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## *Deleuzian Theology and the Immanence of the Act of Being*

Daniel Colucciello Barber, *Deleuze and the Naming of God: Post-Secularism and the Future of Immanence*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 220 pp., \$34.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9780748699780.

F. LeRon Shults, *Deleuze and the Secretion of Atheism*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 225 pp., \$34.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781474401449.

### *Introduction*

Both Daniel Barber and F. LeRon Shults read the theological contributions of Gilles Deleuze in ways that differ from more recent readings of Deleuze that often take a particular concept and apply it to a social problem or phenomenon. Barber and Shults present Deleuze as a theological philosopher, uniquely able to confront the post-secular challenges of the production of meaning after the death of God, atheism, and the political dimensions of theology, specifically Christian theology. Both texts are engaged with the nexus between the political, theological, and ethical aspects of Deleuze's work, and they read Deleuze's philosophy from the perspective of his entire corpus; it is this erudition and creative use of Deleuze scholarship on theology that really makes both books important contributions.

While both books focus on Christianity, Deleuze is a relevant interlocutor to Islamicate thought and work in theology and philosophy because his philosophy seeks to over-turn Plato's "eidetic framework," or system of representative thinking, a mode of thinking that is deeply imbued into both Christian and Islamic philosophical genealogies. Deleuze offers a critique of theological thinking that is pre-Christian and pre-Islamic, which makes his philosophy adamantly outside of a specifically Christian paradigm. The case that both Barber and Shults wish to make, in different ways, is that Deleuze's outsideness to Christianity presents theologians with a world that is indifferent to the Christian and the secular at the same time, making Deleuze an essential interlocutor to contemporary theologians. The project of bringing Deleuze to bear on theological concerns and concepts entails a good deal of creative license in that Deleuze himself never seriously approached religion and theology, but he certainly references religion in peripheral ways.

In this review essay, I begin by reviewing both texts with a focus on the key themes they present for theology more generally. After developing a better understanding of these

concepts, I consider how Deleuze might be thought in relation to Islamic philosophy, particularly through his concept of immanence and the “ethics of the crack.” To do this I bring Deleuze into conversation with the great Iranian philosopher Mulla Sadra, who is considered by many commentators to have presented the most complete ontology of Islamic philosophy. My intention is to read Sadra into the Deleuzian framework of immanence, as well as to show his own unique position as both within and outside of immanence.

*Deleuze and Theology: Review of Barber and Shults*

In *Deleuze and the Naming of God*, Barber focuses on Deleuze’s concept of “differential immanence” with the overarching aim to move beyond secularism, and in so doing think a political break with the present system of secularism (10-11). It is thus important that we begin by understanding what this concept is and how it relates to the post-secular. Barber asks, “what is the secular, after all, if not a dominant formation of the present” (11)? The question of theology is tied to what he terms “the naming of God,” a process that concerns the creation of a new world of meaning. He writes, “the production of God is the production of a value that devalorizes the act by which God is named” (4). God is thus a name that plays a crucial role in the act of world making because, “it is with God that the act of world-making does not go away” (4). Differential immanence enables us to think the world and world-creation without relation to an object, and the constitution of relations between things and within each thing themselves is constituted on a set of prior relations of difference. Differential immanence thinks change within the world of difference without relying on the transcendent and it speaks of change as modes of expression of difference and intensities.

The archenemy to immanence is transcendence, and the clearest difference between these concepts is that transcendence thinks change with reference to something outside of itself (or the world). Because it is only able to think change with reference to an outside, the category of time and temporality in transcendence lead theology back to a re-affirmation of existing social and political arrangements. Paradoxically, immanence is able, Barber argues, to think rupture and change in a given world and ultimately an immanent theology can assist us with thinking beyond the “transcendent implications of Christianity” (13). Barber’s main argument is that Deleuzian immanence is able to think the creation of the new, or what he calls naming God, without relying on a theory of transcendence because differential immanence, unlike transcendent theology, does not rely on the present order to arrive at a conception of the new. Barber identifies two enemies of immanence in the work of David Bentley Hart and John Milbank, two highly influential contemporary Christian theologians.

The temporality of Deleuze’s immanence is concerned with creation, as opposed to the re-construction of the present. This entails a procedure of thinking nothing less than the impossible, or what Deleuze refers to as “utopia.” For Deleuze, utopia names the place that the movement of difference exerts on any territory schematized by the present (198). This is achieved when the movement of difference has brought about “absolute deterritorialization” within a world, constituting both a no-where and a now-here (198). Utopia is a radical politics of resistance that “annihilates the ever-expanding present, it mocks communication’s presumption of eternity, but it does not yet create the future” (200). Written in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, Barber argues that this social and political movement is an example of fabulation in that it was composed of differential relations that are not of the present order. It is utopic. Closely related to utopia, in other words, is what Deleuze names “fabulation,” or the way that we defeat the present through producing a different story. Deleuze says that

what is opposed to fiction is not the real but the way that a people begins to create a people by telling tales, which enables new relations and produces real beings (202). The fable addresses elements of the here and now, but it does so in relation to the dispersal of the nowhere. The mediation of utopia and fabulation is important to thinking change and the invention of a new future within the field of immanence because it is utopia's break with the present that gives way to fabulation's creation of the future (205).

Shults' *Iconoclastic Theology* looks at Deleuzian theology from the lens of the bio-cultural study of religion, an interdisciplinary paradigm that combines a cultural and a biological view of religion. This framework will most likely be unfamiliar to many philosophers or students of theology, but it does provide a compatible system for posing a conversation with Deleuze and theology as it analyzes religion from the point of view of human value-making, a project that is present in Deleuze's thought beginning with his major text, *Difference and Repetition*. The bio-cultural study of religion starts from the premise that humans need to make sense of their value and value making, and so religion must be understood first in a societal situation, wherein human groups cannot rely merely on empirical observations about cognitive and coalitional hypotheses to sustain value-making. Religious groups require the creation of an "infinite supernatural agent" in order to create new values. The bio-cultural study of religion is thus an analysis of how the axiological engagement of supernatural agents (i.e. Gods) functions at the cultural/group level for particular coalitions and religious groups. Deleuze (Shults rightly notes) is a theological thinker in that his project, beginning with *Difference and Repetition*, asks, "What are the transcendental conditions for the real experience of creating new values" (15)? Christianity, compared to other religious coalitions, has a high degree of what Shults calls "sociographic promiscuity" and "anthropomorphic promiscuity" as it relies on the mediation of priests to derive meaning and the sacred (17). Because it is a religion mediated by priests and clergy, or what he calls a "sacerdotal machine," Christianity traps desire within an infinite "anthropological promiscuity," a problem that Shults applies to Deleuze's *Anti-Oedipus* and *Thousand Plateaus* series.

With this methodological basis established, Shults goes on to critique the image of Christ in priestly mediation and divine intentionality within Christianity. His argument is that this infinite power of the divine being of Christ "secretes atheism"—a concept that has to do with the way that the infinite God is represented (20). In Christianity, the secret of atheism is tied to the scandal of revelation and its linkage to the body of Christ. Christ's divine image secretes an atheism in that the finitude of the person of Christ as a man interferes and disrupts attempts to axiologically ground his being on the basis of an infinite divine transcendent being (22). This contradiction is based around the way in which Christianity is linked to the imagistic-based paradigm of Plato's representative thinking. Since Deleuze has fashioned much of his philosophy as an attempt to subvert this Platonic framework, Shults turns to Deleuze to de-Platonize Christianity. All religious coalitions practice a "sociographic prudery," a concept based on the following premise: empirical observations about cognitive and coalitional hypotheses of religious groups are not sufficient to human meaning systems, they must create supernatural entities such as Gods in order to make sense of their value and value-making.

The goal of Shults's reading is to liberate the Platonic, or "iconoclastic machine" of Christianity by detaching it from the "sacerdotal machine" (144). The iconoclastic machine refers to the way that Deleuze overturns Plato by creating "a new concept of Ideas as immanent and differential, rather than transcendent and identical" (27). Or, as Deleuze states

in *Logic of Sense*, “to reverse Platonism is first and foremost to remove essences and to substitute events in their place, as jets of singularities.”<sup>1</sup> Shults’s study is a very exhaustive fleshing out of the key theological themes in Deleuze’s entire philosophical corpus and it presents very helpful analyses of *Difference and Repetition*, the *Anti-Oedipus* and *Thousand Plateaus* series and *Logic of Sense*, all with an eye to the anti-Platonic and immanent theology at work in Deleuze. Overall, the text presents a solid grounding for thinking a form of Christian theology that is stripped from the secrets of atheism that it produces and is, therefore, able to re-connect to productive flows of desire. One is left to wonder if, after such an operation, we would still be able to remain true to Christianity as such, or whether the entire basis of the religion would transform into something else?

### *Analogy vs. Immanence*

Although dichotomies are often reductive ways to account for categories and concepts, they can also be exceedingly helpful in classifying large swaths of thinkers and defining frameworks of thought. The dichotomy between analogy and immanence in theology is helpful as it enables us to arrive at a general orientation of a given theology, specifically the way that God is placed in relation to being. In Barber’s chapter “Stuck in the Middle” he carefully critiques John Milbank’s reading of Deleuze’s immanence and what Milbank calls the “violent origins” of Deleuze’s ontology. In his *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank makes a distinction between ontologies of violence and ontologies of peace<sup>2</sup>; the former is based on a pagan cosmos that is inherently chaotic and violent, while the latter is based on a Christian ontology that presents the first harmonic conception of the cosmos. Violent ontologies, Milbank argues, are “forces into a consequent war between meaning, or collective goods, and being. It is this sort of dialectic that prevents them from providing the conditions for genuine peace” (83). Peaceful ontologies, on the other hand, have an analogical correspondence of being in such a way that difference can remain inherently open and relational. Milbank presents Deleuze’s ontology as violent and in contradistinction to Christianity’s peacefulness. While Milbank does not reduce Christianity as the only peaceful ontology, he does not mention Islam, nor, for that matter, does Barber. Milbank rather argues that the infinite, in a Christian ontology, presents a harmonic peace that captures difference in transcendence—not as an infinite chaos as he argues Deleuze’s ontology presents.

For Milbank, the enactment of a violent or peaceful ontology results in social relations that are either peaceful or violent, and violent societies emerge unless they are connected to a conception of a “hospitable cosmos” and a peaceful ontology (85). In order to arrive at a peaceful social situation, there must be an accord with the violent chaotic cosmos to prevent social unrest. Barber shows how this turns into a zero-sum game for Milbank when he writes, “political liberation, when it does not understand itself in terms of analogy, grants itself a tragic fate in advance because its ontology is violent” (85-86). In Milbank’s conception of a peaceful ontology, God names a supra-temporal infinite in which every desirable effect is already realized. What concerns Barber with such a conception of God is the way in which difference is managed, not because it is difference itself that holds the key to a violent ontology (as Milbank seems to insist), but because a world in which difference is devoid of a temporality that might change the world presents us with a world where the

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>2</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 278-325.

present social order is continually re-affirmed. Barber is correct to point out that the stakes in these two ontologies is not the extent to which they are either violent or peaceful, but it is the extent to which they are able to think true change in a given world. Furthermore, from the perspective of immanence, the important distinction is not between peaceful and non-peaceful ontologies, nor is it between harmonious and dissonant accords; it is between accords that seek to creatively re-express the interstice, and those that do not. The interstice is the point of change that cannot be integrated back into the difference that is produced in the world. What Milbank will argue against Deleuze is that he cannot make the claim that future accords will be better, i.e., less violent because they do not rely on nor do they require a transcendental site that can secure the accord. As background, accords come about when there are cracks or rupture points within a given order that present a moment for a new temporality to develop, or a new order of difference. Milbank's transcendent system of thinking change and the naming of God cannot adequately think new possibilities, or cracks as they emerge precisely because they are not created within time, but are transcendent to the given world. Deleuze's solution to the crack between order (peace) and chaos (violence) is to produce a new middle by generating a product that draws on both planes of existence (97). For Milbank on the other hand, the middle must have a specific role of assuring beings that they are placed in a peaceful space and contained within the infinite. But this specified role of the "new accord" is not able to produce something new outside of a spatial logic as Milbank's conception of God remains supra-temporal (99). For Deleuze, we must think temporality in such a way that it does not transcend history and it must also be sought from within our own historical situation (144).

These ontological considerations we have just outlined have an important ethical dimension to them. For Deleuze, the "ethics of the crack" results in two types of becoming: majoritarian and minoritarian. A minoritarian group deals with the crack as a crisis at the level of their very existence, and typically cracks result in struggles based around the very existence of the group, and thus communication breaks down. The majoritarian ethics of the crack, on the other hand, is unable to integrate the minoritarian group back into the ontological edifice as its process of becoming minor works with a new temporality and thus a new mode of existence that often cannot be re-appropriated or even included back into the majoritarian mode of becoming. We will return to these ethical considerations of the crack after turning by way of an examination of the ontology of the Iranian philosopher Mulla Sadra.

### *Mulla Sadra and the Act of Being*

How might the analogical versus immanent modes of theology and the ontologies of peace versus violence map onto philosophical considerations by Islamic philosophers? As both Barber and Shults have shown, there is nothing distinctly Christian about Deleuze's theology, which means that Islamic philosophy can indeed find some important points of dialogue and readings of Deleuze. What I want to develop in the remainder of this essay is the way in which Sadra's philosophical thought is not reducible to either analogy or to immanence, and his ontology thus problematizes the distinction between a violent and a peaceful ontology entirely. It also enables thinking change in such a way that it does not reinscribe the oppressive, or majoritarian subjectivity of the present. While Sadra's ordering of existence is developed out of a Neo-Platonic framework of hierarchy (i.e. analogy), his conception of the act of being—his most central account of the real and the basis for the ontology of Islam—is thought within an immanent framework. Sadra's ontology is thus

outside of Milbank's distinction between violent and peaceful ontologies and it incorporates both transcendent and immanent aspects of thinking change and naming God.

My account of Sadra's philosophy comes primarily from the incredible commentary and translation of Sadra's philosophical corpus, *The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mulla Sadra* by Christian Jambet. Jambet is a former Maoist French philosopher who remains an important thinker of the May 1968 moment in French intellectual life. His un-translated book, *The Angel: The Ontology of Revolution*, co-written with Guy Lardreau posed a conversation with Maoist political thought, psychoanalysis and outlined a new form of spiritual resistance.<sup>3</sup> Since the early 1980s Jambet has been one of the most widely read translators and commentators of Mulla Sadra in the Anglo-American world.

Launching from our discussion of immanence and the ethics of the crack, we will attempt to bring Sadra's ontology into these contemporary conversations around the secular and a politics of immanence. Jambet's text is interesting in the context established by Barber's and Shults's books—which both sought to examine how the legacy of Christian post-secularity can be rescued vis-à-vis Deleuze—because Jambet in part turns to Sadra to escape the Heideggerian western-centric ontology in his own study. Where Deleuze states in *What is Philosophy?*, that Christianity only produces concepts through its atheism, Jambet argues that Sadra's ontology is the finest expression and account of ontology in Islam. Deleuze considers any cultural or religious philosophy, including a possible Islamic philosophy to require a movement of atheism in order for it to reach what he calls the “concept.”

Can we speak of a Chinese, Hindu, Jewish, or Islamic “philosophy”? Yes, to the extent that thinking takes place on a plane of immanence that can be populated by figures as much as by concepts. However, this plane of immanence is not exactly philosophical, but pre-philosophical. It is affected by what populates and reacts on it, in such a way that it becomes philosophical only through the effect of the concept.<sup>4</sup>

Deleuze is suspicious of philosophical attempts to re-territorialize a certain region or people in the way Heidegger did with Germany and Nazism. Given Sadra's prominent place in the current political theological and political pedagogy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, one is tempted to agree that Sadra may benefit from a Deleuzian reading, particularly if one wishes to return to Sadra's core philosophical insights away from any narrow use of his thought to a specific place or people, etc. Such a reading of Sadra that seeks to find in his work a new foundation for ontology beyond that of Hegel and or Heidegger is in fact the very core of Jambet's work on Sadra.

By way of painting a philosophical background of Sadra, we should begin by stating that similar to Deleuze, Mulla Sadra was inspired by Neo-Platonist notions of thinking existence; however, his thought goes further by synthesizing Avicenna (metaphysics) and Suhrawardi (interpretation of being in the ontology of light). Sadra pushed against the Neo-Platonist tendencies towards apophatism, which argued that God cannot be known and is completely other. Instead of relying on a hidden God, Sadra's notion of God does not differentiate God with being, and in his primary existential theory, “the act of being,” there emerges an arc between God and a hierarchy of existents. The question that drives Sadra's philosophy is the

<sup>3</sup> Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, *L'ange: Pour une cynegetique du semblant* (Paris: B. Grasset 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 93.

question of being, or as Avicenna notes, the “being above perfection” (*hawq al-kamal*). For Sadra, existence is:

Conceived as a concomitant of possibles, not as a constitutive, existence is determined by its degree of intensity. The consequence of this is that every movement of increasing or decreasing existence will be accorded a relative intensification or a relative weakening. We move from a predicate of essence to a predicate of existence. It is this revision of existence as intensity, which will form his major contribution to metaphysics in the act of being.<sup>5</sup>

With the concept of the act of being, Sadra shifts the entire question of philosophy to a science of the existent as existent, which culminates in the highest existent that is necessary by itself: God. God is thus taken outside of representational proofs and is converted into a self-evident proof: “if God is existence then the object of our highest knowledge will be the nature of existing rather than the quiddity of things.”<sup>6</sup> As Jambet notes, “In Sadra, the ontology of Islam reaches its completion. But it is not completed in the synthesis of the concept; rather, it is fulfilled in the return to the luminous essence, identical to the act of being of light.”<sup>7</sup> The being of light is a completely immanent phenomenon, and to unveil it is to proceed to the act by which the veritable existent, the intelligible divine light, is uncovered. This unveiling is not based on grasping the “thing itself” in reality, but rather as a being given “in the world.” This distinction Sadra makes between the thing in itself and being in the world is important as it is why his idea of ontology is oriented towards immediate presence and grasping reality in the scheme of appearance and not in the absolute of the concept as we find in Hegel. The act of being escapes the mind’s capacity to contain it or phenomenologically account for it. It is the merging of the infinite and the finite itself, a movement towards being in which the subject is formed in the very act of being. This movement is a perpetual movement and unlike what we find in Heidegger, the history of being is infinitely open, leaving the goal of theoretical philosophy to be the amassing of a new knowledge of the real.<sup>8</sup>

This returning to the intensive moment of the real of existence is what allows Sadra to escape from Avicenna’s metaphysics, and since being can never be reduced to what a thing is, existence does not precede essence but constitutes it at a certain degree of opacity and material constraint.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Sadra establishes within the act of being a moral ground of the good because in the act of being the subject is aiming towards an object of desire. It is precisely in this conception of the good and the moral within the act of being that we find the source of an immanent and not a transcendent conception of being and God. The act of being is the pure, detached real, without foundation, even of itself.<sup>10</sup> This is why the act of being does not fall into any of Aristotle’s ten categories; it has no matter, no form and no finality. Thus, for Sadra, analogy is collapsed into the intensity or weakness of the act of being; no longer is the analogy of being based on a logical solution to the problem of the

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Jambet, *The Act of Being: The Philosophy of Revelation in Mulla Sadra* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2006), 155.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 149

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-156.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

predication of existence.<sup>11</sup> Being has a movement that cannot be captured by the infinities. Because the act of being cannot be represented in thought, the good, the beautiful, and truth are no longer transcendental categories but are rather discovered in the act of being. To quote Sadra:

The site of the beautiful, the good, and the true is not the abstract knowledge of innocuous transcendental's but the immediate grasp of the beauty, truth, and goodness of being in the eternal center of every concrete existent, at the point where its victorious reality shines forth in its proper light.<sup>12</sup>

But there remains an object in the act of being that is tied to something outside of the immanent world of time and temporality, an object that latches onto eternity itself. As Jambet comments, “if there is a desire for eternity, and if this desire encounters its object, it is necessary for eternity to be an effective reality, a concrete state of being, an experiential truth.”<sup>13</sup> This object of desire that the act of being aims towards is one that enters the subject into a subjectivization of what Jambet calls the “becoming angel” through the intensity of the existence and potentiality of the act itself.

As we saw in our above discussion of analogy and immanence, analogy sets up a hierarchy among beings, specified in terms of how being is associated with God. An analogical account of being associates God with being and this association reinforces the existing political and social order. Barber therefore rightly critiques analogy when he states that if “all of being is analogically contained in God”, this is the same as affirming, “all of being is analogically contained in the present” (102). The temporality of the act of being differs from the analogical account of being as it presents a new theory of what Sadra calls ‘embodied time’, wherein God creates (in Aristotelian fashion) an essential body in motion, but God is not analogically present in future motion or time. This conception of the body, heavily influenced by Avicenna, is one based on the fundamental concept of self-transformation. It is necessary to completely transform oneself in order to be faithful to the nature of motion and such a person that is able to engage in self-transformation cultivates what Sadra refers to as a “natural desire.”<sup>14</sup> Bodies under self-transformation, i.e., under what Sadra calls “essential motion,” move from potency to act—a movement that is equivalent to the metamorphosis of their essence, from a lower state of sensible reality to a higher imaginal world. Stability is only gained at the final end of this movement, in what Sadra calls “intelligible superexistence, which is a unification of the divine light.”<sup>15</sup>

Sadra preserves a hierarchy of beings but strips the subject or becoming angel of a core essence. In his notion of “embodied time,” the relation between God and being therefore does not fall back into an oppressive retrenchment of the present social order from which being emerged as we find in analogy because this fluid becoming subject in fact undergoes an interiorization of potency and act. We could thus imagine the becoming minoritarian within such a conception of embodied time. At the same time, the movement upward towards the hierarchy of intelligible superexistence within the becoming angel most certainly remains transcendent in Sadra’s theology. This is why Sadra’s act of being straddles both

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 222-223.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 224-225.



immanent and transcendent conceptions of God and being, and is not easily reducible to one model alone.

### *Conclusion*

Shults and Barber have succeeded in opening up some of the most salient theological lessons and concepts of Deleuze, and in so doing, they enable us to further apply Deleuze's thought, not only to Christianity, but to other religions and theologies as well. I have attempted to probe how Sadra's act of being and ontology more generally might engage with the Deleuzian notion of immanence, but a great deal more work can be done at this intersection, both with Deleuze and Islamic philosophy and theology, as well as with Sadra and Deleuze.

Towards this end, the first thing to note is that the ethical implications of Sadra's immanent conception of the act of being remain ambiguous in that the act of being is not presented as an act at the level of the group or the social collective, and remains an individual conception. How, therefore, might the act of being be thought within the coalitional or group level of collective existence, and how might the self-transformation that Sadra discusses be applied to collectives? Such a political and social application of Sadra's thought would benefit from an immanent development of new values grounded in an existential act of being. Can Sadra's reliance upon a hierarchy of beings following the act of being (the becoming angel) ensure that his core notion of subjectivization and self-transformation will not reinforce the present power structure? How might Sadra's act of being be thought as a production of desire that breaks the flows of desiring machines? These questions require a reading of Deleuze onto the text of Sadra, as much as they require a reading of Sadra onto the contemporary thought of Deleuze.

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