of finite rational beings like us are divided into higher and lower branches. The higher faculty of desire is reason itself insofar as it determines the will directly, through the mere form of law.<sup>22</sup> The lower faculty of desire, on the other hand, is determined pathologically, i.e., by the feelings of pleasure and pain; its principle is self-love or the pursuit of one's own happiness.<sup>23</sup> If our faculties of desire were not divided into these two branches, and if there were not therefore a very real possibility of choosing either in favor of the law or of our inclinations, then we could have no experience of obligation at all. For obligation, as Kant describes it, is an experience of constraint. If we had only a higher faculty of desire, so that we never experienced any incentives competing with the moral law, then we would never experience the law as constraining our action. We would act in accordance with the law as a matter of course. One might argue, then, that the concept of obligation, far from excluding any dimension of unactualized moral possibility, actually presupposes such a dimension.

But on Kant's terms, the possibility that is required by the concept of obligation is necessarily a non-moral possibility. An act that violates the moral law may very well be physically possible, but it is nonetheless morally impossible.<sup>24</sup> Kant attributes this insight to our moral common sense:

Suppose that an acquaintance whom you otherwise liked were to attempt to justify himself before you for having borne false witness by appealing to what he regarded as the holy duty of consulting his own happiness and, then, by recounting all the advantages he had gained thereby, pointing out the prudence he had shown in securing himself against detection, even by yourself, to whom alone he now reveals the secret only in order that he may

be able at any time to deny it. And then suppose that he then affirmed, in all seriousness, that he had thereby fulfilled a true human duty—you would either laugh in his face or shrink from him in disgust. . . .<sup>25</sup>

Anyone who is even minimally capable of moral experience can recognize “easily and without hesitation” that the pursuit of self-interest stands in need of justification by a higher principle; the principle of self-love can never be the source of obligation. The acquaintance’s act of bearing false witness, then, is given immediately as morally impossible. If, on the other hand, the acquaintance had merely described how he was *tempted* to tell the lie, we would probably neither laugh in his face nor shrink from him in disgust, for the experience of inclination as an incentive to act contrary to duty is common to all finite rational beings. In experiencing the possibility of lying as a temptation, he would demonstrate his recognition of the moral law as ultimately authoritative. And recognizing the authoritativeness of the moral law, he could not experience the act of lying as a moral possibility.

That the moral law is the exclusive source of obligation is suggested perhaps even more strongly by the way in which we determine whether an act has a specifically moral worth. Beings like us, whose faculties of desire are divided into higher and lower branches, experience the moral law as constraining our wills, as commanding us to do our duty. This, again, is because we do not do our duty as a matter of course. But we do not experience the principle of self-love as constraining our action, for to act in accordance with that principle is to act just as we would if we had had no consciousness whatever of the moral law. Thus we do not attribute moral worth to actions when we perceive that they have been motivated by inclination. We do not, for example, attribute any

specifically moral worth to a person's merely continuing in her existence, despite the fact that preserving one's life is a duty. This, according to Kant, is because we all have an immediate inclination to preserve our lives; it is something we would do even if we had never conceived of anything like the moral law. Of course we would still judge the person's continuing to live as a good, at least in most circumstances. If the person were a friend, for example, we would certainly regard her continued existence as a good thing. But we would not give her any kind of moral credit for it. If, however, we knew that the person chose to continue in her existence despite her having lost all enjoyment in life, then we would likely conclude that her act was motivated by the moral law.<sup>26</sup> Only in this case, where her choice seems to have been constrained by the law, would we attribute to her act a specifically moral kind of goodness. This judgment, which Kant attributes to our moral common sense, demonstrates the way in which the range of what is morally possible is circumscribed immediately and without remainder by the moral law. Whatever is not given as commanded by the law is necessarily a non-moral possibility.

Finally, this position that we all take as practical agents subject to the authority of the moral law depends on no prior exposition. We do not pass through any disorienting middle on the way to our discovery of the moral law as the exclusive source of our obligations. Rather "the moral law is given, as an apodictically certain fact, as it were, of pure reason, a fact of which we are a priori conscious, even if it be granted that no example could be found in which it has been followed exactly."<sup>27</sup> The authoritativeness of the moral law "forces itself upon us as a synthetic proposition a priori based on no pure or empirical intuition."<sup>28</sup> We do not become conscious of the moral law, then, through any kind of medium, e.g., through our observations of others' conduct, through

our consciousness of transcendental freedom, through moral feeling, or through theoretical cognition of a supposedly objective order of ends. The moral law, rather, “is firmly established of itself.”<sup>29</sup> And from this firmly established position, which we have occupied always already, we are able to delimit the whole field of moral possibility without remainder.

### **Moral Possibilities**

These characteristics of the phenomenon of obligation can all be traced back, Kant thinks, to “the naturally healthy understanding, which does not need to be taught but rather only to be enlightened.”<sup>30</sup> But recalling Serres’s cardinal insight that pre-positional relations support the positions we take precisely by disappearing from view, might it not be the case that our “naturally healthy understanding” is deceived in this matter? Might it not be the case that what we recognize as our duty is in fact just one actualization of an open possibility of moral sense, in much the same way that French is just one actualization of an open possibility of linguistic sense? This is what I would like to argue.

For Kant, what is essential in the experience of obligation has its origin in the fact that our practical subjectivity is extended across a gap between the sensible and the intelligible, between inclination and the moral law. Obligation, as Kant conceives it, is only possible for a being whose “will is at a crossroads, as it were, between its principle *a priori*, which is formal, and its incentive *a posteriori*, which is material.”<sup>31</sup> All of the examples that Kant uses to bring out what is essential in moral experience emphasize this conflict. That it is a duty to keep our promises is brought out by an example in which the practical subject is “pressured by distress” and thus tempted to act on the “principle of self-love, or of what is expedient for [herself].”<sup>32</sup> That it is a duty to develop our talents is

brought out by an example in which the subject “sees himself as in comfortable circumstances and sooner prefers to indulge in gratification than to trouble himself with the expansion and improvement of his fortunate natural predispositions.”<sup>33</sup> What these examples and others like them show is that although our wills are situated at a crossroads, we know perfectly well which direction is the right one to take. Or to employ the more Serresian analogy, although our practical subjectivity is extended across the gap between the intelligible and the sensible, we find ourselves to have been firmly anchored on the side of the law always already. Despite our being tempted by the inclinations, we require “no well-informed shrewdness” to know what we ought to do.<sup>34</sup> At no point, then, are we really exposed to a morally disorienting middle.

But surely it is a great simplification of our moral experience to trace the experience of constraint back in every case to a conflict between inclination and the law. In many cases, I want to argue, our experience of a situation as morally problematic can be traced back rather to our finding ourselves faced with a number of possibilities, all of which at least seem to make some kind of moral claim on us. In these situations, we find ourselves unable, on the basis of the moral positions we have already staked out, to determine which possibilities have a moral worth that makes a binding claim on us or to discern precisely what that moral worth consists in. The moral sense of the situation, in other words, is given as opaque. Just like the goalkeeper in Serres’s analogy, then, we must be able to maintain ourselves in a state of exposure, of sensitivity to the multiple possibilities. And like the goalkeeper, we must ultimately choose. If this description of moral experience is correct, then the experience of obligation can be shown to have its origin not in the extension of our practical subjectivity across the gap between the

sensible and the intelligible, but rather in its being stretched across a virtual multiplicity of moral possibilities.

An especially vivid example of this Serresian account of moral experience is provided by the life of Simone Weil. From her earliest childhood, Weil demonstrated an extraordinary degree of compassion for those whose lives were filled with hardship. As a five year old child during World War I, Weil refused sugar, having been told that the French soldiers were deprived of it.<sup>35</sup> In 1934, hoping to gain a better understanding of the sufferings of the working class, she took a leave of absence from her teaching position and began working in a factory. This work was especially hard for Weil, given her physical clumsiness and the extreme fragility of her health. And throughout her life, Weil always refused to eat any more or any better food than the least fortunate were able to eat, a practice that played an important part in her death at the young age of thirty-four. Even as her health rapidly deteriorated during a stay at a London hospital, Weil refused the nutrition that her doctors insisted was necessary for her recovery. The reason she gave for this refusal was that “she couldn’t eat when she thought of the French people starving in France.”<sup>36</sup>

Now, from the moral position that I, and certainly many others, occupy, it seems clear that one ought not to sacrifice one’s well-being and, *a fortiori*, one’s life unless doing so will contribute to effecting some greater good. From this point of view, it is difficult to discern the moral sense of Weil’s acts of self-sacrifice. Of course I can easily recognize the moral worth of Weil’s strong concern for the well-being of others. But given that her sharing of others’ hardships put her at risk of dying at an unnecessarily young age, and more importantly, given that her doing so contributed practically nothing

to the welfare of those for whom she professed concern, the moral worth of her acts is far from obvious. Her acts of self-sacrifice seem as morally pointless as banging one's head against a wall out of compassion for sufferers of migraine headaches. But this way of understanding the moral worth of Weil's actions seems to miss something essential. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant writes of respect that it "is a tribute we cannot refuse to pay to merit whether we will or not; . . ." Whenever I perceive in someone "righteousness in a higher degree than I am conscious of in myself, *my mind bows* whether I choose or not. . . ." <sup>37</sup> Even though I do not understand the moral sense of Weil's self-sacrifice, I find that I cannot help but respect it. This feeling of respect proves that I do not experience Weil's acts as morally impossible; I do indeed experience them as having some kind of moral sense, even though I am unable, from the point of view of the moral position I already occupy, to articulate precisely what that sense is.

A proponent of the Kantian account of obligation might object here, challenging the accuracy of my description both of Weil's conduct and of the experience I have when I reflect on it. First, the Kantian might argue that I have misjudged Weil's conduct, attributing moral worth to acts that were in fact motivated pathologically. In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant offers a description of human conduct in general that could plausibly be taken to apply to Weil's prodigious acts of self-sacrifice:

From the day that the human being begins to speak by means of "I," he brings his beloved self to light wherever he is permitted to, and egoism progresses unchecked. If he does not do so openly (for then the egoism of others opposes him), nevertheless he does so covertly and with seeming self-abnegation and

pretended modesty, in order all the more reliably to give himself a superior worth in the judgment of others.<sup>38</sup>

Weil's friend Gustave Thibon described Weil's conduct in a way that suggests something like this Kantian point of view: "Her aim was self-forgetfulness, and she came upon herself in this very forgetfulness."<sup>39</sup> Perhaps despite her own best intentions, Weil's acts were ultimately motivated by egoism. And if that is indeed the case, then the feeling of respect that I have when I contemplate her acts is entirely inappropriate. Perhaps, the Kantian might argue, the feeling I experience is not exactly respect, but something more like admiration for her commitment to a life of self-denial. This would resemble the admiration we have for great athletes and musicians, who impose severe discipline on themselves in order to develop their talents to extraordinary degrees. The object of this admiration is not the person *qua* good in a specifically moral sense, but rather the person *qua* skillful. Perhaps I merely admire Weil for her feats of self-negation, as a kind of athlete of the soul. If so, then the feeling I have would suggest nothing at all about the open-endedness of moral sense. On this account, the moral sense of Weil's conduct would seem opaque to me simply because I had not examined it rigorously enough; after careful reflection, the Kantian would argue, the moral sense would reveal itself as unambiguous.

But the description of the feeling I have toward Weil's project as mere admiration misses the way in which that feeling presents Weil as an object of specifically moral concern, and presents me to myself as constrained, as obligated to comport myself toward that project in the right way. The moral concern that I experience suggests that her project does have some kind of moral worth, and is not merely egoistic. This becomes clearer if I imagine myself having been a friend of Weil's, faced with the problem of how to engage

with her regarding this project whose moral sense I find so opaque. Trying out this thought experiment, I do not find myself knowing “easily and without hesitation” what I ought to do. But I do have the sense that if I had chosen wrongly, I would have done a moral wrong to Weil. This case seems different in a very important way from the case of the false promise or the case of the person who prefers not to develop his talents. In those cases, the possible courses of action can be neatly divided between those obviously motivated by inclination, and thus lacking moral worth, and those motivated by the law, and thus possessing moral worth. In the case of my imagined obligation to Weil, though, I must choose between two possibilities that I experience as genuinely moral, possibilities which are virtually co-present but nonetheless incompatible. On the one hand, I recognize an obligation, albeit a wide one, to contribute to the well-being of others. If I had a friend whose behavior consistently caused her great suffering, both emotional and physical, I would certainly judge myself to be morally blameworthy if I did not implore her to stop that behavior. On the other hand, I do recognize the moral sense of Weil’s acts as making some kind of binding claim on me, even though I can conceive that sense only very roughly. Weil herself clearly regarded her way of life, along with all the suffering that it entailed, as absolutely obligatory; to live any other kind of life was morally impossible for her. And as evidenced by the respect that I cannot help but feel for her, I am not entirely closed off to the possibility that she was right. From this point of view, then, I would actually violate my obligation to her by trying to contribute to her happiness. The moral worth that she discerned in her own way of life would make a binding claim on me as well, at least as regards my conduct in relation to her. I would be obligated, in Kant’s terms, to make her end my own, to support her in the way of life that caused her so much

suffering.<sup>40</sup> I could not, of course, pursue both of these courses of action, even though both seem to make genuinely moral claims on me. Like the goalkeeper who is sensitive to multiple, incompatible possibilities, I would have to choose one of them without being able to know in advance whether my choice would turn out to have been the correct one.

### **Conclusion: Harlequin, Pierrot, and Moral Sensitivity**

According to Kant, respect is the sensibly experienced effect of our having taken our moral stand always already for the law and against the inclinations.<sup>41</sup> But the case of Simone Weil suggests a very different understanding of the role of respect in our moral experience. There the feeling of respect was precisely what made manifest moral possibilities that called into question the moral position that I had already adopted. Far from confirming me in the moral position that had seemed so natural to me before I had encountered the story of Simone Weil, the feeling of respect presented me to myself as exposed to the morally disorienting middle. Respect, then, is a form of moral sensitivity; it reveals to me that although I have taken a particular moral stand, I am always something more, *qua* practical subject, than the one who has taken that stand. Even after having read about the life of Simone Weil, I still take the position that one has an obligation to contribute to others' happiness. If I had known Weil, I am quite sure that I would have implored her to stop doing the things that caused such apparently needless suffering; I would have regarded myself as blameworthy if I had not. That is the moral position on which I am willing to take my stand. Nonetheless, the respect that I feel for Weil's way of life reveals that I am something more than the one who has taken that stand. I am sensitive to a dimension of unactualized moral possibility that ceaselessly

undermines the certainty and immediacy that Kant thinks are essential to the experience of obligation.

Our virtually occupying numerous, impossible moral positions in no way weakens our obligation. It is rather the very basis of obligation. Our practical subjectivity is not indifferent to the multiplicity of moral possibilities across which it is stretched; like Serres's goalkeeper, we must not only choose, but we must choose correctly. This "must" is the constraint or necessitation that is essential to obligation. Having chosen, however, we will tend to focus on the position we have taken, localizing obligation there and overlooking the exposition that is inseparable from it. The model for obligation, understood in this way, is provided by Harlequin Emperor of the Moon. On the one hand, for reasons that we have seen, no one is more exposed than Harlequin. Insofar as he is exposed in this way, Harlequin is Pierrot. He is truly a patchwork, at once a baker, an apothecary, a farmer, a chambermaid, and an ambassador. But insofar as he is Emperor, Harlequin must be something more than just Pierrot: he must eventually take his stand and lay down the law, which will then appear to everyone within the empire, and indeed to Harlequin himself, as the very source of all obligation. Harlequin will slowly lose his sensitivity to possibilities other than the ones he has actualized, to the point where he will be able to declare with perfect certainty that, practically speaking, everywhere everything is exactly the same, that there is "nothing new under the sun or on the moon."<sup>42</sup> But, for reasons that Serres has described in great detail, Harlequin cannot maintain himself in this extreme state of insensitivity either. He must be something more than just the legislating subject. Harlequin Emperor of the Moon and Pierrot are ultimately indissociable. The phenomenon of obligation, then, has its locus neither in Harlequin

Emperor of the Moon nor in Pierrot, neither in the law nor in sensitivity to unactualized possibility, but rather in the tension of their indissociability.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 101.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper, ed. Phillippa Hurd (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 99-106.

<sup>4</sup> To read the French *que* as “that” is, of course, a mistake. The *que* needs to be read as part of the construction *ne...que*.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 5. Hereafter *Troubadour*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-126.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii-xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Evaristo Gherardi, *Le Theatre Italien de Gherardi, ou le recueil de toutes les Comedies & Scenes Françoises jouées par les Comediens Italiens du Roy, pendant tout le temps qu'ils ont été au Service. Enrichi d'Estampes en Taille-douce...à la fin de laquelle tous les Airs qu'on y a chantez se trouvent gravez notez, avec leur Basse-continue chiffrée*. Vol. 1. (Paris: Jean-Bapt. Cusson et Pierre Witte, 1700), 197-200.

<sup>14</sup> Serres, *Troubadour*, xiii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 41-48; Maria L. Assad, *Reading with Michel Serres: An Encounter with Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 131-132.

<sup>17</sup> Serres, *Troubadour*, 149.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>19</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 36. Page numbers refer to those of the Akademie Edition. Hereafter *CPrR*.

<sup>20</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Allen W. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 403-404. Page numbers refer to those of the Akademie Edition. Hereafter *GMM*.

<sup>21</sup> Kant, *CPrR*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Kant, *GMM*, 397-398.

<sup>27</sup> Kant, *CPrR*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Kant, *GMM*, 397.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 400.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2001), 26.

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<sup>36</sup> Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 536.

<sup>37</sup> Kant, *CPrR*, 77.

<sup>38</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, ed. Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 128. Page numbers refer to those of the Akademie Edition.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph-Marie Perrin and Gustave Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 2003), 107. Cf. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 83. "Every time I think of the crucifixion of Christ I commit the sin of envy."

<sup>40</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 388. Page numbers refer to those of the Akademie Edition.

<sup>41</sup> Kant, *CPrR*, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Serres, *Troubadour*, xiii.