Lost Expectations: On Derrida's Abraham

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Kierkegaard and
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Lost Expectations

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MART-JANE RUBENSTEIN

Introduction

This chapter undertakes a critical analysis of Jacques Derrida’s reading of Fear and Trembling (Frygt og Baven) in The Gift of Death (Donner la mort). In a gesture that might be called a faithful betrayal, Derrida seeks in this text to “go further” than de Silentio, pushing Abraham’s singular near-sacrifice of Isaac into “the most common” experience of decision, his absolute relation to the Absolute into every relation to any other. Composed largely of anonymous fragments, the essay at hand evaluates the theo-ethico-political stakes of this deconstruction, seeking to reread Derrida’s tout autre in light of the double-movement he perplexingly omits.

Preface

It is with considerable regret that I confess that I am not exactly the author of the essay you are about to read. I had, of course, meant to write something for the volume at hand, but kept putting it off, thinking after all that there was more than enough time, and that when it comes to matters as weighty as the political in Kierkegaard, there is, as Johannes Climacus would remind us, no need to rush—no need to be in such a holy hurry to get down to business. But as the winter holidays dwindled and still nothing had written itself, my ordinarily reliable loafing became an increasing burden. I planned a last-minute weekend excursion to the mountains to impose some bourgeois discipline on myself, and as the airplane lifted off and hit cruising altitude—after a brief nap—I settled down to jot down some leisurely thoughts. Just then, something very strange befell me. I opened the tray-table attached to the seat in front of me, only to find a jumble of handwritten pages that fluttered out onto my lap and into my neighbor’s bowl of take-out soup. A few pages even lodged themselves under the wheels of a passing beverage cart and ripped, in the confusion, into more pieces than one might think a beverage cart capable of producing.

Once I had gathered the fragments together, I discovered them to be part of a manuscript written by a woman who doubtless has a name but who does not reveal it in them, a self-described accountant who simply refers to herself as “B.” She claims to have had—she insists she has had—no philosophical training, that she is an amateur yet devoted reader of—and at this revelation, I bolted upright in my chair, spilling my club soda onto my increasingly vexed seatmate—an amateur yet devoted reader of the pseudonymous works of Søren Kierkegaard. The text seems to be a single entry from a quasi-philosophical journal she keeps, concerning the theopolitical afterlife of these pseudonymous texts. Why anyone would keep such a journal—audienceless and ineffective a medium as it is—is beyond me.

When I arrived at my lodging in northern New England, I could not help but share this remarkable story with the inn’s assistant proprietor, a recent transplant from Denmark whom I had heard tell the patron in front of me that he—the assistant proprietor—had taken a class as an undergraduate in Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works (he might have been stretching the truth to impress the patron, who looked like she might well be a philosopher, or an architect, or maybe a journalist). At any rate, upon hearing about the incident on the airplane, he insisted that I let him read the manuscript, assuring me he would return it as soon as possible. Sure enough, by 6 o’clock the next morning, the fragments had arrived, now patched together and considerably reordered, under my hotel door. The assistant proprietor had even done me the service, I soon learned, of revising those parts of the manuscript he had found unclear, of adding a quotation or example here and there, of writing footnotes corresponding to B’s numerous citations, and of assembling the entries into a format roughly following that of Fear and Trembling, whose structure he insisted spoke unconsciously through- out the modest oeuvre in question.

I was so intrigued that I spent the rest of the trip and journey home reading the collated fragments and following its footnotes—before falling into the mindless routines of daily living back home. And although I had intended to check the final draft before submitting it to the publisher, thinking after all, there is no need to hurry, I was tragically impeded by the despicable mediations of this carnival time—the Facebook and Twitter and newscasts and emails—all of them announcing the end of this, the beginning of that, the most, the greatest, the worst, the final—and I was so busy awaiting the consummation of history that I forgot to consummate the manuscript. (I will not tire you with the details of my thwarted efforts vis-à-vis copyediting, page-proofs, or the other earnest productions of paragraph-gobblers seeking to render the message more palatable, digestible, even anti-emetic.)
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What lies before you, then, is the partially reconstructed version of B's journal entry, via New England Airways and a Danish hotelier, with the hopefully obvious assurance that whatever I would have written, had this bizarre set of circumstances not befallen me, would have been more serious and scholarly than what I now half heartedly deliver.—From the journal of "B," 28 June 2018

Exordium

On the occasion of a good friend's birthday a month ago, twelve of us stood around an unopened bottle of Chartreuse that her father had preserved in his cellars since the year of her birth. For fifty years it had lain on its side in its little wooden box, growing greener and thicker, more herbal and more imponderably expensive so that it might in the fullness of time intoxicate a group of accountants and their partners on a Nantucket beach in 2018. Trying to feel the full weight of those fifty years, one of us addressed the birthday girl solemnly, "This bottle is from 1968. That's the year you were born." Caught in the spirit, another ventured, "1968—this liquid is three years older than Starbucks coffee." Unable to control myself, I grabbed the bottle and said, "This label was printed in the same year as Jacques Derrida's 'Dérive' essay!" At which point my companions stared at me strangely before changing the subject. But I don't mind. I've grown accustomed to being misunderstood.

"Dérive" was, of course, one of the first watchwords of the literary tactic known as "deconstruction," which for the first decade or two seemed to spell the demolition of all epistemological bulwarks: the author, the book, intention, the subject, the origin, the concept, the referent, metaphysics, teleology, and above all, anything having to do with religion. To cite just a few examples, throughout her introduction to Derrida's Of Grammatology, Gayatri Spivak insisted that différence was iminal to anything like "mysticism" or "theology:" in an early edited volume called Deconstruction and Theology, Carl Raschke famously defined différence as "the death of God put into writing," and the author himself—if one can even speak this way—who proclaimed time and again that deconstruction unsettled even "the most negative of negative theologies."  

It was therefore surprising to Derrida's followers and critics alike to find a circle of theologians gathering excitedly around him beginning in the early 1980s. The circles widened and multiplied until Derrida's death in 2004: in that last decade in particular, it seemed that every other month produced a conference, edited volume, or journal dedicated to Derrida and religion, Derrida and the Bible, Derrida and ontotheology, Derrida and the messianic, Derrida and Augustine, and of course, Derrida and negative theology. Derridians own turn to the question of the religious began in earnest with

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the publication in 1992 of Donner la mort, translated into English as The Gift of Death. This book performs an extended reflection on Fear and Trembling, which Derrida attributes throughout the text to "Kierkegaard." I should qualify that statement: Derrida does treat the issue of pseudonymous authorship in two early paragraphs, which mention Johannes de Silentio once and then focus on the irresponsibility enacted in refusing to sign one's own name to a text ("De la responsabilité on pense souvent qu'elle consiste à signer en son nom"). After that, Derrida refers to the author one time as "Kierkegaard-de Silentio," before going on simply to call him "Kierkegaard" through the rest of the book.

As is well known, Fear and Trembling has a marvelously hard time getting started. There's a preface (Forord) and an exordium (Stemning) and a eulogy (Lovtale) and some preliminary throat-clearing (Foreldoblig Ekseptoration) before Silentio finally dives into his central problem. Similarly, Derrida's reading of Fear and Trembling only gets started halfway through The Gift of Death. In fact, he only mentions Kierkegaard once in the book's first two chapters, which focus instead on the Heretical Essays written by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. Patočka, then, becomes for Derrida something like what Socrates is for Johannes Climacus—a way of getting at Kierkegaard's the way that Climacus approaches Hegel: not headlong but sideways, all for the sake of writing indirectly about something that defies direct communication.

Derrida centers his reading on what Patočka names the three major epochs of European responsibility: the so-called orgiastic, the Platonic, and finally the Christian. (Although Derrida does not call attention to such resonances, these three epochs can be heard as collective, historical echoes of Kierkegaard's canonical stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.) Patočka's orgiastic names an allegedly prehistorical stage of pagan enthusiasm, sexual excess, and an unbroken continuity of animals, vegetables, humans, and gods. At this stage (again, allegedly), there is no real responsibility, because there is no real subject—no doer behind the deed, no unsubstitutable substance behind human actions and accidents. And so when humans died in this mythic ur-era, Patočka suggests, they simply returned to the pantheist whole that produced them, perishing unreflectively like woodland creatures or tomato plants ostensibly do.

For Patočka, Derrida reminds us, the responsible subject is finally born with the entrance not of Judaism (as Nietzsche might have it), but of Platonism. Platonism, for Patočka, carves out a coherent, self-identical subject by giving it a new relationship to

2. See, e.g., Derrida, Of Grammatology, xxviii.
5. Derrida, Gift of Death, 58; Derrida, Donner la mort (Paris: Galilée, 1999), 85. Subsequent references to this text will be cited with the English page numbers followed by the French and separated by a slash (/).
6. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling; Kierkegaard, Frygt Og Bave. Subsequent references to this text will be cited with the English page numbers followed by the Danish and separated by a slash (/).

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death: if orgastic death simply dissolves the creature into the whole, Platonic death opens the way to personal immortality by positing an everlasting soul. Of course, not everyone attains immortality; it is a gift reserved for those who learned to separate their souls from their bodies through the practice of philosophy, which the Phaedo Socrates calls a "rehearsal for death," or melêth thanatou. By means of the discipline of philosophy, the young man learns to separate his soul from his body and himself from the crowd, consenting to being dragged up the rocky path from the cave to the light so he can finally see the Good itself. The individual, substantial, immortal self therefore gathers itself together in relation to death. As Derrida suggests, then, the self is the gift of death: death gives the gift of the self and is, in this sense, itself a gift.

Europe's relationship to death changes again with the dawn of Christianity. According to Patočka, the most profound difference between the Christian and Platonic paradigms is the nature of the Good, or God; whereas Platonism figures the agathon as external to the human subject, somewhere "out there," Christianity configures God internally as well, so that God in the Christian paradigm God resides within the human mind, memory, or heart that God nevertheless exceeds. Ultimately, then, however difficult the journey out of the cave might be, the Platonic good is accessible, visible, and beautiful, whereas the Christian divinity remains stubbornly inaccessible, invisible, and sublime, inducing among human subjects not calm contemplation, but rather fear, and trembling. And finally, in the place of an impassive and impersonal agathon, which resides beyond the worldly fray forever, Christianity introduces a good that empties itself, even sacrificing itself, as a person for each other person. The Christian Good, which is the Christian God, dies for me—in other words, the god offers his death to me, as a gift.

Those who have ears to hear might pick up echo in this either/or between Platonism and Christianity of Johannes Climacus's distinction between the Socratic and the artfully unnamed "other" way, in which the moment is decisive, the teacher is singular, and the learner is transformed. Rather than focusing with Climacus on the Christian introduction of sin, however, Derrida-through-Patočka focuses on the Christian transformation of death. Both the Platonic and the Christian selves are assembled in relation to death, but whereas the Platonist calmly gathers himself together

10. Patočka, Heretical Essays, 116: "Tremendum, because responsibility resides henceforth not in an essence that is accessible to the human gaze, that of the Good and the One, but in the relation to a supreme, absolute and inaccessible being that holds us in check not by exterior but by interior force."
11. Derrida, Gift of Death, 374/48: "The disymmetry of the gaze, this disproportion that relates me, and whatever concerns me, to a gaze that I don't see and that remains secret from me although it commands me, is, according to Patočka, the frightening, terrifying mystery, the mysterium tremendum. Such a terror has no place in the transcendent experience that relates Platonic responsibility to the agathon."
12. Ibid., 31/55.

in the face of his own death, the Christian anxiously gives herself away in an imitative response to the death of the other, offering her whole life to a perpetually inscrutable god in an endless gesture of self-sacrifice. As Derrida reminds us, Patočka offers this tripartite genealogy of the orgastic, Platonic, and Christian in response to what he perceives to be a resurgence of prehistorical fanaticism in twentieth-century politics. In particular, Patočka attributes the cults of personality, totalitarian regimes, and enthusiastic revolutions of fascism, national socialism, and the French Revolution before them to a resurgence of the orgastic, which he also calls the demonic, at the forgotten roots of European society. His genealogy is therefore as prescriptive as it is descriptive: through it, Patočka maintains that Europe must become what it is by excising the pagan and even Platonic remnants of its history. In this way Europe will finally become truly responsible, self-sacrificing, Christian.

It is at this point that Derrida begins to read Patočka against himself, pointing out that insofar as European responsibility is constructed upon a Platonic repression of the orgastic, the history of responsibility contains irresponsibility within it, as its condition of possibility. There is no such thing, then, as pure responsibility: responsibility "never becomes what it is." Moreover, Derrida maintains, Platonism can never quite give way to Christianity thus construed—there is, rather, an irreducible undecidability between these two (admittedly reductive) paradigms. Christian and Platonic ethics are incompatible, incommensurable, and yet we adhere to both of them: "this aporta of responsibility would thus define the relation between the Platonic and Christian paradigms throughout the history of morality and politics."

It is rather the situation in which a hypothetical modern woman, living in an overdeveloped nation under the sway of late capitalism, might find herself whenever she goes to the grocery store. Attempting to buy food responsibly, she will most likely find herself under the equally weighty injunctions of two incompatible ethical frameworks. One tells her she should buy locally sourced, organic food, which is far more expensive than its conventionally-grown counterparts but better for the earth, for laborers, and for the animal and vegetal life involved in its production and consumption. The other set of principles tells her she should save as much money as possible for her family, the homeless shelter she supports, and maybe even her retirement

14. Derrida, Gift of Death, 48/73: "It institutes responsibility as a putting-one'self-to-death or offering-one's-death, that is, one's life, in the ethical dimension of sacrifice."
15. Ibid., 21/40: "Patočka encourages us to learn a political lesson from this, one for today and tomorrow, by reminding us that every revolution, whether atheistic or religious, bears witness to a return of the sacred in the form of an enthusiasm or fervor, otherwise known as the presence of the gods within us."
16. Ibid., 20/37–38: "If the orgastic remains enveloped, if the demonic persists, incorporated and dominated, in a new experience of responsible freedom, then the latter never becomes what it is. It will never become pure and authentic, or absolutely new."
17. Ibid., 24/43.
account. And so, she makes both choices, without being able to reconcile them, so that her shopping cart is absurdly half-filled with local, organic groceries and half-filled with whatever is being sold at a discount that day.

Similarly, Derrida explains, the Western tradition has two ways of thinking about responsibility, which operate incompatibly yet with equal force upon our imaginations. What Patočka calls the Platonic paradigm values knowledge over action; I must know before I can do. By contrast, what he calls the Christian paradigm values action over knowledge: I must respond before I know. I must say, "here I am" before I ascertain what is being asked of me. For Derrida, this duality also amounts to an undecidability between Heidegger and Levinas—between ontology and ethics, between singularizing the self and coring it out, between being-toward-death and perpetual self-immolation. Somewhat surprisingly, then, Heidegger maps onto Platonism in this scheme and Levinas onto Christianity. And again, this tension can never be resolved: on the one hand, I have to know what I am getting myself into before I respond; on the other hand, if I wait until I understand, my response will inevitably be too late. This, then, is the "aporia of responsibility": I must know before I respond, and I must respond before I know. Derrida concludes, "in debates concerning responsibility one must always take into account this original and irreducible complexity that links theoretical consciousness (la conscience théorétique) ... to 'practical' conscience (la conscience 'pratique')... if only to avoid the arrogance of so many 'clean consciences' ('bonnes consciences')."

This, then, is what Derrida takes with him on his journey up Mount Moriah: irresponsibility as constitutive of responsibility, an undecidability between knowing and doing, and the ethical importance of a bad conscience.

Problematas

Much as he did with Patočka’s Heretical Essays, Derrida approaches Fear and Trembling on its own terms—except, of course, for his stubborn attribution of the text to Kierkegaard; our friend Johannes de Silentio is escorted off the stage nearly as soon as he is summoned onto it. Nevertheless, the Gift of Death’s third chapter gets most of Silentio’s major concerns into place, beginning with a meditation on trembling, then opening onto secrecy, the radical alterity of God, the incommunicability of Abraham’s act, the singularity of the actor, indirect communication, Abraham’s obligation to hate what he loves, and above all, the unmediated conflict between Abraham’s obligation to

22. Ibid., 66/69. "The two duties must contradict one another, one must subordinate (incorporate, repress) the other. Abraham must assume absolute responsibility for sacrificing his son by sacrificing ethics, but in order for there to be a sacrifice, the ethical must retain all its value; the love for his son must remain intact, and the order of human duty must continue to insist on its rights."
23. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 60/68.
24. Ibid., 54/61.
25. Ibid., 120/137.
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by the singularity, the exceptional quality we tend to confer upon Abraham—as if ordinary ethics works just fine under ordinary conditions, and only breaks down every few millennia when God demands something outlandish of an unsuspecting patriarch. Cordonning Abraham off from the ethical, we can assure our own consciences, relieved that nothing so dreadful will ever be asked of us. But, Derrida cautions, what the knights of good conscience don’t realize (Ce que méconnaissent les chevaliers de la bonne conscience), is that the "sacrifice of Isaac" illustrates—if that is the word in the case of such a nocturnal mystery [notice Derrida is stalling here, throwing us off before throwing us in] the most common and everyday experience of responsibility (le sacrifice d’Isaac illustre...l’expérience la plus quotidienne et la plus commune de la responsabilité).27

"Pardon me?" we might respond. "How can it possibly be the case that the sacrifice of Isaac—extraordinary, vicious, unassimilable—illustrates the most common and everyday experience of responsibility?" And as if he could hear us, Derrida continues:

The story is no doubt monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable (monstrueuse, inouïe, à peine pensable): a father is ready to put to death his beloved son, his irreplaceable loved one, and that because the Other, the great Other asks him or orders him without giving the slightest explanation (raison). . . . But isn’t this the most common thing?28

The most common thing? The purported founder of three major monotheisms nearly murders his son in obedience to an unseen God, without reason and without explanation; foundational filicide on a mountain before God; an act that will seal the fate of generations as numerous as the stars...and this is the most common thing?

"Let us not look for examples," Derrida implores, before providing to give numerous examples.

By preferring my work, simply by giving it my time and attention, by preferring my activity as a citizen or as a professorial and professional philosopher, writing and speaking here in a public language, French in my case, I am perhaps fulfilling my duty (je fais peut-être mon devoir). But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don’t know, the billion of my fellows ("semblables")...who are dying of starvation or sickness. I betray my fidelity or my obligations to other citizens, to those who don’t speak my language and to whom I neither speak nor respond...thus also to those I love in private, my own, my family, my sons, each of whom is the only son I sacrifice to the other, every one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.

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habitat every second of every day" (chacun étant sacrifié à chacun sur cette terre de Moriah qui est notre habitat de tous les jours et de chaque seconde).29

And at this moment I, the secondhand editor of B’s manuscript and reluctant signatory of this essay, risk a brief interjection: surely this is an overstatement. Derrida’s home is the land of Moriah? Your recycling bin is the land of Moriah? Is this edited volume the land of Moriah? To be sure, by having failed to write a proper chapter—and by rendering it in English rather than French or Danish—I am betraying a number of potential readers, not to mention Derrida and Kierkegaard "themselves"—if one can even speak this way—in my very effort to fulfill my obligation to them. But does this betrayal liken my quasi-authorship of this paper to Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac?

What right does Derrida have to liken any of this terrain to the land of Moriah?

Back to the manuscript:

Derrida’s explanation comes very quickly—all in the same long paragraph that called the akedah, or the binding of Isaac, “the most common thing.” The akedah enacts a scene of absolute responsibility, meaning it binds Abraham in his singularity to God in God’s singularity. "God," then, is the name of the absolute other to whom Abraham is bound absolutely to respond—to whom any of us is bound absolutely to respond. That is what God means. But, Derrida continues, God is not the only other.

There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others...Tout autre est tout autre, every one else is completely or wholly other.30

As Derrida goes on to parse carefully, the phrase tout autre est tout autre is stubbornly overdetermined. It could mean simply that the wholly other is wholly other—a perfectly orthodox formulation, even redolent of the Shema or the Shahada—God, it would say in this light, is God. But in another light, tout autre est tout autre could mean that every other is wholly other, which is to say the otherness of God does not outweigh the otherness of any other other. Each, any, and every other is wholly other.

Ontologically, the phrase does risk collapsing in on itself. The locution “every other is wholly other” comes precariously close to saying that every other is equivalent, which is to say that nothing is truly other, because everything is effectively the same. Derrida comes closest to this collapse, I would suggest, when he proclaims that what can be said about Abraham’s relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to every other as wholly other, in particular my relation to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and

29. Ibid., 69/98–99.
30. Ibid., 68/98; emphasis added to “should.”
transcendent as Jahweh (à mon prochain ou aux miens qui me sont aussi inaccessibles, secrets et transcendents que Jahuê).\footnote{31}

We might at this point remember that, as complicated as his relation to the tradition might be, Derrida was raised Jewish and remained a Jewish thinker in addition to all the other kinds of thinker he remained. He knew it was forbidden to say, much less write, that particularly "secret and transcendent" name. And yet there it is, laid bare, not only written but also rendered equivalent to every gopher, slug, and stallion. One might therefore ask, whether this pronouncement of the unpronounceable name, this straightforward statement of the purportedly incommunicable, Derrida might in fact capitulate to exactly that abstracting and systematizing tendency that so disgusts Johannes ("This is not the System; it has not the least thing to do with the System" [Det er ikke Systemet, det har ikke det Måndag med Systemet at gjøre]).\footnote{32} Is Derrida’s globalization gesture not, in fact, what all the pseudonyms feared? A massive neo-Hegelian digestion of difference, a swallowing of singularity, a maceration of mystery?

Perhaps. But in the interest of generosity—insofar as we are dealing here with the gift, with genre, and with generations—one might instead read the tout autre as saying, not that every other is equally other, but rather that every other is radically different from every other other. Along this reading, each vector of otherness would be radically different from the otherness of every other other, each of which would be wholly other in wholly different modes of otherness. So my neighbor and your dog and this treadmill and that arugula plant may each be “just as secret and transcendent” as God, but insofar as the otherness of God is not a calculable otherness, it could never be possible to call these others equivalent. Rather, each of them would, understood this way, be radically inscrutable, irreducibly other, and each so in its own way—otherwise, we would know the measure of otherness ahead of time and everything would in fact amount to everything else.

Understood this way, tout autre est tout autre could be heard as a radicalizing of the Kierkegaardian effort to slip out from under Hegel by preserving particularity. Not only is the single individual particular as distinct from the general run of things, not only is the transcendent God particular as distinct from the general run of things, but the general run of things is itself composed only of irreducible particularities—which is to say there is no general run of things. Each thing is singular, just as singular as God. The ontological implications of this possibility can best be discerned in relation to the work of Gilles Deleuze, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, and Duns Scotus, whose various constructions of univocity on the one hand and inacceitas on the other I shall address momentarily . . .

\footnote{31} Ibid., 78/110.
\footnote{32} Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 8/8.

. . . and here I insert another second-order editor’s note: this part of the manuscript seems unfortunately to have been lost—either to wheels of the airplane’s beverage cart or to my seatmate’s take-out soup.

. . .

. . . ontologically, then, it is not certain whether we have in The Gift of Death a thoroughgoing monism or a pluralistic, anti-relational monadology. Ethically, however, the implications of the tout autre are clearer; in fact, one could argue that The Gift of Death thwarts ontology in order to become an essay in practical ethics.

Ethically speaking, to say that every other is wholly other is to say that I am as obligated to any other as I am to the divine Other. I am as obligated to your family as I am to mine, to your neighbors as I am to God. This infinite obligation may at first sound odd, but it bears echoes of Levinas, for whom God only appears in the face of a human other, or of Matthew 25, which locates God in the poor, hungry, and orphaned people his disciples either serve or fail to serve.\footnote{33} So a messianic Jew or incarnationalist Christian could read Derrida’s ethic as radically panentheist: God is in every other, and thereby binds us infinitely, in absolute responsibility, to every other.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, things are not quite this tidy for Derrida. Not only am I bound to respond unreservedly and without delay to every other, but the moment I undertake such a response, I forsake my duty to each other other. Just as Abraham could only do his duty to God by forsaking his duty to Isaac and Sarah and the rest of us, I can only do my duty to one neighbor by forsaking the other, to one nation by betraying the others, and to this manuscript by neglecting my vegetable garden. And just like Abraham, I have no way of accounting for these decisions. As Derrida asks in what has become an infamous passage, “how would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant”?\footnote{34} Although we might at this point object that neglecting to feed cats is not the same thing as killing them, Derrida insists that the difference between killing and letting die is a “minor” one; practically speaking, it is negligible.\footnote{35}

Similarly, we might object that sacrifice is only sacrifice if you love what you are sacrificing, so inasmuch as I do not love every cat other than mine, they are not Isaac and I am not sacrificing them. To his riposte, Derrida responds that even though I may not love those scores of anonymous cats, I ought to. I am as obligated to them as I am to my own cat as I am to your roommate’s uncle as I am to God,

\footnote{34} Derrida, Gift of Death, 71/101.
\footnote{35} Ibid., 86/118–19.
and, as in the case of Abraham, a response in any of these directions amounts to a betrayal everywhere else.

The upshot of all this failure and betrayal is that there is no safe separation between "absolute responsibility" and "responsibility in general"—no chasm between my responsibility to God and my responsibility to everyone else. In other words, Derrida performs in *The Gift of Death* the deconstruction of the pseudonymus' and Kierkegaard's most sacred distinction, which is to say the absolute separation—the *infinite qualitative distinction*—between the ethical and the religious.

To account for this collapse, one could say that Derrida pulls the religious down into the ethical, bringing us back to a Kantian equivalence of religion and ethics. At the same time that he pulls the religious down into the ethical, however, Derrida also opens the ethical "up" or out to the religious, at every turn. It is not just Abraham's decision that is impossible and unspoken, not just the occasional mythic sacrifice; rather, every decision is impossible and unspoken. Every decision is a betrayal. And yet, Derrida reminds us, "we also do our duty (devoir) by behaving thus." In other words, insofar as responsibility to any one is always irresponsibility to every other, irresponsibility is the necessary condition of our being responsible in the first place. Responsibility relies upon irresponsibility as its monstrous yet inexcusable condition of possibility. And this, incidentally, is what Derrida was suggesting with his lengthy analysis of Patočka. Responsibility contains irresponsibility not just historically, not just conceptually, but also practically, within it.

The ethical importance of this realization comes across with unparalleled clarity in the transcript of a roundtable discussion between Derrida and a number of theologians gathered at Villanova University in October of 1999. The British theologian John Milbank raised a series of objections to what he called Derrida's "transcendental betrayal," according to which one is infinitely and universally obligated, and therefore infinitely at fault. As a corrective, Milbank cited Thomas Aquinas as having authorized a hierarchy of preferential love, according to which a person is obligated to his own family and friends and nation above all other families, friends, and nations, so there is no need for the sort of runaway bad conscience that feels infinitely obligated to everything. For Aquinas, Milbank reports, it is acceptable—even an obligation—to love one's own before loving others. The reason Milbank appealed to this affective hierarchy in conversation with Derrida is that he was concerned about a kind of ethical exhaustion. If we think ourselves equally obligated everywhere and therefore doomed to betray everywhere, Milbank reasons, then we are likely not to respond anywhere: "because you are being too moralistic," he charges, "you will also end up saying that one cannot do anything moral." Along this line of thinking, then, the *aporia* of responsibility encodes a false piety, prompting us ultimately to capitulate to a moral indifference that mirrors the ontological indifferenciation of the *tout autre*.

Derrida's response:

You might call this indifference, but if you think that the only moral duty you owe is the duty to the people—or the animals—with whom you have affinity, kinship, friendship, neighborhood, brotherhood, then you can imagine the consequences of that. Of course, have preferences. I am one of the common people who prefers his cat to his neighbor's cat and my family to others. But I do not have a good conscience about that. I know that if I transform this into a general rule, it would be the ruin of ethics. If I cast as a general principle that I will feed first of all my cat, my family, my nation, that would be the ruin of any ethical politics. So, when I give preference to my cat, which I do, that will not prevent me from having some remorse for the cat dying or starving next door or, to change the example, for all the people on earth who are starving and dying today. So you cannot prevent me from having a bad conscience, and that is the main motivation of my ethics and my politics.

This, then, is the reason for the deconstruction of Patočka, for the deconstruction of Silentio. Derrida uncovers the irresponsibility at the heart of responsibility in order, as he puts it, "to avoid the arrogance of so many clean consciences."

... ...

And here another editor's note: at this point in the manuscript, the assistant proprietor of the inn at the mountain inserted a marginal annotation in surprisingly flawless penmanship. I am beginning to wonder whether he might have been some monastic scribe, hiding from an oppressive abbot in the comparative plainclothes of a hotel employee. At any rate, my unexpected collaborator had apparently traveled from Denmark to New York City in the spring of 2007, by which time the United States had been at war with Iraq for nearly four years and Afghanistan for nearly six.

36. Ibid., 71/101.

37. Kearney, "On Forgiveness," 68; Milbank: "I would like to say something very quickly about betrayal. I was really more talking about transcendental betrayal." Derrida: "I am too sensitive to transcendental betrayal." Milbank: "I think if one has this model of transcendental betrayal, then one somehow thinks that difference is taken to be the ultimate, that if you have got a sort of transcendental difference and difference is the ultimate, then there is a sense in which everything is on a level and there is a certain kind of indiscernibility and then transcendental betrayal. So you will end up saying, 'well, I have an equal duty to this person and this person. As you put it very witty in one of your books, you say, why should I look after this cat and not other cats?' That seems to be a consequence of this transcendentalism about betrayal. You will end up thinking, 'nothing has more weight than anything else.'"

38. Ibid.; Milbank: "Aquinas says that you should love your wife and your family more than other people. It is only later on that people have real problems with that. ... What you are saying seems to me not to take seriously affinity and the erotic."

39. Ibid., 69.

40. Ibid.

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I read from the assistant proprietor's marginalia: "In mid-April, the season when all Americans are required to render unto Caesar the fruits of the previous year's labor, an image appeared on the cover of the New Yorker magazine, showing the requisite tax forms folded into fighter jets, armored tanks, and catapult ships—all presumably headed toward the Middle East." 42

Although the hotelier did not explain himself any further, I think I can discern his meaning—surely resonant with the little essay at hand—our author B informs us, we might recall, that she is an accountant. As a citizen and civilian, my duty to my country is to pay my taxes. In so doing, however, I am participating in the murder of hundreds of thousands of humans and animals, not to mention the destruction of vegetables and minerals, in the Middle East and wherever else my country decides either to declare war, to wage undeclared war, or to provoke the wars it proceeds to ignore. So, I might decide not to pay my taxes, refusing to participate in this slaughter, but in that case I am refusing to fund the government's few remaining safety nets for the homeless, the poor, the old, and the young; I am refusing to contribute to the roads and bridges I use daily; and I am risking saddling my family and my fellow citizens with the burden of supporting me in prison for the foreseeable future. There is no way to make a decent decision in this land of Mount Moriah.

Back once more to the manuscript.

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Derrida insists that the "whole point of [his] ethics and [his] politics"—which accounts for the theological deconstruction of Silentio—is his bad conscience: his conviction that there is no clean option, no fully responsible way to respond. Just as we will never be able to say, "Europe has become fully ethical, or fully responsible" (which is to say, for Patočka, fully "Christian"), we will never be able to say and must never be able to say, "I have done my duty; my hands are clean; my own cat is fed and my own kids are in piano lessons and it is safe on the streets of my little town, so I am, as they say, all square," just like Abraham, we are always abrogating our duty somewhere at the very moment we respond somewhere else.

It is therefore very puzzling to encounter the next and last major move Derrida makes with respect to Silentio's Abraham in The Gift of Death. As he rides out to Mount Moriah, unsaddles the donkey and climbs the rocky path with Isaac and the fire and the knife, Derrida writes that Abraham is "absolutely responsible" to God, and therefore "absolutely irresponsible in the face of men and his family, in the face of the ethical." 43 Yet despite all of this, Derrida continues.

42. A publicly accessible image can be found at http://bit.ly/2yhKihM.
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can discipline herself to sacrifice what she loves. It is excruciating, but possible. And what marks Abraham as a knight of faith is certainly not that he gives up hope—likewise, anyone can give up hope, especially having given up everything she loves. What marks Abraham as the knight of faith is that he gives up what he loves in the absurd expectation that God will give it all back. This is, in fact, the anti-conceptual lynchnip of the whole book: the knight of faith gives up everything he loves and everything he is, infinitely; he knows it is gone forever; and yet imperiously, he still expects it back. Such expectation, of course, constitutes the difference between the knight of infinite resignation and the knight of faith.

"Infinite resignation," Silentio tells us, is "the last stage before faith" (Den nen-delige Resignation er det sidste Stadium, der gaar forud for Troen), and yet it is not faith, is not yet faith, is separated from faith by an unimaginable counter-peak back into the finite. Called to give up the woman he loves, even the only woman he will ever love, the knight of infinite resignation is able to renounce her infinitely, reconciling himself to the pain and to a lifetime of unhappiness in the full knowledge that she will never return to him. "Now let us meet the knight of faith on the occasion previously mentioned," Silentio continues.

He does exactly the same as the other knight did: he infinitely renounces the love that is the substance of his life, he is reconciled in pain. But then the marvel happens; he makes one more movement even more wonderful than all the others, for he says, "Nevertheless I have faith that I will get her—that is, by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God all things are possible" (jeg troer dog, at jeg faurer hende, i Kraft nemlig af det Afsalde, i Kraft af, at for Gud er Alting muligt).

Johannes makes this distinction even clearer when he contrasts himself with Abraham, saying that if he had been ordered up the mountain with Isaac, he would have obeyed absolutely—he might even have arrived early, he says, to get the horror over with sooner. "But I also know what else I would have done," he writes, "The moment I mounted the horse, I would have said to myself: Now all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all of my joy" (Nu er Alt tabt, Gud forderer Isaak, jeg offer ham, med ham al min Glaede.)

Faceted with such a scenario, Silentio admits, some overeager contemporary, hell-bent on "going further" than Abraham, might say that Silentio's resignation is "greater" than Abraham's foolish faith in repetition—"more ideal and poetic than Abraham's small-mindedness. But this is utterly false (Og dog er dette den største Usandhed)." Silentio insists, "for my immense resignation would be a substitute for faith" (hi min uhyre Resignation var Surrogatet for Troen). What Silentio cannot do—what no one by his own strength can do—is to muster himself into believing that which he gives up infinitely will return. And yet this is the mark of Silentio's Abraham: not his obedience, nor his resignation, but his expectation. His absurd expectation that Isaac would somehow be returned to him.

In saying, therefore, that Abraham is "all square," in saying he has renounced all hope and expects nothing in return, Derrida has collapsed the knight of faith into the knight of infinite resignation. He has—in a book devoted to a close reading of Fear and Trembling—somehow managed to leave out faith.

The practical question, then, concerns the status of the tout autre. Does Derrida's puzzling eclipse of faith as a double-movement invalidate his careful deconstruction? Does it restore the ironical distinction between the religious and the ethical, the absolute and the general, Abraham and everything else? Or is there a way, not to abandon the tout autre, but to reconsider its political ethic of bad conscience in light of the forgotten double-movement of faith?

In the dairy section of my local grocery store, they carry organic milk and they carry local milk, but there is no local organic milk. If I buy the local milk rather than the organic milk, I am participating in the killing of insects and the poisoning of groundwater, but I am also reducing the amount of fuel that transports my food and supporting my neighbors who still run family farms in this era of big agriculture. If I buy the organic milk, then I have saved the insects and the groundwater, but I've forsaken my neighbors, used gallons of extra fuel, and participated in the killing of deer, possums, and raccoons by 18-wheel trucks on the transcontinental highways. And either way, I have condemned the cows to perpetual lactation, confinement, and production for an endlessly exploitative market. I could head for soy milk, instead, but then I would still have the fuel and roadkill problems—and would moreover be contributing to the continued clearing of Latin American rainforests as producers struggle to meet the ever-growing global demand for soy.

There is, it seems, no decent decision here.

The question before us, then, is how we might think Derrida's tout autre together with the "faith" it perplexingly occludes. What might it mean to approach such a decision not only with the bad conscience that knows I am infinitely obligated and my hands are never clean, but also with the hope that my abandoned hope might somehow be restored? "Yet Abraham had faith," writes Silentio, "and had faith for this life" (Dog Abraham troede og troede for dette Liv).

What would it mean to approach every decision, not just with resignation to the murderous order of things, but also with the hope—even the expectation—that things might be different in this world, that the mechanics of death might be and must be transformed into life, precisely where transformation would be most impossible? Such faith in the impossible would be too much for me; I am, after all, merely a trifer, an afterthinker, an accountant. I cannot.

49. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 46/51.
50. Ibid., 46/52.
51. Ibid., 35/38.
52. Ibid., 34-35/38.
make the dizzying double-movement of faith, but I can see what it might look like, and this without attempting like poor Heraclitus's overeager disciple to go further.54

Unconcluding Editorial Postscrawl

With Silentio's Abraham, we remain with faith. And faith, to be sure, is no political program. It may have the capacity to say "no" to the possible and "yes" to the impossible, but after that, it goes no further. Far from grounding an ethic of decisionism or a politics of the exception, the most Silentio will give us is an ethico-politics of bad conscience and a hope against hope that things might be otherwise. But as he continually reminds us, there may be no such thing as faith at all. The "otherwise" might always be simply impossible, rather than possible-as-impossible. Or of course it might be even worse than the this-wise we've got.

Bibliography


54. Ibid., 133/140–41.