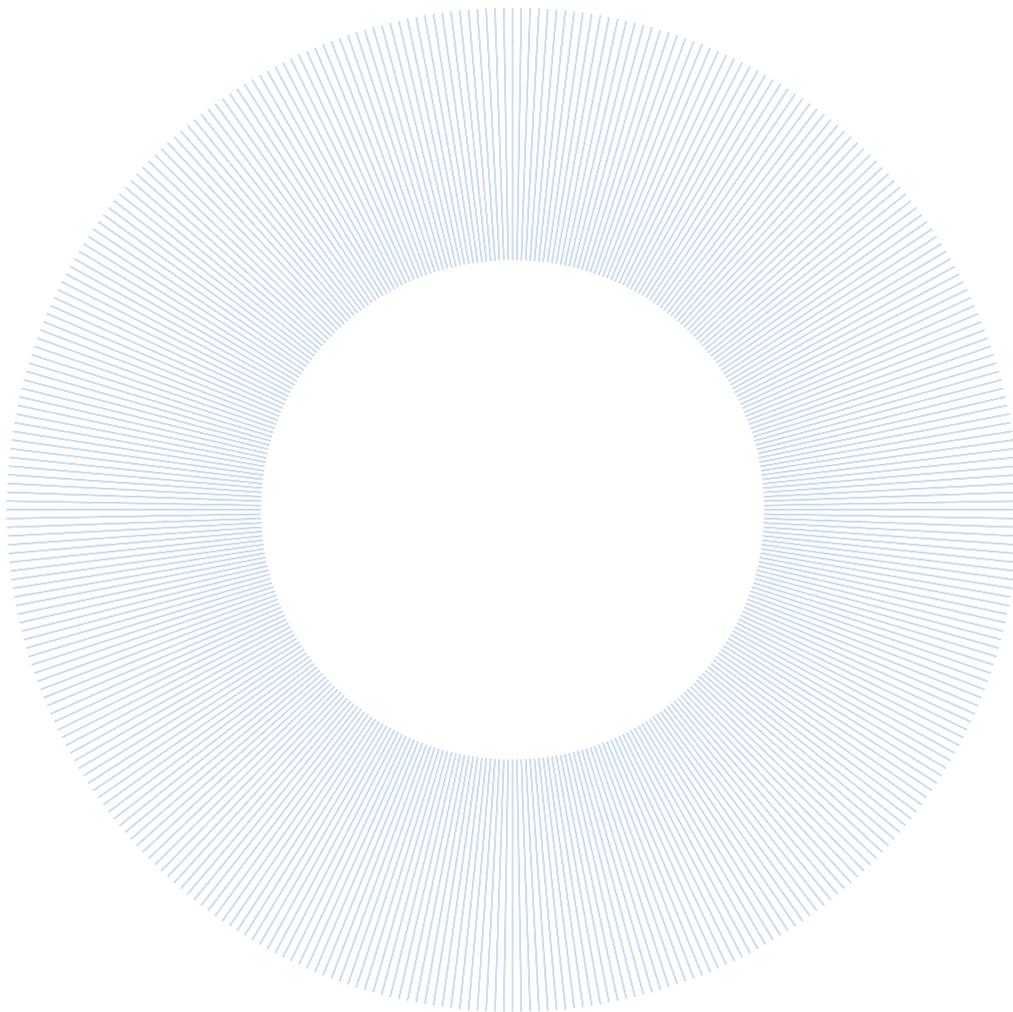


Strangers, Trust, and Religion: On the Vulnerability of Being Alive



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Volume 3

2010

Number 3

ISSN 1756-2074

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STRANGERS, TRUST, AND RELIGION: ON THE VULNERABILITY OF BEING ALIVE

Strangers, trust, and religion are critical dimensions within the sphere of human vulnerability. How are they experientially related? This paper articulates commonly unexplored lines that connect commonly recognized dots.¹ It begins with an epistemological account of the stranger as an Other in the Sartrean sense of otherness: someone who is the embodiment of possible harm, a threat to both our existence and the very meanings and values our life embodies, hence an existential source of fear. The paper then sets forth an account of trust as a palliative to fear, trust being a socio-affective ‘compensation’ for all its risks. On the basis of observations by both Thomas Merton and Huston Smith concerning the stranger, the paper in turn investigates the relationship of strangers, trust, and religion in the terms of life and death. In doing so, it draws on and extends citations from the writings of Michel Foucault and Elaine Scarry who, in different ways, highlight provocative conceptions of the Other. The paper ends with reflections upon what Rudolph Otto termed the ‘mysterium tremendum’ – the experienced mystery of life itself – upon the fact that we are vulnerable in the mere fact of being alive, and upon the fact that we have ways of transcending our vulnerability through a recognition and even celebration of our common humanity.



I cannot imagine a God who rewards and punishes the objects of his creation, whose purposes are modeled after our own – a God, in short, who is but a reflection of human frailty. Neither can I believe that the individual survives the death of his body, although feeble souls harbor such thoughts through fear or ridiculous egotism. It is enough for me to contemplate the mystery of conscious life perpetuating itself through all eternity, to reflect upon the marvelous structure of the universe which we can dimly perceive, and to try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the intelligence manifested in nature (Einstein, 1990, pp. 204–5).

I experienced terror at what awaited me [...] I could not patiently await that end. The horror of darkness was too great, and I wished to free myself from it as quickly as possible by noose or bullet. That was the feeling which drew me most strongly toward suicide. [...] During that time [‘seeing the truth of the situation and yet clinging to life, knowing in advance that nothing can come of it’] this is what happened to me. During that whole year, when I was asking myself almost every moment whether I should not end matters with a noose or a bullet – all that time, together with the course of thought and observation about which I have spoken, my heart was oppressed with a painful feeling, which I can only describe as a search for God.

I say that that search for God was not reasoning, but a feeling, because that search proceeded not from the course of my thoughts – it was even directly contrary to them – but proceeded from the heart. *It was a feeling of fear, orphanage, isolation in a strange land, and a hope of help from someone* (Tolstoy, 1992, p. 354; italics added).

The Stranger: Fleshing Out the Epistemological Ground of Sartre's Ontological Other

A stranger is by definition someone unknown and as such the embodiment of possible harm. Being an unfamiliar Other, a stranger in a broader sense confronts one with a potentially inharmonious world. Feelings of vulnerability come readily to the fore and with them the immediate challenge to trust or distrust: should one turn toward the stranger and explore a relationship or turn away and avoid or even escape contact?

Feelings of vulnerability are basic human feelings put vividly on the line by a stranger. The anxiety intrinsic to these feelings and the gravity of these feelings run deep. We can begin to grasp both by examining them in the context of the Other, in particular, in the context of Sartre's meticulous and penetrating exposition of 'The Existence of Others' (Sartre, 1956, pp. 221–302). As we will see, though not identified as such, the stranger underlies the whole of his exposition, beginning with his initial identification of the Other as the source of the feeling of shame and concluding with his questioning concern about 'manifest bodies' (p. 302).

Although Sartre makes no distinction between familiar and unfamiliar Others, the existentially significant epistemological distinction is implicit from the start in his affirmation that 'inseparable' structures define 'my *being*' and 'the being of the Other' (pp. 222–3). In particular, while his concern and the structures he proceeds to elucidate are clearly ontological rather than epistemological, it is nonetheless evident throughout that the Other is not someone familiar – familiar in any way, shape or form; on the contrary, the Other appears consistently as a total and utter stranger. Consider, for example, the following passages that attest to an unknown, unpredictable Other who in one way and another threatens one's aliveness. Each passage brings a central but differently nuanced dimension of vulnerability to light:

Through the Other's look I *live* myself as fixed in the midst of the world, as in danger, as irremediable (Sartre, p. 268);

[F]or me the Other is first the being for whom I am an object (p. 270);

[T]he death of my possibilities causes me to experience the Other's freedom (p. 271);²

Fear is therefore the discovery of my being-as-object on the occasion of the appearance of another object in my perceptive field. It refers to the origin of all fear, which is the fearful discovery of my pure and simple object-state in so far as it is surpassed and transcended by possibles which are not my possibles (p. 288).

Consider further, Sartre's descriptive account of an experience that culminates in the look and its corollary, 'being seen.' Though highlighting a distinctively ontological rather than epistemological relationship, the descriptive account paradigmatically captures the core experience of vulnerability with respect to a stranger:

What I apprehend immediately when I hear the branches crackling behind me is not that *there is someone there*; it is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense – in short, that *I am seen* (p. 259).

Several pages later, this core experience is given fuller description in the context of noting 'possibilities that are present to my unreflective consciousness in so far as the Other *is watching me*.' *Unreflected possibilities* are precisely not reasoned out options but a spontaneous mix of possible actions and scenarios that arises spontaneously within immediate experience. They include:

- 1) hiding – ‘the dark corner becomes a given possibility’;
- 2) the use of weaponry or an electronic signal – the Other may be ‘ready for anything, his hand in his pocket where he has a weapon, his finger placed on the electric bell and ready “at the slightest movement on my part” to call the police’;
- 3) escaping – ‘This inclination to run away, which dominates me and carries me along and which I *am* – this I read in the Other’s watchful look’;
- 4) a further look that augments the inclination to run away – the look of ‘the gun pointed at me’;
- 5) the alienation or total annihilation of my possibilities – ‘The Other is the hidden death of my possibilities in so far as I live that death as hidden in the midst of the world’ (p. 264).

In short, while the look of the Other is foregrounded in Sartre’s descriptions, vulnerability in face of an unknown Other is the grounding experience. ‘Being seen’ is thus instrumental, not fundamental, in ‘the death of my possibilities.’ What is fundamental is fear, fear of an unknown Other and what an unknown Other might do. As Sartre himself pointedly observes, ‘fear [is] the feeling of being in danger before the Other’s freedom’ (p. 268). Moreover if the feeling of danger is epitomized in the knowledge that ‘I have a body which can be hurt,’ then surely it matters when ‘the “situation” escapes me,’ that is, when ‘*I am no longer master of the situation*’ (p. 265). Indeed, when Sartre states, ‘I am *in danger*,’ and then immediately states, ‘This danger is not an accident but the permanent structure of my being-for-others’ (p. 268), there is no doubt but that an incisive bodily-felt vulnerability is a core human experience, that it is a primordial dimension of human life, and that a strange Other cannot but loom large and in fact figure as an ineffaceable central presence within ‘the permanent structure of my being-for-others.’ In effect, the epistemological dimension of the core experience cannot be ignored: an affectively-charged existential abyss separates familiar and unfamiliar Others.³

In sum, Sartre’s Other is unequivocally a stranger, and a stranger is unequivocally the personification of vulnerability. Vulnerability is indeed at the core of basic human affects, not only shame but terror, apprehension, depression and abjection. Its foundational existential presence in these affects is evident in the same distinctive temporal dimension Sartre describes specifically with respect to the lived relation of oneself to oneself in shame, namely, ‘the consciousness of being irremediably what I always was: “in suspense” – that is, in the mode of the “not-yet” or of the “already-no-longer”’ (p. 288). In a word, the experience of vulnerability is the tantalizingly frozen yet ongoing moment in which one’s aliveness is and remains on the line, in which the meaning and values of one’s life hang in the balance. Whatever the particular affect which literally embodies it, the experience of vulnerability runs along a continuum of being ‘in suspense’ because vulnerability is an Ur-existential condition of human life. It lies *in potentia* and is brought to fore full-force in the form of a stranger whose unknownness has the power to hold one’s life in suspense, in an ongoing, all-enveloping anxiety of the unfamiliar.

Like virtually all animals, humans cultivate familiarity. It is not that they turn from exploring new terrains, discovering new edibles, or trying new techniques, however. On the contrary, they investigate novelty. Once explored, discovered, or tried, however, any novelty is encompassed within the realm of the familiar. That a terrain proves hostile, an edible indigestible, or a technique ill-conceived is immaterial. What matters is that the initial novelty is no longer novel; it no longer has the status of the unknown but enters the realm of the known. A stranger undergoes just such an epistemological metamorphosis when he or she becomes familiar and is no longer avoided or feared but enfolded into the group.⁴ Yet there is something familiar, even *already indubitably known*, about a human stranger, namely, his or her humanness. A

human stranger is indeed in essence both a known and unknown quantity. On the one hand, he or she is what we would colloquially describe as ‘one of us,’ a biological consociate we immediately recognize as human; on the other hand, he or she is feared, feared precisely because we know the possibilities of being human. Our fear emanates from our knowledge of the possibilities for harming that lie within humans – all humans. Even if – or even as – we deny the existence of these possibilities in ourselves, we take for granted that they lie within a strange Other. The double standard is quintessentially epitomized in Jung’s concept of ‘the shadow,’ that commonly un-owned realm of our psyche that we keep in the dark even as we unwittingly project aspects of it onto others.⁵ If we would actually examine our shadow side, we would find that we are vulnerable to our own felt proclivities, that is, to carrying out acts that harm others. Jung put the matter tersely and sharply when he wrote, ‘Since it is universally believed that man is merely what his consciousness knows of itself, he regards himself as harmless and so adds stupidity to iniquity. He does not deny that terrible things have happened and still go on happening, but it is always “the others” who do them’ (Jung, 1970, p. 296).⁶

Of specific moment here is less the fact that we humans are all psychically shadowed so to speak, commonly projecting facets of our shadow Other onto real-life others and remaining opaque to our own capacity for doing harm – psychoanalytic facts that surely warrant examination in their own right – than the fact that we know the harmful possibilities of humans. We know in concrete, graphic ways not simply *that*, but *how*, humans can and do harm each other, and we know further, in concrete, *affective* ways the difference between being among familiar and unfamiliar humans. In short, we know that our fundamental vulnerability in being alive among other humans is augmented in the extreme when it is a question of unfamiliar others. A stranger can be a danger not just to our life but to our way of life, a threat to both our existence and the very meanings and values our life embodies.

On Trust and Its ‘Compensations’

We can begin to unravel the religious consequences and implications of our epistemologically inflected vulnerability by considering first the experiential difference between trust and distrust. As I elsewhere noted and discussed at length (Sheets-Johnstone, 2006a), trust is a palliative to fearful feelings: it diminishes fear, but neither automatically nor necessarily banishes it conclusively for all time. Bodily feelings of fear and trust, however, are oppositional. The dynamics of fear are in a corporeal-kinetic sense antithetical to trust. Fear *moves through* the body in ways different from trust, and it *moves* the body in ways different from trust. In effect, the emotional resonance of the feelings is such that the two cannot be present simultaneously. In the one, an overall feeling of ease and openness toward the future obtains along with a concomitant fluidity of motion; in the other, a tightness grips the body in preparation for the worst of futures and eventuates in a taut irregularity of motion. Both the tensional mode of the body and the flow of movement are palpably distinct. A striking resemblance is in fact evident with respect to the relationship Epicurus observed between life and death: when fear is present, trust is not; and when trust is present, fear is not. Moreover at any moment fear may banish trust just as, at any moment, trust may banish fear. The deftly programmed relationship of the federal government to the electorate in the United States from 11 September 2001 until the bursting of the Republican bubble on 7 November 2006 is a sterling if embarrassingly stupid example. Fear of terrorism was willfully injected into public life – via duct tape and other such measures – to secure trust in the federal government, which trust, of course, kept fear of terrorism at bay.⁷ In short, trust was politically cemented by the social manipulation and control of fear.

The oppositional dynamics of trust and fear testify affectively to the fact that, as sociologist Niklas Luhmann affirms, trust 'rests on illusion' and is 'a risky investment' (Luhmann, 1979, pp. 32, 27, respectively). Yet however illusory and risky the nature of trust, it is in our interest to trust and to cultivate trust both in ourselves and in others,⁸ for in a way almost totally unlike other creatures, humans are at risk not only by way of natural accidents or ageing; they are at risk in being alive among their own kind: as indicated above, humans are at risk '*in being alive among other humans*' (see Sheets-Johnstone, 2002, p. 52). The existential value of trust is to mitigate this human condition, that is, to preserve human sanity by mitigating the potential threat of others and the concomitant anxiety that that threat poses. To put the value in terms of sanity is not to say that the relationship of uncertainty to trust is a reasoned out relationship; one does not think, 'Other people have an "uncontrollable power to act" (Luhmann, 1979, p. 41); I cannot be certain what they will do, therefore I will trust them to offset my anxieties about what they might do.' Trust, after all, is not an adult affect but originates in ontogeny, in feelings of well-being, and in subsequent feelings of attachment. From an ontogenetic viewpoint, the learning of trust begins in nonlinguistic experience, i.e., in tactile-kinetic social interactions, notably those in the context of nurturing and play. In such infant/adult interactions, affective experiences are generated. In particular, feelings of ease (e.g., comfortableness, pleasure, contentment) and uneasiness (e.g., apprehension, startle, fear) are generated (see Sheets-Johnstone, 2006a). These primary experiences, documented in a variety of literature on human infant and child development (e.g., Stern, 1977, 1985; Trevarthen, 1977; Bugental et al., 1991) – and on non-human infant development as well (Goodall, 1971; Strum, 1987, Dolhinow, 1972) – are the foundation of developing attitudes of trust; they are the ontogenetic basis of learning to trust. In effect, and precisely as Luhmann implicitly affirms, trust is in the very nature of human nature. It develops naturally in specific sociological ways on the basis of its natural affective origins. Its existential value is in turn a naturally arising value. Luhmann recognizes this naturally arising existential value implicitly when he states, 'One of the most elementary mechanisms of complexity reduction is the *stabilization of feelings* towards particular objects or people' (Luhmann, 1979, p. 80; italics added).

In sum, trust has sizeable socio-affective compensations for all its risks. Its power to stabilize feelings of ease in a world of others is a substantive part of its nature. In a limited way, something similar may be said of religion; that is, for all its risks, not only as classically articulated by Pascal, but by others as well, it too has the power to stabilize feelings of ease in the world. Indeed, 'In God we trust' is emblazoned on all our US money, assuring we Americans of the goodness of our capitalist ways and perhaps assuring corpulent corporate Americans in particular of being able to squeeze through the eye of a needle after all. Though unconcerned with trust in any focal way, philosopher Konstantin Kolenda's conception of religion as compensatory is topical in this context. Kolenda conceives religion as compensation for human finitude. With respect to the notion of God and the human awareness of death, his aim is to show how the essence of religion is not to trust in a God – an object or image of some kind – but to enrich individual human lives to the fullest. In his book *Religion without God*, he writes, 'The notion of God is the limiting target of compensation. It encapsulates the desire to escape finitude, the search for realization of highest potentialities, the urge to translate ideals into actuality. God is the embodiment of perfection, but if compensation as the tendency toward perfection is logically prior to perfection, then the notion of compensation is a more primitive, more fundamental religious concept' (Kolenda, 1976, p. 75). Kolenda goes on to show that religion as compensation links us to the *radiance* of the world, both the world of nature and the human-made world; the latter including music ('an ingenious invention'), knowledge ('a display of intellectual power'), and so on, all of which 'compensations' enhance and intensify

the meaning of our lives (p. 86). Such 'religiousness,' as he terms it, is a 'superontological' proof of the existence of God that bypasses the notion of God as a transcendent object but is the very essence of religion (pp. 76–7). Through participation in the radiance of the world and arriving at such states as wonder, well-being, assurance, security, safety and joy (pp. 78–9) – all of them 'manifestations of finding the world *good*, as God found it to be when he beheld it following the act of creation' (p. 79) – we are, according to Kolenda, at the heart of religion. '[T]he world,' as he affirms, 'provides suitable material for religious feeling' (p. 81). One might say, in effect, that for Kolenda, religions offer compensation for death by way of celebrating life itself.⁹

If worldly compensations answer to the desire to escape finitude by providing 'material for religious feeling,' however, religion becomes no more than a way of avoiding the fearful reality of death. Well-being, joy, security, safety, and the like, are attributes of compensation, but they do not answer in any depth to the fear and trembling of humans, to the fundamental vulnerability embodied in their very aliveness. Moreover however self-deceptively reconfigured or even offset by quite other worldly means than those mentioned by Kolenda, by the accumulation of *more*, for example – more power, more money, more real estate holdings, or more fame, all of which putatively maximize the compensatory feelings Kolenda specifies, bringing greater and greater well-being, joy, security, safety, and the like – the fact of death remains. Thus, whatever the mode or modes of compensatory subversion that keep it veiled, death continues to loom large in human affairs. That it does so perhaps explains why it is uncannily presented in the form of a stranger. The presence of a stranger is akin to a presentiment of death, evoking a foreboding, fear-laden awareness of what might be termed the ultimate unknown Other: oneself as dead. In light of our epistemologically-inflected vulnerability, the linkage of a stranger with death is far from odd. Yet another quite different sense of the stranger turns us toward the possibility of a distinctly different – indeed, positive – experience.

Huston Smith, renowned authority on comparative religions and their history, asks at the end of his book, *The World's Religions*, 'Who today stands ready to accept the solemn equality of peoples? Who does not have to fight an unconscious tendency to equate foreign with inferior?' (Smith, 1991, p. 390). He asks these questions in the context of proposing an altogether different sense of the stranger, that is, in the context of an emphasis on listening, on striving for open and compassionate understandings of all ideologically-tethered religious ways of life, and in particular, those ways that are foreign to one's own. In the process of doing so, he reminds his readers of Thomas Merton's observation that 'God speaks to us in three places: in scripture, in our deepest selves, and in the voice of the stranger' (Smith, 1991).

Clearly, if we take Smith's emphasis on listening to the stranger and Merton's observation regarding the voice of the stranger seriously, then we perforce take both our 'unconscious tendency,' 'our deepest selves' – that is, the shadow dwelling in our own psyche – and the foreigner – that is, the stranger dwelling in our midst – seriously, and seriously in a double sense: both shadow and stranger are in different ways a threat to our comfortable, familiar existence and at the same time harken us to a fuller, richer life by opening us to *their* existence. Granted, listening with searing clarity to the affective swells and inclinations of our deepest selves commonly puts us less in touch with radiance than with pain, evoking less than joyful, less than secure, less than assured aspects of ourselves. Indeed, we are less in touch with feelings of well-being than of *unwell-being*. Yet the dark side of our psyches warrants examination, for it provides us with insights into our true motivations, into the true consequences of our actions, and so on. The Bible does not speak to us about investigating our shadow side. It does, however, speak straightaway of strangers, of traditional attitudes

toward strangers and the proper attitude toward strangers. A circuitous route to these biblical conceptions and admonitions provides substantive experiential and theoretical understandings that follow through on Huston's and Merton's promptings to listen openly to the stranger, that correlatively suggest openings toward our own shadow side, and that lead back full circle to the epistemologically-inflected Other discovered earlier in the examination of Sartre's descriptive ontology of the Other. The circuitous route consists in my hazarding two comments, each followed by pertinent citations, from Michel Foucault in the one instance, from Elaine Scarry in the other, comments and citations that situate oneself and the Other in relation to life and death.

The Circuitous Route

First, the larger one's lifeworld and the larger the perceived globality of the world itself, the greater the weight of eternity and the more infinitesimal the meaning and value of one's life. What can God possibly do with all these dead humans, billions upon billions of them, far more than a trickle of whom believed or may have believed in an assortment of Gods altogether different from the one any particular religion venerates? Does the real God take into account moreover that uncountable numbers of humans believe and have believed in God but be on the wrong God-track, so to speak? Does the real God offer eternal life or salvation equally to all those well-meaning and well-believing but off-track humans? However unacknowledged, the weight of eternity weighs heavily indeed regardless of the track one is on. At the same time, the greater the weight of eternity and the more infinitesimal the meaning and value of one's life, the tighter one clings to one's beliefs and the more strongly one is threatened by and counters the beliefs of others that are different from one's own. In short, fear of strangers and their strange beliefs increases exponentially with an expanding world. In effect, trust in strangers easily falls by the wayside as xenophobic fears hold greater and greater sway. Foucault recognized something on the order of this socio-spatio-temporal relationship when, in suggesting that an Other is someone who disturbs the familiar order of things and is thus commonly perceived as a threat, he wrote, 'It is [...] [a]s if we were afraid to conceive of the *Other* in the time of our own thought' (Foucault, 1972, p. 12).

'[...] in the time of our own thought': a provocative thought in itself. We have so little time to think and think so little in the sense of being 'at the pains of a little thought' as Berkeley genteelly put it (Berkeley, 1929 [1709], p. 85; see also, pp. 72–3, 79) – and especially as concerns the Other, not only in the sense of thinking so little but thinking belittlingly. Most notably too, we are affectively stirred, precisely '*afraid*,' as Foucault observes, 'to conceive of the Other in the time of our own thought.' Foucault might have had in mind not only a stranger – an unfamiliar, threatening-because-disturbing live Other – but 'Other' in the form of death itself, an Other equally unfamiliar and threatening. We are indeed afraid to conceive of death – most commonly, our own death – 'in the time of our own thought.' Most of us think of death along the lines of our projected shadow, indeed, along the literal lines of Jung already cited and readily paraphrased: 'Man does not deny that death has happened and still happens, but it is always "the others" who die.' (There are obvious tie-ins here with Heidegger's 'they' and their idle talk.) Whether stranger or death, the more distant we keep the Other in space, time and thought, the less we are engulfed in fear. In effect, the less we recognize that we are vulnerable, that we are, as Sartre affirmed, '*in danger*,' that '[the felt] danger is not an accident but the permanent structure of my being-for-others,' and that 'fear [is] the feeling of being in danger before the Other's freedom.' Whether as stranger or death, we protect ourselves precisely by not, in Foucault's word, 'conceiving' the unfamiliar.

A different sense of the Other can nonetheless haunt us. The strange Other whose freedom evokes fear and before whom we are vulnerable may be God, who looms in a towering, ascendant and far more sweeping sense than any mundane stranger. It may be He who controls the seemingly accidental time of our birth and ordains the seemingly accidental time of our death, 'the time of our own thought' thus being a matter of His judgment of us. The second comment I hazard enlarges on this theme.

The price of not believing is spelled out explicitly in the Bible and leaves no doubt that not just death, but life itself will be the punishment. Deuteronomy 28:67 unequivocally describes the price of not believing: '[T]he Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life.' In short, you will be punished for disbelieving: you will live dying, in the constant throes of vulnerability. Elaine Scarry has written in penetrating and corporeally enlightened ways on the biblical theme of disbelief and disobedience. She cites passages showing that both disbelief and disobedience are 'habitually described as a withholding of the body, which in its resistance to an external referent is perceived as covered, or hard, or stiff' (Scarry, 1985, pp. 202–3). We might note, of course, that a hard, stiff, and/or covered body is commonly a dead body, but this is not Scarry's theme. Her keynote idea is rather that 'the withholding of the body – the stiffening of the neck, the turning of the shoulder, the closing of the ears, the hardening of the heart, the making of the face like stone – necessitates God's forceful shattering of the reluctant human surface and repossession of the interior' (pp. 203–4).¹⁰ She comments that 'The fragility of the human interior and the absolute surrender of that interior that does not simply accompany belief, that is not simply required by belief, but that *is itself belief* [...] are in this history acted out with terrible force and unequivocal meaning' (pp. 203–4). Not only this but 'the willing consecration of the Israelite infants, the willing consecration by the Israelites of their own interiors' follows in the form of God's commandment to 'Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast is mine ([Exodus] 13:1, 2)' (pp. 203–4).

In her chapter on 'Body and Voice in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures,' Scarry speaks specifically of 'the imperfection and vulnerability of the human' (Scarry, 1985, p. 183), and goes on to describe how '[t]he relation between man and God [...] becomes a power relation based on the fact that one has a body and the other does not, a relation that is itself radically revised in the Christian scripture where the moral distance between man and God is as great as in the Old Testament but no longer depends on a discrepancy in embodiedness' (p. 184).¹¹ In support of her corporeal readings, she shows how 'It is through the human body that belief is substantiated and [...] it is in its capacity of substantiation that the body, the interior of the body, is often represented in these stories. The most overt instances of this occur in those passages describing the actual passage of children out of the mother's body' (p. 188). Finally, we should note Scarry's claim that 'however more powerful the Word of God is than the Body of man, it is within these [biblical] stories always the case that the Word is never self-substantiating: it seeks its confirmation in a visible change in the realm of matter' (p. 193).¹²

What becomes evident on the basis of Scarry's reading of biblical texts is that the transition from verbal to physical is a transition that existentializes belief by materializing it in some form. Trust in God is, as it were, corporeally cemented. The Word is indeed made flesh. The price of not believing is, in contrast, to suffer one's flesh, to live not only precisely as the Bible indicates, excruciatingly and morbidly 'in constant suspense,' but, strikingly enough, precisely as Sartre indicates with respect to the temporal relation of oneself to oneself in shame, namely, being 'consciousness of being what I always was: "in suspense" – that is, in the mode of the "not-yet" or of the "already no longer."' Being locked in suspense is in both

instances a matter of living irremediably in a relentless vulnerability, in a tantalizingly frozen yet ongoing moment when one's life is on the line, when the meaning and value of one's life hang in the balance.¹³

Closing the Distance: Bringing Stranger, Trust, and Bible into Conjunctive Alignment

Scarry does not write of strangers as such, but in the context of specifying forms of disbelief and disobedience she points out that 'to be a foreigner [...] is also an extreme form of disbelief, a state of existing wholly outside the circle of faith' (Scarry, 1985, p. 202; see also pp. 128–33). Categorical denigration of foreigners is surely widespread among religionists within doctrinaire circles of faith, but certainly the enlightened concept of a stranger as it appears in the Bible is well-known, even if not put into serious active practice by the religious faithful (but see Fasching, 1992).¹⁴ The biblical concept can in essence be condensed as follows:

First, we humans are ourselves strangers here on earth. Heaven is our real home; we abide properly with God. Second, God is strange in being totally Other, not only outside and apart from the mundane human world, but an Other of whom there is no Other and in relationship to whom there is no Other. Third, Jesus appeared as a stranger to those about him as the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John attest: 'I was a stranger and you invited me in' (Matthew 25:35);¹⁵ 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head' (Luke 9:58); 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him' (John 1:10). Fourth, strangers can be 'good,' as Jesus taught in the lesson of the good Samaritan, who was himself a stranger, a reviled one, and who, in traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, treated and helped a stranger who was robbed and beaten (Luke 10:29–35).

Clearly, the biblical concept of a stranger is far from one-dimensional.¹⁶ Its encompassing richness is epistemologically reinforced by a subtext that permeates both Old and New Testaments and in fact permeates the general everyday concept of a stranger. The subtext and everyday concept are haunted by language; they are 'nominally obsessed.' Naming is typically a way of making the strange familiar, not just cursorily familiar, but known and in turn potentially if not fully trustworthy. In Genesis, for example, Jacob appeals to the strange man who wrestles him at Jabbok 'Please tell me your name' (Gen 32:29); in Exodus, Moses says 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" Then what shall I tell them?' (Exodus 3:13); in Isaiah, God says in answer to the question who controls the world, 'I, the Lord [...] I am he' (Isaiah 41:4), and later, 'I am the Lord, that is my name!' (Isaiah 42:8). Jesus asks 'Who do men say that I am?' His disciples variously name John the Baptist, Elijah and other prophets, and when asked who they themselves say he is, they answer with the name 'the Christ' (Mark 8:27–30).

Naming confers identification and identification confers a sense of familiarity. What is named can be trusted to be something rather than nothing and to be what it is and not another thing. Naming thus stabilizes our feelings of ease in the world: whatever the object or individual, it now inheres by linguistic authority in the world of the known and thereby lives under our wings, so to speak. In truth, *naming* dupes us into thinking we *know* something – as when we specify 'feature analyzers' and 'cognitive maps' in the brain, or phlogiston, quarks, and the Big Dipper in the external physical world. What is nonlinguistic remains by contrast strange

until we secure it a reality, a knowability and potential trustworthiness by naming it. The idea that *what* or *who* we don't know can hurt us is thus not simply a colloquialism or banal truism, but an expression of our fundamentally-felt, epistemologically-inflected vulnerability, the bite of which can be muted by naming.¹⁷ The Bible in fact showers us with names, not only as in the begat sequences (Genesis), the listings of clan memberships and their numbers (Numbers), and the like, but throughout in its pinpoint naming of individuals and places – e.g., 'Then the men of Judah went with the Simeonites their brothers and attacked the Canaanites living in Zephath, and they totally destroyed the city. Therefore it was called Hormah' (Judges 14:17). Naming casts a net of familiarity over the world. It operates in everyday life in the service of what Luhmann termed 'complexity reduction' (Luhmann, 1979), but in a biblical sense, it does much more. It not only gives us the sense of knowing an individual or place, but instantiates the individual or place as real, providing proof as it were of its existence. What would otherwise be the point of naming all these people and places and of emphasizing names from the beginning if not to secure the reality of the history being told, to assure the reader that the genealogy, the cities, the regional areas, and so on, are not a fiction or fairy tale but emanate from the word of God? Indeed, biblical naming is as much flesh made Word as Word made flesh. The Bible historicizes God, humans, and God's relationship to humans by naming. The significance of this historicizing can hardly be ignored. Historicizing confers reality, all the more emphatically as that history is not just spoken but recorded. Writing makes real and true the tale of what happened when, where, and to whom. The rite of baptism with its christening motif is the ceremonial epitome of the transformation of flesh made Word, the sanctification of the body by word of mouth and therewith the enfoldment of an erstwhile stranger into a circle of faith.

That the biblical concept of a stranger is richly textured cannot be doubted. That stranger anxiety is a core human experience cannot be doubted either. Anxiety in face of a stranger in fact commonly begins in infancy,¹⁸ and is in further fact, to begin with, an evolutionary fact of life. Vulnerability is in other words an ontogenetically and phylogenetically-derived existential reality and religion is one of its cardinal cultural elaborations; religions commonly provide an answer to the existential reality of human vulnerability. Religious belief systems are indeed culturally and familiarly inculcated. We are taught what is religiously true of the world. Whether religious knowledge is esteemed a spiritual blessing, a sacred covenant linking us with God, an indubitable story of creation, and the like, or whether esteemed a compensation, a placator, a tranquilizer, an opiate (as per Marx), or whatever, we are not born with this knowledge.¹⁹ The opening quotation from Tolstoy testifies to, and speaks eloquently of, both our fundamental existential ignorance and our terror of death: his words reverberate with the felt vulnerability of being a stranger in the world, of being alive without appeal – helpless, alone, bereft of meaning, fearful of the inevitable end. Tracing this ignorance and terror to its biblical core, we find the simple fact that if death were not, biblical religions would be not. If, in the Garden of Eden, humans had not tasted of the tree of knowledge, they would not know of death, or of good and evil, *nor* would God have immediately decreed thereafter that man 'must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.' *Nor*, furthermore, would God, after banishing man from the Garden and to assure his not living forever, have placed 'cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life' (Gen 3:22–4). But the simple fact too is that if a stranger were not a quasi-symbol of death, the living embodiment of possible harm, a permanent danger that, as Sartre would affirm, brings on a near-death experience in the form of the death of my possibilities, the dissolution of myself into an object, my wholesale saturation in fear, then biblical religions would not analogously be pervaded by concerns with the stranger and conceive the stranger in all manner of guise. The coincidence of stranger and death resonates in the vulnerability of being alive.

Sartre's description of shame at being caught peeking through a keyhole is indeed oddly akin to being caught naked in the Garden, that is, oddly akin to being aware of oneself before an Other, an unfamiliar Other who stops you in your tracks and robs you of your freedom, who causes an internal hemorrhaging of the world, who makes you an object.²⁰ There is indeed an uncanny resemblance not just between oneself at the keyhole and oneself in the Garden of Eden, but between the Other watching at the keyhole and the Other watching in the Garden. The presence of the Other in each instance means 'I am no longer master of the situation;' it means 'I *live* myself as fixed in the midst of the world, as in danger, as irremediable;' it means '[t]he Other is the hidden death of my possibilities in so far as I live that death as hidden in the midst of the world.'²¹

A totally different Other, however, warrants recognition. A strange Other distinctively unlike the Other that either Sartre or Scarry describes, and furthermore having no link either symbolically or otherwise to the Otherness of death is described in painstaking detail by Rudolf Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*. Nothing mundane approximates to the 'wholly Other' that Otto captures in his seminal notion of the *mysterium tremendum*, a phenomenon he categorically distances from everyday conceptual understandings of mystery or unfamiliarity, and the felt experience of which he categorically distances from everyday experiences of fear or dread (Otto, 1928). The experience of the *mysterium tremendum* is an experience of the numinous that begins in a sensory experience of some kind, but is not itself sensory. It is an emotional experience in which 'a creature [feels] abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures' (Otto, 1928, p. 10). The experience is a uniquely religious one that is resoundingly positive, a 'harmony of contrasts' (p. 42), as Otto describes it, a complex of fascination as well as fear, wonder as well as terror, felt in relation to a transcendent Being. Otto emphasizes many times over that the *mysterium tremendum* is a natural, spontaneous experience, i.e., it is not derived from any teachings, and that the words he uses to describe it are to be understood not conceptually but affectively. Moreover while his descriptive analysis of 'the stupor before something "wholly Other"' (p. 27) is clearly weighted in Christianity and Judaism, it encompasses references to Hinduism and Buddhism. It in fact harks back to Plato, a fact Smith points out in the course of answering his own question, 'What does holiness involve?' He observes that, 'To many moderns the word is empty; but those who feel the stir of wonder and can sense the ineffable pressing in on their lives from every side will know what Plato was talking about when he wrote, "First a shudder runs through you, and then the old awe creeps over you"' (Smith, 1991, p. 301). He comments that 'Those who have had such experiences will know the blend of mystery, ecstasy, and the numinous, which received classic description in Rudolph Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*' (p. 301).

Smith himself writes of mystery in the context of his studies of religion, an abiding epistemological mystery similar to that of Einstein but not wholly removed from Otto. 'Reality,' he states, 'is steeped in ineluctable mystery; we are born in mystery, we live in mystery, and we die in mystery. [...] A mystery is that special kind of problem which for the human mind *has* no solution; the more we understand it, the more we become aware of additional factors relating to it that we do not understand. In mysteries what we know, and our realization of what we do not know, proceed together; the larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder. It is like the quantum world, where the more we understand its formalism, the stranger that world becomes' (Smith, 1991, p. 389). The epistemological affinity with Einstein notwithstanding, the affinity with Otto is equally strong: in the same way that nothing mundane approximates to the *mysterium tremendum* of which Otto writes, so nothing in the way of a definitive answer approximates to the mystery of which Smith writes. Indeed, in a

permanently and ever-increasingly strange world, it is as if a 'wholly Other' holds absolute and permanent sway, a 'wholly Other' whose presence is not rooted in affective experience as with Otto, but is a matter of ever elusive knowledge.

Whether an awareness of that 'wholly Other' eventuates in the numinous experience that Otto describes or in forms of mystery that Smith and Einstein describe, or in fact eventuating in a vacuum of no particular experience at all, the reach of the world clearly extends beyond us in a never-ending unfamiliar space and time filled with a never-ending presence and emergence of 'strangers' – natural phenomena as well as animate beings – whose possibilities for action for or against us are beyond our ken. These are immutable facts of life. We are indeed vulnerable by the mere fact of being alive. A supernatural redemption of our vulnerability by way of the *mysterium tremendum* invites our trust but with no guarantee of fulfillment. Other mysteries say nothing of the vulnerability of our aliveness but bequeath us an interminably strange natural world to comprehend and contend with as we will. Indeed, they invite our trust in nothing more than our own understanding, including the limits of our own understanding. With respect to these mysteries, the origin and terminus of the natural gift of life remain unfathomable; precisely as Smith indicates, 'Reality is steeped in ineluctable mystery' (Smith, 1991). At the end of his book titled *Apocalypse*, D. H. Lawrence echoes this thought. He eloquently concedes the unfathomability of our punctuated existence,²² but with a wondrous twist. He writes, 'Whatever the unborn and the dead may know, they cannot know the beauty, the marvel of being alive in the flesh. The dead may look after the afterwards. But the magnificent here and now of life in the flesh is ours, and ours alone, and ours only for a time' (Lawrence, 1932, pp. 199–200).

In essence, Lawrence's words attest to the fact that the natural gift of life can invite trust with no strings attached, either fearful strings of death or their personification in strangers, and with no tetherings either to religion. His alternative vision of the human world is eschatologically and doxically unencumbered. Neither the prospect of death nor a terror of death, neither belief in a transcendent Being nor in an afterlife, enters into his vision. As Einstein affirms, '[t]he mystery of conscious life' and 'the marvelous structure of the universe' suffice in themselves. Lawrence in fact extols their sufficiency in expansively rich first-person plural terms. In his affectively-charged closing words following immediately upon those quoted above, he fervently summons us to awaken to the wonders of life: 'We ought to dance with rapture that we are alive and in the flesh and part of the living incarnate cosmos' (Lawrence, 1932, p. 200). The words recall those of Nietzsche: 'I could only believe in a God who could dance.' A god who dances celebrates life, reveres life, is alive to the wonder of life. A god who dances is creative rather than destructive and vengeful, life-enhancing rather than life-destroying. A god who dances joins together rather than renders asunder; a god who dances is yea-saying of life in all its wondrous forms.²³

Unsentimentalized reflection on Lawrence's closing words brings us to a closing thought on the challenge of our aliveness. Would we humans actually dance with rapture 'that we are alive and in the flesh and part of the living incarnate cosmos,' we would not escape the sheer vulnerability of our aliveness, but we would surely escape the vulnerability of being alive among unfamiliar Others, for no strangers would be among us, dancing with rapture. Rapture, like trust, *moves* the body and *moves through* the body in ways contrary to fear.²⁴ In effect, none of us would be clutched 'in suspense,' frozen in an ongoing vulnerability. On the contrary, we would each be open toward a world of others and toward moving with a world of others. In Smith's evocative image, we would all be moving along the shoreline of wonder, the shoreline that stretches continuously beyond us, extending our interpersonal understandings to their limit and profiting from the interpersonal understandings of others along the way.

Fanatical and fundamentalist ideologies would find no place along this never-ending shoreline of wonder: motivated by life itself, none would feel inclined toward any such ideology. Being in the company of fellow humans, we would each of us be experiencing a common aliveness in the here and now, a common being in the flesh, a common rapture and inter-connected presence in the living incarnate cosmos. Our communal dance would transcend language and prominence our foundational communal humanness, strengthening religious moral teachings concerning strangers by living them in the flesh. Our movement together would clearly not be a panacea for all ills of the human world – deep and conscientious probings into the commonly disowned shadow side of our human psyche would be equally essential – but it would surely be a point of departure for ameliorating the violent ideological conflicts that adult humans proliferate within the world and moreover teach their children to proliferate within the world.²⁵ Experiencing the rapture of our aliveness would refocus our attention to life itself, awakening us to the fact that we are all mortal humans who are of a piece with the ongoing, interwoven wonders of nature.



Notes

¹ This Templeton Foundation guest lecture, initially presented at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in March 2007 and subsequently presented as a guest lecture at the Department of Philosophy at Durham University in May 2007, is far less a position paper or a descriptive analysis than an inquiry into and an attempt to articulate commonly unrecognized lines connecting commonly recognized dots. Its moral conclusion might be sketched as follows.

Where belief overtakes wonder, religion fails in its mission to enhance life. When fear overtakes wonder, individuals fail in the promise of their aliveness. In particular, when belief overtakes wonder, that is where religion fails in the sense of constraining or even shutting the individual off from investigation and exploration of the unknown or unfamiliar or from what is not sanctioned as proper. When fear overtakes simple curiosity and the desire to know, that is where the individual fails in the sense of simply reacting, prejudging a situation or a person as threatening or dangerous in advance of actual experience. When belief and fear together take over, human experience is shackled and crippled. It remains ideologically tethered and affectively maimed.

² 'The proof of my condition as man, as an object for *all* other living men, as thrown in the arena beneath millions of looks and escaping myself millions of times – this proof I realize concretely on the occasion of the upsurge of an object into *my* universe if this object indicates to me that I am probably an object at present functioning as a *differentiated this* for a consciousness' (Sartre, 1956, p. 281).

³ Further examination of Sartre's exemplary descriptions reveals additional perspectives on how affectively-charged epistemological facets are fundamental. Sartre describes the feeling of shame as 'an intimate relation of myself to myself' (Sartre, 1956, p. 221), emphasizing from the start that such a relation is not a reflective relation but an immediately lived one, i.e., 'in so far as the Other *is watching me*,' I immediately experience myself as an object. It is thus clear how 'the Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me' (p. 222), and in particular, how 'I am ashamed of myself as I *appear* to the Other' (p. 222), namely, as an object caught in an unseemly act of some kind. As indicated above, however, the primordial vulnerability of humans is not a matter of being seen; it has nothing to do with 'appearance' as such. When we distinguish between a purely ontological rendition of the Other and an epistemologically inflected ontological rendition of the Other – between a theoretical concern with the being of the Other *tout court* as distinct from a living concern with the being of the Other as familiar or unfamiliar – we find that the primordial vulnerability of humans has to do not with *the look* of the Other, but with *the full-bodied presence* of the Other and the potential harm that full-bodied presence embodies, above all with respect to its familiarity or unfamiliarity. The primordial vulnerability of humans, like the primordial vulnerability of all animals, is indeed tied to the existential condition of being alive, and alive among full-bodied Others. Shame is in truth only one possible form of communal vulnerability and a highly sophisticated one at that. The starkest form is tied to the simple fact of being communally alive. It hinges on the unpredictability of unknown Others and on the incipient to full-fledged fear that unpredictability evokes or may evoke. Sartre himself points up the 'unpredictability' of the Other in the fact of his being '*no longer master of the situation*' (pp. 265–6). Clearly, an epistemological gap exists, a foreboding scissure engendered in the very presence of an unfamiliar Other. The gap is implicit in Sartre's descriptions of his 'situation' before the Other: 'I am in a world which the Other has made alien to me' (p. 261); 'I experience a subtle alienation of all my

possibilities' (p. 265); 'every act performed against the Other can on principle be for the Other an instrument which will serve him against me' (p. 264); 'I grasp the Other [...] in a fear which lives all my possibilities as ambivalent' (p. 264).

⁴An exceptionally lucid and detailed account of just such acceptance is given by evolutionary anthropologist Shirley Strum, who describes the patient and protracted lengths to which a strange male olive baboon (*Papio anubis*) went prior to being accepted within a new group (Strum, 1987, pp. 23–37).

⁵Jung's concept of the shadow and his analyses of the practice of projection are highly relevant to understandings of the stranger and warrant full examination in their own right.

⁶Jung also comments provocatively in his essay 'The Undiscovered Self' on the fact that 'resistances to psychological enlightenment are based in large measure on fear – on panic fear of the discoveries that might be made in the realm of the unconscious. [...] Often the fear is so great that one dares not admit it even to oneself. This is a question which every religious person should consider very seriously; he might get an illuminating answer' (Jung, 1970, pp. 271–2).

⁷Injections of fear – the possibility of a terrorist attack on the Golden Gate Bridge or the Brooklyn Bridge; the necessity of smallpox inoculations; the purchasing of duct tape to secure windows; and so on – not only kept trust in the federal government alive during this period of time, but bolstered it, and strengthened its social hold.

⁸If one were a sociobiologist rather than a systems theorist, one would attempt to show that trusting and cultivating trust are behaviors enhancing reproductive success, not behaviors reducing complexity; that is, one would attempt to explain trust adaptively in terms of ultimate causation rather than functionally in terms of proximate causation. The explanations, however, would run basically along similar lines, i.e., they would determine 'the benefit' that comes from trust. In contrast to posing and answering the question, 'what is it good for?' or 'how does it work?', one could pose and answer the question, 'where does it come from?' If phenomenologically inclined, one might thereby trace out the origin and development of trust, elucidating it as an existential condition of human aliveness. For a beginning attempt in this direction, see Sheets-Johnstone, 2006.

⁹Although well-being, security, safety, and the like, figure in the compensatory spin-offs of religion that Kolenda describes, trust does not figure substantively and centrally in the equation in any way. What does figure centrally is death. As philosopher David Stewart points out, Kolenda attempts to find an alternative to the personal and transcendent God of the Jewish and Christian traditions through the notion of compensation: 'The religious impulse, Kolenda argues, arises from our awareness of human finitude; another way of saying this is that religion grows out of our awareness that we all die. Because religions – at least some religions – give us hope for continued existence after death, they attempt to provide what Kolenda calls *compensation* for human finitude.' (Stewart, 1992, p. 340).

¹⁰She notes that 'Perhaps the most overt acting out of this [shattering and repossession] occurs in the final plague on the house of the Pharaoh, the final entry into his hard heart, the massacre of the innocents in which the interior of the body as it emerges in the first-born infant is taken by God (Exodus 12)' (Scarry, 1985, p. 204).

¹¹ Scarry's theme is furthermore to show how 'God's most intimate contact with humanity, His sensory contact with the human body, is in the Hebraic scriptures mediated by a weapon [e.g., a flaming torch, a burning bush, a rod, a stick, a stone (Scarry, 1985, p. 200 ff.)] and in the Christian scriptural additions is mediated by Jesus' (p. 213).

¹² The relation between the 'Word of God' and the 'Body of Man' is mediated.

¹³ The Bible and Sartre aside, one has a readily available contemporary point of reference that documents the experience of living in a sheer and ongoing corporeally-gripping vulnerability: the American-held prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

¹⁴ A contemporary incident in the US points up the lapse in a homely but plainly incisive way.

Less than ten years ago I found myself one Sunday in a white Baptist church in rural South Carolina listening to a sermon titled 'Surrounded' and sincerely wishing I was somewhere else. For more than an hour I sat there, gradually realizing that my own considerable discomfort was dwarfed by that of the worshipers around me. The stares I received betrayed not hostility but genuine confusion. In a segregated town that was 60 percent black, my presence in this white space was itself a statement. But about what, no one knew. The eyes fixed upon me desperately sought answers. 'What are you doing here? You know the rules. Everybody knows the rules. We don't go to your churches, and you don't come to ours. Why are you doing this to us? What do you want?'

When the sermon was over, I tried to leave as quickly as I could, but a hand caught my shoulder. 'Welcome. I'm so glad you came,' said one woman. 'Thank you. I'm glad to be here,' I said. On hearing my voice her face relaxed a little. 'You're not from here, are you?' she said. 'No, I'm from England,' I said.

As the words were repeated all around me a small crowd formed. 'He's from England,' 'He's English,' I could hear people muttering as a mini-stampede came to shake my hand and greet me. I was English. I was not their problem I would not be coming back (Younge, 2006, p. 12).

Gary Younge, a columnist for *The Nation*, later notes that 'American racism has me pegged somewhere between the noble savage and the idiot savant – it adds twenty points to my IQ for my accent but docks fifteen for the bell curve' (Younge, 2006).

A scapegoat, the negative focal point of a community, figures in a similarly excluded way, but a way that is definitively hostile and vindictive. An insightful analysis of a biblical scapegoat in the person of Job is given by religion scholar René Girard, who shows how Job becomes the innocent victim of opprobrium, persecuted by his own people including even his wife. The 'scapegoat mechanism,' as Girard terms it, operates on the principle of '*all against one*' (Girard, 1987, p. 24). On a smaller scale, the same principle is at work with respect to 'the black sheep' of a family. Church intruder, scapegoat, black sheep – all are strangers in their own communal midst, foreigners outside the 'circle of faith.' All are treated counter both to the way in which the Bible conceives and has been interpreted as conceiving strangers and to the way in which it admonishes us to treat strangers. The biblical thematic can in essence be condensed in quadrant form.

¹⁵ Note too, 'I tell you the truth [...] no prophet is accepted in his hometown' (Luke 4:24).

¹⁶ See also the analyses of José E. Ramírez Kidd in his finely researched book *Alterity and Identity in Israel* (Kidd, 1999). Kidd documents in thorough fashion the prescribed treatment of strangers specified in the Old Testament. He shows that the Hebrew word for stranger in the text, for example, refers both to individuals and to Israel, that both orphans and widows are included in the former use of the word and that a distinct notion of resident aliens prevails that is not found in any of the ancient texts of the surrounding cultures. The laws the Old Testament sets forth as governing behavior toward strangers is particularly remarkable in light of present-day behaviors in the Middle East.

See too theological scholar Bernhard A. Asen's essay 'From Acceptance to Inclusion: The Stranger (*ger*) in Old Testament Tradition,' which also contains a short but informative section on the stranger in the New Testament (Asen, 1995).

¹⁷ When we are at a loss to name something, the typically unnoticed challenge of languaging experience is directly experienced and even heightened. For more on the challenge, see Sheets-Johnstone, 2006b.

¹⁸ As classically identified, stranger anxiety commonly appears at eight or nine months of age, but infant anxiety in face of a stranger might also be identified as vulnerability; the first stirrings of vulnerability, not in any ideological sense, religious or otherwise, but in the sense of an immediately felt openness to danger or harm from others, that is, a raw, culturally unembellished experience of the Other as unfamiliar, wholly unknown and thus threatening.

Stranger anxiety from this perspective constitutes the ground floor of the experience of being at risk in the presence of a strange Other and of the possible harm that the full-bodied presence of the Other embodies. The response, in other words, is obviously in the service of survival. Looking back on our own infancy from this adult perspective, we find that it is not only conscience in the sense of reflection that 'makes cowards of us all,' as Shakespeare has it, but strangeness and strangers. The stranger must prove himself trustworthy, someone whose actions we can count on, someone whose words we can believe – thus, the later religious connection with knowing the name of the stranger and in turn trusting. Someone whose words can be believed – 'I am the Lord – is someone who will keep his word, someone who can do what he says he can do and will in fact do what he says he will do, someone who can thus be venerated and who will protect one from harm.

It is of interest to note in this context that the first words of an infant are typically 'Mama,' the naming of someone already familiar, but now made even more familiar by naming, more familiar in the sense of having a distinctive *call*, so to speak. One can articulate the already familiar, and in articulating the already familiar, make the familiarity a *felt* presence, not just heard but presented in and by the body.

To be emphasized too is the fact that stranger anxiety is an evolutionarily-rooted phenomenon, as might be apparent from earlier references to non-human infant behaviors. See, for example, Goodall, 1971, 1990; Strum, 1987.

¹⁹ In this respect it is of substantive import to note that naming talk – what we might call veritable Heideggerian 'idle chatter' about the world and its occupants – is an adult occupation and preoccupation, not the occupation and preoccupation of infants and young children whose experiential knowledge of the world is nonlinguistically constituted and whose basically tactile-kinesthetic constitution of the world lays the foundation for its

later linguistic constitution (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999). Infants and young children, after all, have yet to be indoctrinated into the epistemological name-game by which what is unfamiliar is made putatively familiar by naming. Learning the world originally, regardless of one's ancestry or religious environment, means making one's way not by dint of language but in the flesh, *exploring* it, not naming it. In doing so, infants and young children take what is initially strange directly into their world, familiarizing themselves with it in the process.

²⁰ Shame is close to guilt and guilt is close to sin in that feelings of shame can open onto feelings of guilt for doing or having done what one did, and feelings of guilt for doing or having done what one did can open in a religious context onto feelings of sinfulness.

²¹ Moreover Sartre's description of the look of the Other as 'eyeless' is akin to Scarry's description of God's voice as bodiless: 'M]y apprehension of a look turned toward me appears on the ground of the destruction of the eyes which "look at me"' (Sartre, 1956, p. 258); the voice of God 'is exclusively verbal [...] [God] has no body' (Scarry, 1985, pp. 19–23). Both look and voice are a pure and awesome presence distilled absolutely from anything corporeal. But like the voice of God, the look of the Other is actually physically substantiated, namely, in the Other's corporeally-grounded ontological freedom, or in Luhmann's words, in the 'uncontrollable power [of Other people] to act' (Luhmann, 1979, p. 41). In actuality, then, we live continuously on the edge of the death of our possibilities, on the edge of the unfamiliar.

²² For more on 'punctuated existence,' see Sheets-Johnstone (1990), *The Roots of Thinking*, Chapter 8, 'On the Conceptual Origin of Death.'

²³ The teachings of the Buddha, we might note, focus in a related way on the preciousness of life. Moreover Lawrence's and Nietzsche's words might recall those of Aristotle with respect to the source of all nature, the unmoved eternal that imparts motion, the Prime Mover. Further still, the words might prompt us to ask why the stranger who wrestled with Jacob all night till dawn did not dance with him instead. The stranger was God. We might well wonder what would have happened if God had danced with Jacob? What would have been different if they had danced together rather than fought? Surely an intercorporeal attunement and spiritual rejoicing would have been present throughout the night. At the very least, Jacob would not have been injured by God in the hip and limped ever after.

²⁴ For a further discussion of such kinetic distinctions, see Sheets-Johnstone, 2006a.

²⁵ Vengeance and terrorism are paradigms of just such human adult-generated ills that heighten to an extreme the fear of strange Others, of death, and of the 'uncontrollable power [of Others] to act.'

Acknowledgements

This article was originally presented as a guest lecture sponsored by the Templeton Foundation for Science and Religion and is to appear in 2010 in a volume titled 'Trust: Science and Religion' edited by Robert Crease, chairperson of the Department of Philosophy, State University of New York at Stony Brook.

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