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Critique of Possessive Desire

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> This is the mind of the messiah [referring to the servant ethic of Mark 10:43–44], and it does not take the erotic form of desire. It takes the humiliating and often invisible, strange-making form of sacrifice, which relates to the form of this world as a "passing away." Such witness—and I dare-say it is a witness equally paradoxical in the church and in the world—bears testimony to the power of the Spirit that brings about not new human achievements but discloses the strange and strange-making passage of God in the world. It cannot be possessed; it cannot be restricted to the church; it can only be prepared for by repentance.[1]—P. Travis Kroeker

> Let this preface, then, be a "counter-provocation" to Jim's [A. James Reimer's] bi-directional provocations, in the service of what I want to call a messianic political theology that is neither Catholic nor Protestant, neither Mennonite nor secularist, neither orthodox nor heterodox—in keeping with a Pauline economy (*oikonomia*, sometimes translated as "commission"; 1 Cor 9:17) that inhabits the mysterious freedom of messianic slavery in order to build up (*oikodome*; 1

1. Kroeker, "Making Strange," 98.

> Cor 8:1, 10:23) the common world that is nevertheless passing away (1 Cor 7:31).[2]—P. Travis Kroeker

> There is no salvation to be found in institutional, human, political, or religious powers or in identitarian moral purity. Everything in the world is secular, fragile, vulnerable, and mortal, kept alive by divine love, the divine breath. This is why Augustine is so deeply ambivalent about all justice claims. Like all virtue language tied to the knowledge of good and evil, as if this could be a humanly controlled or instituted techne, love and justice may quickly become destructive fantasies: the endless erotic pursuits of "final solutions" to the problem of evil, as it is humanly understood and imposed, that always end yet again in violence and death—new kinds of hell on earth.[3]—P. Travis Kroeker

What to say about the work of P. Travis Kroeker? How to write about, and in some senses address, an erudite, charitable, critical, and influential figure in the conversation on political theology (who was also my *Doktorvater*, in the very best sense of the term)? Below I want to draw out just one feature of his thought that I find most challenging, most provocative, and most helpful: the *critique of possessive desire*, a term for what one might call a methodology or paradigm that centrally animates Kroeker's unique messianic political theology, but which he does not possess or use in the traditional ways that methodologies are often instrumentalized. As expressed in the leading quotations above and on the back cover of his book *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, Kroeker's work seeks to further "a messianic posture rooted in the renunciation of possessive desire that pertains to all aspects of everyday human life in the household (*oikos*), the academy, and the *polis*."[4] But what does this mean? What makes for a critique of possessive desire, and how does it feature in his work and the works of others?

2. Kroeker, "Foreword," ix–x.
3. Kroeker, "Postsecular History or Figural Messianism?", 344.
4. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, back cover.

Below I will survey some of Kroeker's writings in order to draw out the threads of the critique of possessive desire, with the ultimate aim of demonstrating that it sits within the heart of his work in ways that cannot be fully articulated, lest it lead those who articulate it into possessive self-defeat. I will begin with an account of the constellation of ideas and paradoxical ways of thinking that characterize the critique of possessive desire, and then I will highlight its presence in a sampling of Kroeker's unique political theology, before concluding with an account of salient parallels between Kroeker's work and writings by Hartmut Rosa and Reiner Schürmann—two unlikely dialogue partners who illuminate how the critique of possessive desire transcends the often-possessive distinctions between religion and secularity.

The Critique of Possessive Desire

The critique of possessive desire is certainly not singular (for it is only ever "a" critique of possessive desire), but it nonetheless appears as a golden thread woven through the history of religious, theological, and political thought, from the ancients to the medieval mystics to the moderns and postmoderns. The critique draws from many sources but is reducible to none, and it persistently works against the forces of pride, hubris, and *libido dominandi* that drive people to ruin. This distinctive approach to the problems posed by power, control, and possession is, in some ways, *not* distinctive, because the critique of possessive desire belongs to no one (otherwise it would become self-defeating in being possessed), and yet it is found in many specific places and times. Kroeker's work addresses many of these sources, sometimes through apocalyptic and messianic readings of figures like Augustine or Simone Weil, and often through literary-political readings of the great works of Western religious and theological thought. Even within the social-scientific and interdisciplinary field of religious studies there are elements of unpossessive deferral when scholars allow the self-understanding of those whom they study to take precedence over the imposition of ideal types or classifications. Unrestricted by field, discipline, time, and space, the insights and wisdom of the critique of possessive desire are in some respects perennial and diverse, but in the interest of clarity (the possessive character of which must be refused), here are its main contours.

When we talk about what a thing *is* (ontologically) as if we know something *about it* (epistemologically), using names and terms and concepts to point toward it (linguistically and communicatively) that are jointly grounded in their instrumental uses and polemical abuses by various people (politically and socially), being both normative and descriptive, then we attempt—and it is only ever an attempt—to fix upon that thing enough to say something meaningful about it that others will understand and appreciate. But the moment that desire for fixity lapses into anxious or controlling exercises of power, force, violence, or coercion (often motivated by the very understandable but highly manipulable desires for safety, security, and certainty), then we have lost something valuable, even sacred, and fallen into possessive self-defeat.

For example, in desiring to lock down a definition of a key term or definitively solidify a religious doctrine, the project of securing it causes its sacred, ineffable, sublime, and spiritual character to disappear. Possessive desire, from the level of concepts and ideas (where thinkers deal in ideal types that cloak normative uses of terms in the appearance of mere description) to social and material situations (where people act in violent, controlling, and possessive ways toward themselves and others), offends against the nature of things: the fact that all things are subject to change, and that all things are passing away and will always pass away. In some senses, it is a bold metaphysical claim to say that the way things are is reflected in the idea that we cannot possess or fix in place how things are, but in another light it is simply a piece of worldly wisdom that everyone knows without much need for reflection: nothing lasts forever, all things must change, and as soon as you think you've captured something you desire, it has escaped your grasp.

Travis Kroeker's Political Theology

In both his seminar courses and published works, Kroeker approaches the ideas and texts of others in a distinctive way that flows both from and toward his messianic political theology and diasporic ethics. Now, Kroeker's work is not unique inasmuch as it exemplifies and sometimes articulates this critique of possessive desire. But his work is exemplary of this paradoxical approach in ways that can be put in more precise terms (mindful, of course, that too much precision defeats the purpose of clarifying a critique of possessive desire). From his master's thesis on Karl

Rahner and dissertation on political economy to his co-authored book on Fyodor Dostoevsky and articles on Mennonite political theology, to his lectures on empire erotics, his 2017 essay collection on messianic political theology, and his work on Miriam Toews—and especially in the pedagogical relay between gentle correction and insistence on detailed close reading that characterizes his seminar teaching style—Kroeker's critique of possessive desire has left an indelible mark on his many students (and in some ways appears to be inspired by his own teachers[5]).

In the introduction to *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, Kroeker gives one of the more succinct and programmatic summaries of his theopolitical project. His approach to political theology understands the term to refer to "a normative discourse rooted in the conviction that political crises—in the complex etymological sense of events, issues, judgments and decisions related to crucial 'turning points'—may be best accounted for with reference to theological terms."[6] Political theology is certainly normative, and it is certainly a response to crises, but *how* its normative orientation relates to the secularization of concepts is what counts, and for Kroeker, I suggest that the normativity of political theology is characterized by the struggle with possessive desire. Kroeker's work consistently returns to themes of scandal, controversy, and agonism, but without the *ressentiment*, moral panics, and anxieties that afflict conservative political theologians who seek a regressive return to a time when Christian theology reigned. Instead, Kroeker critiques "the presumptive grasping of power" that characterizes human sovereignty and seeks a form of political education that asks: "Who is leading us out (*e-ducere*) of bondage into a more liberating, peaceful and just form of communal life and vision?"[7] Exilic and diasporic approaches, informed by messianic and apocalyptic readings of Augustine, Walter Benjamin, and the great works of the Western tradition are the ways in which Kroeker resists possessive desire without taking refuge in the fantasy that

5. Kroeker concludes his appreciation of his PhD supervisor, James Gustafson, by stating, "The Christian faith at its center confesses that both the content and the human form of divine wisdom is revealed in Christ—whose example of humility and serving love is scandalous to both such strategies. The wisdom of God is foolishness to discursive human reason (whether doctrinal or scientific) that seeks to possess certain knowledge for itself; and the power of God is weakness to those human traditions (whether religious or secular) that seek to control and dominate the saeculum. What the alternative might be is known only to the eye of faith." Kroeker, "Doubting Theology," para. 4.

6. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 1.

7. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 2–3.

people can be purified of their need for repentance and reconciliation, and without the trappings of fatalism or hopelessness.

Elsewhere, Kroeker pitches suffering love against educative violence,[8] and calls for an existential form of Anabaptist radicalism that draws from literary and philosophical sources to provide provisional answers to the most important existential questions.[9] Like a golden thread, the critique of possessive desire is woven through Kroeker's work up to his most recent essays on the scandalous drama of the Trinity (on which he advocates for a "vernacular mysticism" that calls Anabaptists to "become more radical in committing to the figural drama of the biblical witness that goes beyond conventional doctrinal or traditional logics in the service of the scandalous divine love for a sinful, suffering world"[10]), and on the concept of the secular and the political (in which he argues that "to the extent to which any retributive judicial practices are devoted to the possessive and dominating 'order' of the security state that claims to mediate a non-penitential justice, such practices are rooted in sinful necessity and contribute to the 'lie' of a strictly human sovereignty."[11]).

The essays in *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics* further exemplify the delicate but persistent wisdom that comes from critiquing possessive desire by treating their sources, concepts, narratives, and ideas in ways that allow them to be themselves (letting them be) but also make incisive interventions that transform them. Whether by learning to live "as if not" by acknowledging the partial character of all knowledge while nonetheless seeking the fulfillment and recapitulation of time, or arguing that the pursuit of the political and public good requires existential reckoning that cannot be forced or imposed, Kroeker's writing is careful and humble but also persistent and assertive.[12] Through simultaneous critiques of the liberal forgetting of religion and investment in technocratic individualism, and the conservative desire to conserve what cannot be conserved, Kroeker encourages ways of thinking and interpreting the world that build up the secular from below by theological means.[13] In his close readings, each major text he engages with—Augustine's *Confessions*, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Herman

8. Kroeker, "Educative Violence or Suffering Love?"
9. Kroeker, "Anabaptists and Existential Theology."
10. Kroeker, "Scandalous Drama of Trinitarian Theology," 153.
11. Kroeker, "Secular—The Political," 253.
12. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 33, 44.
13. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 64.

Melville's *Moby Dick*, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Plato's *Republic*, and so on—is treated with similarly unpossessive hands. Kroeker draws lessons, truths, and insights from these texts without reducing them to moralizing discourses or didactic expressions of moral purity. Kroeker's ethics is diasporic, seeing the scattering of languages after Babel as a divine gift of difference and resisting the "colonizing vision and monolithic ontology" of technological empires.[14]

This upbuilding work involves both an apophatic suspicion of names and language and a willingness to name realities in plural and dispersed ways, alongside an existential theological orientation that seeks truths in ways that require "both a certain sort of person and a certain kind of *techne*, or method."[15] Kroeker's existential Anabaptism, for example, reflects his position as "someone struggling to give an account of what it means to be answerable for what I have been given to be and to do."[16] Rather than another overly cognitive and abstract theology, Kroeker advocates for an existential theology rooted in real people and communities, "in communion that keeps faith with one another, the land, and God—embracing and embodying, in disciplined skills of love and care, a life-giving vision of peaceable justice."[17]

Grounded as it is in existential matters, Kroeker's work nonetheless holds its ground with a gentleness and care that understands how possessive, controlling, reactive, and anxious desires can cause the movements of life to bind and catch, often leading into self-defeating cycles where we create precisely what we fear. Only humility, repentance, and unpossessive holding of ideas and things can prevent—for example—the poison of *ressentiment* or the perpetuation of colonial violence (dynamics touched upon in Travis's exchange with Carole Leclair in chapter 12 of *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*). Encounters across lines of difference are essential spiritual exercises for holding knowledge of the world with open hands, and this disciplined unpossessiveness should emphasize how the "critique of possessive desire" (that is perhaps idolatrously named and unpacked in this chapter) is not the possession of any single figure and is expressed by many. So, I turn in conclusion to two others who have found its path and articulated its wisdom, if only to illuminate

14. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 75.
15. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 75, 83.
16. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 86.
17. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 87.

how this critique is a possession of no one but available to all, in ways that resonate with Kroeker's corpus.

Critiques of Possessive Desire in Hartmut Rosa and Reiner Schürmann

Hartmut Rosa's book *The Uncontrollability of the World* describes the *Unverfügbarkeit* of all things in a clear and accessible way—so deceptively simple it risks being overlooked. Rosa focuses on the elusiveness of control and the positive possibility of resonating with the world in ways that engage with its unpredictable and resistant character by carefully yet decisively mediating between that which we can and cannot control (as the Serenity Prayer articulates in popular form). He opens with the claim that modernity is based on the idea that the world is controllable, while "it is only in encountering the *uncontrollable* that we really experience the world."[18] The visibility, accessibility, manageability, and usability that we attribute to the world when we desire to possess and control things in it—from concepts to people—are each fundamentally challenged, for Rosa, by the world's mysterious withdrawal.[19]

Against these desires, he prescribes modes of affection, efficacy, emotion, and adaptive transformation by which we can come into greater resonance with the world. By resonating with the tension that animates the line between what we can and cannot control, Rosa thinks that we are not confronted with a contradiction but are witness to the semi-controllable character of the world.[20] Against possession and mastery, Rosa asks that simple existential question that confronts us each day: "To take control or let things happen?"[21] His answer is to pursue the latter, and his examples are simple and beautiful, from falling snow that cannot be taken in hand and held to the paradox of trying to fall asleep, wherein the more one tries the less likely sleep will arrive.

Another thinker who expresses a version of the critique of possessive desire is Reiner Schürmann, who is best known for his work on Martin Heidegger and his magnum opus, *Broken Hegemonies*.[22] Early

18. Rosa, *Uncontrollability of the World*, 1.
19. Rosa, *Uncontrollability of the World*, 19.
20. Rosa, *Uncontrollability of the World*, 41.
21. Rosa, *Uncontrollability of the World*, 60.
22. Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*.

in his career, Schürmann trained to become a Dominican priest and wrote theological texts that have recently been edited and compiled in a volume called *Ways of Releasement*—where "releasement" stands in for the German *Gelassenheit* and the French *délaissement*.[23] In these early writings, before Schürmann sought to quietly erase his theological past, he articulates a series of insights—many derived from Meister Eckhart—that resonate with the critique of possessive desire. For the early Schürmann, living according to the gospel means to free oneself from the "complications of language" in ways that understand that "to seek words is necessary; to find them is impossible."[24] Via Schürmann's related concept of "peregrine identity"—at once influenced by Heidegger, Eckhart, and the Bhagavad-Gita—we can see another exemplary expression of the critique of possessive desire, especially in his description of "true ascesis" as "the apprenticeship of saying and falling silent," where revelation is at once "radically incomprehensible" and renewed through contemporary language.[25]

It is in his interpretation of Eckhart that Schürmann's critique of possessive desire becomes most clearly expressed—for example, in Eckhart's statement that those who wish to understand his teaching about detachment (*Gelassenheit*) must themselves become detached.[26] But this is not a total detachment that dissociates from present things in space and time, but rather it is a way of becoming more present, listening more closely, and letting things be in ways that still act and decide. For Schürmann, critiquing possessive desire and living in *Gelassenheit* means "preserving the mystery of his path," giving "answers with silence," "wandering far from the origin but being called back to it," and being invited and called to "the infinite resignation of detachment."[27] This itinerant wandering means "crossing the nothingness that separates us from the emergence in which all things are one" in ways that release hold on binaristic oppositions, while bearing and grounding nothing, and avoiding all security and capture.[28] Not unlike Kroeker's diasporic approach, Schürmann's releasement means

23. Schürmann, *Ways of Releasement*.
24. Schürmann, *Ways of Releasement*, 11, 97.
25. Schürmann, *Ways of Releasement*, 99.
26. Schürmann, *Ways of Releasement*, 102.
27. Schürmann, *Ways of Releasement*, 112.
28. Schürmann, *Ways of Releasement*, 151.

> letting go, unclenching [*Lâcher prise*], ceasing to lay hold of. Of oneself, of others, of the images of the past and the projects of the future, of God finally. This has nothing to do with desperate abandonment. On the contrary. It is a matter of supreme interest in everything that is. But to see what is, it is necessary to pull back and keep our hands off. Away from the haze, we have a future in place of apprehensions, and a heart in place of a past. Letting be [*Laisser* être]: this opens a path. An initiation, perhaps, but not a threshold crossed once and for all. Dare dispossession, with animal patience. These words say it well: peregrination, peril, experience. Our essential peregrination, the experience of ourselves, remains perilous.[29]

Kroeker, Rosa, and Schürmann each articulate a version of the critique of possessive desire, the mystical center of which can never be expressed but the contours of which represent one of the most urgent and serious ethical problems we are faced with. Consider Rosa's question again: "To take control or let things happen?" It can never be so simple as to choose one option over the other in a decontextualized way. Instead, the question is really about how one mediates between letting things be and taking action, or discerns between the moment of releasement and the moment of decision. If Schürmann's approach is to be taken seriously, any simplistic division of our thinking in two is given over to possessive self-defeat—for example, the notion that one must either take control or let things happen.

Self-Critique and Self-Defeat of Possessive Desire

Lest theologians be tempted to read such insights possessively as a coded crypto-theological validation of preexisting doctrines, or philosophers to see these ideas as grounds to rail against religious contamination, we must recognize that the critique of possessive desire—as expressed by Kroeker, Rosa, Schürmann, and many others—must cultivate an essential self-reflexivity that calls into question any settling or sedimentation of normative categories (including traditional scholarly disciplines and institutions of all kinds). This includes the ever-present temptation to divide the world into the categories of "religious" and "secular," as if nothing crossed or stood between these bounds.[30] No. Better to call all

29. Schürmann, *Ways of Releasement*, 152.

30. See my *Postsecular History*.

things into question, disinvest in all categories, and let the question be and remain a question that, although it may be answered in contextual ways in specific times and places, maintains its questionable status, lest it fall into a violent ontology of displacement.[31]

I want to emphasize again that if it is to have integrity, the critique of possessive desire must not be restricted to either the realm of concepts or the domain of practices. It is existential, which means it is always mediating between theories and practices. The critique of possessive desire is as much about the problematic and tragic binds that we fall into when we grasp too tightly and anxiously the things in our everyday lives as it is about the act of critique and the careful combination of inward self-critique and outward ideology critique. Both the way that one thinks about ideas and categories (for example, how signifiers point toward but do not capture or exhaustively represent what they signify) and the way that one acts (for example, how one resists patriarchal, colonial, classist, and other violent ways of treating others) must be shaped by this form of critique. Although we are not a unified "we," it is nonetheless true that we cannot think possessively and expect to act unpossessively, and we cannot act possessively and expect to think unpossessively.

This critical chiasmus and its self-reflexivity are essential, and they resonate with Kroeker's messianic, apocalyptic, exilic, and diasporic approach—one that sees the Messiah as a sacrificial servant who does not bow to earthly power but resists it from below without being drawn into its oppositional character; one that reads apocalypse as a figure for the world "in which the mystical body of Christ is constantly being crucified (in the church no less than in the world)";[32] and one that sees exile and diaspora as terms for an existential, spiritual, and real struggle with worldly belonging. Becoming unpossessive—or "living as if not"[33]—requires intentional mediations between all of the dichotomous distinctions that Western metaphysics has monstrously gifted the world. When Kroeker emphasizes the partial character of all knowledge in the secular present, and when he refers to the "kenotic movement toward the 'unsavable' that effects salvation,"[34] and when he suggests that we make the most of our time while echoing Paul's admonition to love your neighbor as yourself, he is pointing—and only ever pointing without capture—toward

31. See my *Ontologies of Violence*.

32. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 1.

33. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 33.

34. Kroeker, *Messianic Political Theology*, 33.

a worldly and divine wisdom that is not his own, yet which he has explored and developed in most of his work.

Doubtless Kroeker will be horrified by the fact that I have attributed to him a critique of possessive desire that is anything but his own possession, and doubtless he will reject any inference that he possesses the messianic mystery. This is part of his integrity. For even the activity of trying to summarize and articulate the critique of possessive desire in the way I have above is always at risk of falling into possessive self-defeat. While this essay has attempted to delineate the main contours of this approach—which has surely gone by other names in many other places—the risk is always that the effort to express something becomes a form of capture. This is part of the necessary integrity of any critique of possessive desire worth its salt (Matt 5:1–20). Nonetheless, if above I risk clarifying too much how this way of thinking is essential to Kroeker's project, I only do so because he is the one who taught it to me, and because he was a messianic figure in my own life, who showed up when I needed a teacher most, and did not teach by pointing to himself but by building up others.

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