

Preface

God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die."

—Genesis 2:17

But sweeter still than this, than these, than all,
Is first and passionate love—it stands alone,
Like Adam's recollection of his fall;
The tree of knowledge has been plucked—all's known—
And life yields nothing further to recall
Worthy of this ambrosial sin, so shown,
No doubt in fable, as the unforgiven
Fire which from Prometheus filched for us from heaven.

—Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

The story of the fall of man would seem to place the blame for that catastrophe squarely on woman's shoulders. When the serpent questions Eve's right to cull the fruits of the world's first and most perfect orchard, she admits to knowing of God's prohibition. But we know, because the Serpent tells Eve—and God had earlier told Adam—that the fruit of the one tree imparts the knowledge of good and evil, knowledge that, in the purity of her Edenic innocence, Eve cannot possibly have.

As commentators new and old have noted, there is something deeply puzzling about Eve's supposed transgression: how can she understand what amounts to a moral prohibition, the rule against eating from the one tree, if the knowledge required to distinguish between good and evil, between right and wrong, is only to be had as a result of that act? This paradox holds the key to a radical questioning of the relation between perversity and ethics—the title of this book.

If a properly ethical act, in a formulation typical of modern ethics, is an act that is good per se, a perverse act would be not merely an evil act, but an act of evil per se. What the story of Eve's temptation reveals, however, is that the poles of ethical and perverse action, their roles as absolute motivators of behavior, are from the outset hopelessly intertwined. To do the right thing, or the wrong thing, means to be primordially inhabited by what I call the *ethical fault-line*, a rift at the core of identity that drafts the blueprint for the moral self and orients the self's desire.

Perversity and Ethics begins by considering the importance of psychoanalysis for discussions of philosophical ethics. As I explore in the first chapter, "Freud and the Banishment of Evil," psychoanalysis has commonly been received as at best irrelevant to ethical thought and at worst—because of its highly causal and apparently mechanistic understanding of the workings of human desire—a repudiation of the very idea of moral responsibility. Nevertheless, if psychoanalysis has been largely ignored by ethical thought, psychoanalytic theory has not ignored ethics. Indeed, Jacques Lacan's seminar of 1959–60, widely considered by his followers as among the most crucial in his intellectual legacy, was dedicated to what he called the *ethics of psychoanalysis*. What has been lacking, however, despite numerous and often excellent readings of the Lacanian contribution to the ethical tradition—and in particular its engagements with Kantian thought¹—has been a sustained attempt to understand the extraordinary power and complexity of the psychoanalytic challenge to ethics in the context of contemporary ethical thought. Under the enormous influence of Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic engagements with philosophy and politics, it has become increasingly common among Lacanian theorists, for example, to disparage—against the idealization of the figure of the pervert among thinkers influenced by Foucault—perversion as being in no way subversive of political hegemony.² Equally crucial, however, is the extent to which the injunctions of modern ethical systems are themselves inevitably implicated in structures of desire that can only be described as perverse. The primordial status of the perverse moment in ethical philosophy is the central theme of this book.

In Chapter 1 I use the texts that constitute Freud's metapsychological theory—his theory of the psychosomatic foundations of human desire—to derive the notion of *institutionalization*: the process whereby the very foundation of the self coincides with the emergence of a fundamental level of drive that is directed against the moral codes and social barriers that are the self's most basic elements. The historical trajectory of these institu-

tionalizations constitutes the book's key theoretical construct, the ethical fault-line. This concept leads in Chapter 2, "In the Beginning Was the (*Orthos*) *Logos*," to a discussion of Lacan's seventh seminar, which is dedicated to the ethics of psychoanalysis. At the outset of those lectures Lacan speaks of his theme as being "the universe of fault," which in French (*la faute*) signifies at once guilt or culpability—that is, the force of the law—as well as the desire to transgress that law in order to attain what lacks, that which it holds from us. It is from this multivalence that the fault-line gains its force. In this second chapter I explore Lacan's rethinking of Freud's reality principle—and of the very notion of reality inherent in it—as being primordially imbricated with laws, ethical norms, and institutions, such that abstract ideals (the good, the beautiful) are understood as affective derivatives of what Lacan calls *das Ding*, the substantial embodiment of institutionalization that simultaneously marks the innermost and outermost limits of the subject's experience of self. While Lacan carefully develops this notion as the ultimate impasse to traditional ethics, it is also the place where he turns to the possibility of another way of thinking through the ethical conundrum he has revealed. In his infamous reading of Sophocles's *Antigone*, for example, Lacan, now deeply engaged with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, speculates that if the ethical has been repudiated in its pretensions to universally determine the good, it returns as the uncanny and in-eradicable knowledge of the self's ultimate inability to be fully self-identical.

In the third chapter, "Deconstruction and the Theology of Desire," the theoretical resonances outlined in the preceding chapter between the Heideggerian notion of authenticity and Lacan's notion of the ethical as a refusal to "give way as to one's desire" will be brought into dialogue with a series of insights I will broadly refer to as deconstructive. These insights can be called deconstructive because they are united by a questioning of what Nancy describes as the "immanentism" of ethical models—according to which a core identity is assumed to exist prior to an individual's entry into relations with others. By way of an engagement with the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy and Søren Kierkegaard, I argue that psychoanalysis and deconstructive thinking converge around the affirmation of the radical impossibility of ever mediating—bringing to a close, fully understanding, or even moving beyond—what Kierkegaard calls the paradox of mediation.

That the paradox of mediation cannot be mediated means, on the one hand, that the absolute or the immediate must always be approached via history, and hence through mediation; whereas, on the other hand, the

very notion of mediation necessitates an absolute or immediate that mediation keeps just beyond our grasp. The convergence of these thinkers around Kierkegaard's paradox thus signals the continual reemergence of theological questions at the heart of even the most ostensibly atheistic philosophy: the question of God, in Derrida's formulation, is an inevitable moment in the overall movement of the trace. It is, I claim, the very inevitability of the theological question that points to the agency of the ethical fault-line, for to mediate the paradox of mediation would require precisely that which the fault-line will not allow: a self-identical, nonaffected self prior to any act of mediation.

The final chapter, "Sexual Difference and the Ethics of Duplicity," turns to the question of sexual difference in its relation to the ethical fault-line. Traditional ethical thought is largely predicated on the model of an individual actor's obligations in the face of the law, society, or other people. Implicit to this model is therefore a comfortably settled sense of what constitutes the self and what constitutes the other, the inside and the outside. The initial claim in this chapter is that this implicit model is the hallmark of what I call "male" philosophy; in contrast, the positions that repudiate this model stem from what can be called "female" philosophy. These models correspond respectively to transcendentalist and immanentist³ theories of knowledge, and the central claim in this chapter is that this difference has its basis in a cultural history in which the figure of woman has been made to carry "the burden of redemption." The modern tradition of philosophical ethics, indeed of modern philosophy in general, depends on an orientation toward the fault-line that can be described as "male" in light of Lacan's theorization of sexual difference in his later thought, because its basic move is to totalize the field of what is to be known while at the same time abstracting from that field the position of the knower. Nevertheless, while the ethical alternatives that develop in the late twentieth century, described here as the fulfillment of a "female" philosophy, would seem to offer a corrective to a deficient system of "male" ethics, there is a danger that those discourses proclaiming a resolution to the conundrum posed by the perversity of ethics will be caught in the very traps from which they believe themselves to have struggled free. Although "female" philosophy has taken center stage with the force of an epochal event, psychoanalysis and the perversity of ethics it theorizes suggest that only a subject convinced of its own essential duplicity has the chance, slight though it may be, of not falling prey to the promise of redemption, and of thereby being able to bear witness to the ethical fault-line.