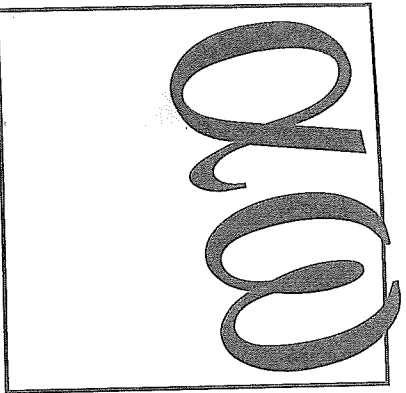


## SIN, DEATH, AND DERRIDA

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any less interesting or compelling.

There is much to be gained, then, in tracing out the argumentative line found in Derrida's fascinating little book on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, *The Gift of Death*. Derrida's reading should call to mind both Luther's commentary on this story in his Genesis lectures and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, well worth the (re-)reading by those who preach on these texts. The following synopsis of Derrida is an act of interpretation to draw out the theological fruitfulness of engaging with deconstructionism as a kind of contemporary reflection that unveils human bondage to sin and raises acutely the question of salvation. Naturally, this involves also criticism of Derrida, yet hopefully it will be the kind of criticism that moves theologians forward.

*Jan Patočka's Warning*

Radical Orthodoxy increasingly sounds less and less like radical Augustinianism and more and more like updated Cambridge Platonism: a Plotinian cosmos with God at the pinnacle as the seat of the coincidence of opposites, itself the appearance of binaries here below in the world of flux and becoming. The debate is ripe for Lutheran intervention, with a theology of grace as gift that both fulfills and surpasses the law of reward and punishment, as well as trinitarian personalism that in its trinitarian account of the crucified Son of God goes beyond the sterile modern antinomy of theism and atheism.

Jacques Derrida notes the fact that in much "postmodern" philosophic discourse Christian themes are taken up and thought without any "need of *the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event*" (49).<sup>1</sup> There are many such discourses today, Derrida observes, "discourses of a philosophical type if not philosophies themselves—without putting forth theses or *theologems* that would by their very structure teach something corresponding to the dogma of a given religion" (49). Derrida is thinking of Heidegger, who "propos[ed] a nondogmatic doublet of dogma... *thinking* that 'repeats' the possibility of religion without religion" (49). Such endeavors cannot be sustained. They amount both to bad theology and bad philosophy. But that criticism does not make this remarkable fact of the contemporary life of the mind

Derrida begins by taking up the warning from Czech philosopher and Charter 77 founder Jan Patočka (1907–1977), which he spoke against the suspension of the ethical in demonic/orgiastic rapture from under the dark shadow of Stalinism and in living memory of Hitlerism. By this he had in mind the modern bloodbath of revolution that ends up devouring its own children. He was also thinking back to the classic repression of this Dionysian frenzy that occurred in ancient Greek philosophy, especially in Platonism. Patočka sets the Christian "singularity" against both this danger of the suspension of the ethical in the demonic orgy of revolutionary violence and also against Platonism, which purchases freedom from the demonic-orgiastic by means of the soul's murder of its own body. Over against both of these, he describes the Christian singularity as the passage to responsibility by the self made subject to the unseen but all-seeing gaze of God, referring to Jesus' preaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) of the heavenly Father Who sees in secret. From this source, Patočka argues, an ethical European self arose which must answer for itself in the form, as Derrida names it, of an "ambiguous gift of death" (3).

Derrida clarifies the ambiguity. Ethical responsibility, he says, is always a matter of giving death by deciding what is

worth living for to the point of dying for. When this becomes clear, however, the real aporia or conundrum arises: is this ethical gift of death really a gift, or is it ultimately calculating on a reward? How ethical then is the ethical? This latter is the perplexity toward which Derrida drives.

Derrida comments that contemporaries resist Patočka's analysis of the *historicity* of European responsibility because it seems to open up an "abyss" of moral relativism, suggesting that responsibility is something learned in the contingencies of history and thus never fully acquired. Responsibility is not written on the human heart, Derrida implies, waiting to be awoken, but is painfully learned in the changes and chances of life. Modern, secularized Europeans resist this historicity by resort to the supposedly timeless Kantian foundations for universal morality in the categorical imperative of rational beings to treat other rational beings as worthy of being treated as ends, never as means. Yet the Kantian doctrine itself arose historically to replace the responsibility that had been learned from the Christian dogma about the heavenly Father Who sees in secret.

Lutheran theology today might take cognizance: the secular catastrophes of Hitler, Hiroshima, and Stalin now render Kantianism questionable. Who counts as a fellow rational being? Hannah Arendt painfully showed Adolph Eichmann doing his duty to the Führer by murdering the racial enemy, the Jews. We could say the same about Stalin's starvation of the Kulaks, or Stimson's rationale for the atomic incineration of civilian population centers in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Duty to whom? For whom? Already Plato himself had entertained Thrasymachus's myth of the magical Ring of Gyges that renders its wearer invisible, asking: what crimes would we commit if, rendered invisible, we knew we'd never get caught? Plato had no answer to the dilemma. Neither does Kant. Only the dogma of the heavenly Father Who sees in secret

provides for the interiorization of the ethic of responsibility. What is in us, otherwise, is not the moral law but hearts full of envy, greed, and murder, as we can see when we imagine ourselves magically invisible.

Derrida, following Patočka, contrasts Jesus' heavenly Father's gaze into the secrets of the soul with the Platonic self's search for its exterior, highest Good. The latter is a sublimated form of eros, focused on some extrinsic object as most beneficial, thus finally a form of self-seeking, seeking one's own good in another (what Luther called *amor concupiscentiae*). As may be seen in Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*, in which Socrates cheers his grieving friends before drinking the cup of poison, the Platonic "gift of death" is a way of taking responsibility for one's own death (drinking the cup) and at the same time an interpretation of death (as the liberation of the rational soul from the prison-house of the body, home of the demonic). Here philosophy as "preparation for death" emerges as the very essence of the soul and its freedom, which in this act disowns the body as the source of the demonic-orgiastic. In the murder of the body, it asserts its own spiritual freedom and ethical responsibility. At what a price! The body is thrown out along with its passionate lust for blood-vengeance, the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

Patočka sees a continuing, albeit repressed, Platonism in existing Christianity insofar as Christian ethics remain subordinated to "natural" law and "natural" knowledge of the good, the sublimated eros of Platonism's maxim that "all by nature seek the good." The reference to Catholicism is unmistakable. This pagan remnant is actually in contradiction to Christianity's own proper ethic, founded in the gaze of the unseen but all-seeing personal God. Analysis of this true freedom-and-responsibility, for Patočka, leads us to understand, so to speak, the paradoxical orthodoxy of heresy, that is, of Protestantism. (As a Czech, Patočka was heir to the legacy

of Jan Hus. True Christian responsibility generates dissidence vis-à-vis the world, and the worldly church, as integral to the responsible life before God.) Patočka thus imagines a "radical" deplatonization: a forsaking of sublime self-seeking, a radical Christianization before the mystery of the Goodness which gives (not the Good we seek) as self-forgetting agape.

Derrida, taking up this proposal of Patočka, concludes that such "self-forgetting" would amount to a new way of dying, a new way of taking responsibility for one's self in the act and interpretation of death. It would also be an act of resistance. A world in which there are no secrets (as in Stalinist atheism) is a world prepared for earthly totalitarianism. It is worthy of note that Patočka died after a brutal eleven-hour interrogation by the Czech Communist Secret Police. Patočka the philosophical theist died a martyr for his faith.

Christianity's *mysterium tremendum* transforms the Platonic Good that we selfishly seek, so Patočka continued, "into a Goodness that is forgetful of itself, into a love that renounces itself" (40). It announces another form of death than Platonism does, uttering the word "gift" as something received from another Who in "absolute transcendence sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible" (40). The reference here to a "mystery, terrifying and fascinating" goes back to Rudolph Otto's phenomenological account of God, *The Idea of the Holy*, which also introduced a parallel expression for God as the "Wholly Other." Derrida will later trade heavily on the notion of the deity as wholly other.

Notice the paradox: God is hidden in His act of revelation, inaccessible in His coming to us. This paradox has an important consequence, according to Derrida: it is said to obligate us unconditionally. The very inaccessibility of this self-forgetting Giver (Who sees while remaining unseen, Who gives death as a gift of one's own self-forgetting) "acts as a command to the

donee.” It is a “gift of the law” that underscores “the uniqueness and irreplaceable singularity of the self as the means by which—and it is here that it comes close to death—existence excludes every possible substitution” (41).

If the reader finds the connection here somewhat obscure, it is because it depends on a certain (questionable) teaching of Heidegger about death, namely that “to have the experience of one’s own absolute singularity and apprehend one’s own death amounts to the same thing: Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place” (41). Heidegger had in this way attempted, similarly to Kant, to dechristianize responsibility by interpreting it existentially as Dasein’s own-most possibility of authenticity in owning up to the prospect of one’s own nonexistence. “My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, ‘given,’ one can say, by death... Only a mortal can be responsible” (41). Derrida’s essay proceeds on this (questionable, Heideggerian) basis: that I am uniquely responsible in being related to that which no one can do in my place, namely, dying. The sense of responsibility in any conceivable case is a mode of giving oneself one’s own, non-substitutable death. That idea that Christ can genuinely die for us, in our place, as our “substitute,” seems excluded a priori, this notion of Christ our Substitute will only return at the very end of Derrida’s inquiry.

Despite the universality of that existential claim about non-substitutable death, the analysis to this point indeed implies moral relativism and also the brute historical fact “that Christianity alone has made possible access to an authentic responsibility throughout history, responsibility as *history* and as history of *Europe*” (50). Derrida asks the transcendental question: on what condition is responsibility a possibility? He has answered with Heidegger that ontologically it is the subject’s apprehension of its own non-substitutable death that makes

living a question for which responsibility must be taken. Derrida seems further to answer ontically: genuine responsibility is possible on the condition that the Good no longer be the object sought (as in Platonism), but rather a certain relation to the wholly other (as in Christianity). This ethical relationship would be one of a “goodness exist[ing] beyond all calculation” (50). A Christian theologian could not have said it better: “Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to become finite, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other” (51).

From this consideration, however, there emerges for Derrida a structural disproportion of enormous consequence. “I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness... Before any fault is determined, I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible... Guilt is inherent in responsibility” (51). This is like original sin, a predicament revealed in the light of the revelation of infinite love. “What is it that makes us tremble in the *mysterium tremendum*? It is the gift of infinite love, the dissymmetry... the divine regard that sees me, and myself, who doesn’t see what is looking at me” (56). Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* learned from St. Paul that we have to work for our salvation (this is what we can see!) knowing all along that it is God Who decides (Who, unseen, really sees). “We fear and tremble,” Derrida writes, alluding to Kierkegaard, “before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible, that is, free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death” (56). In the Christian experience of Kierkegaard interpreting Paul, Derrida concludes, “God is himself absent, hidden and silent, separate, secret, at the moment he has to be obeyed... Otherwise he wouldn’t be God, we wouldn’t be dealing with the Other as God or with God as the *wholly other*” (57).

### *The Sacrifice of Isaac*

This Christian experience derives from the Jewish experience of Abraham, the *Akeidah*. All of Derrida’s attention now turns to this tale from Genesis 22, with special attention to Kierkegaard’s Christian interpretation of it.

“God will provide,” Abraham tells Isaac, who asks where the ram for the sacrifice is. What is this statement at the moment it is uttered, that is, without knowing the outcome, as Abraham walks obediently to the mountain of murder? Is it a lie? a desperate ploy? a firm confidence? hope against hope? Abraham “doesn’t keep silent and he doesn’t lie,” Derrida answers (59). He keeps God’s secret but in doing so transgresses the ethical order binding him to his own son. This secrecy violates the widely shared belief that responsibility is tied to the public and the nonsecret, to the demand to account for one’s words and actions in front of peers. Here, on the contrary, absolute responsibility is absolutely singular and implies secrecy from one’s peers. To be sure, Abraham’s secrecy is a “scandal and a paradox” (60), but not because it implies the immorality of obeying a sadistic God in violation of humanistic sensibilities. Rather, it is scandalous because, in Derrida’s analysis, it uncovers the aporia of responsibility, namely, that any conceivable act of responsibility is at the same time irresponsible.

Lutheran theologians should perk up their ears at this point. Derrida, the apophatic Jew, uncovers here the original sin of self-justification masquerading under the form of the ethics of responsibility and its modern, all-too-modern good conscience. For Abraham, according to Derrida’s reading of Kierkegaard’s reading, “the ethical is a temptation... which under the pretext of calling him to responsibility, to self-justification, would make him lose his ultimate responsibility along with his singularity, make him lose his unjustifiable, secret and absolute responsibility before God” (61). But the righteousness of Abraham’s faith

is that he “refuses to present [himself] before the violence that consists of asking for accounts and justifications, summonses to appear before the law of men. [He] declines the autobiography that is always auto-justification, *égoïstée*” (61; Derrida’s neologism is a pun on Leibniz’s *théodicée*).

The terrifying secret of Abraham’s true responsibility, says Derrida following Kierkegaard, is that he must sacrifice the son whom he loves with “an absolute, unique, and incommensurable love” (65). This contradiction is essential: the ethical retains its value in the very moment it is transgressed and thus its judgment must be endured “in the instant itself.” The two duties contradict one another: one must “subordinate (incorporate, repress) the other.” The only *real* conscience, therefore, is a *bad* conscience: the “absolutes of duty and responsibility presume that one denounce, refute, and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law... that one behave in an irresponsible manner” (65). But this terrifying secret of irresponsibility in responsibility is “forgotten by the moralizing moralists and good consciences” (67), who dismiss Abraham’s obedience as a superstitious remnant of the unenlightened savagery of religion.

The biblical story is monstrous, Derrida acknowledges. But “isn’t this [monstrosity] also the most common thing?” (67). “A decision is, in the end, always [the] secret” of this monstrosity, Derrida argues, since “one is unable to be responsible at the same time before the other and before others, before the others of the other. If God is completely other, the figure or name of the wholly other, then every other (one) is every (bit) other” (77). He means, if we take God as the figure for the “absolute other,” Who relates to me as an “absolute singularity,” then whenever I undertake responsibility for any other, I simultaneously sacrifice an infinite number of equally absolute others. “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the

other other; the other others” (68). The ethics of duty are thus condemned a priori “to paradox, scandal and aporia” (68). “Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I own absolute fidelity, incommensurably” (68). Derrida draws the traumatic, historicist conclusion: “There is no front between responsibility and irresponsibility but only between appropriations of the same sacrifice, different orders of responsibility, different other orders... I am responsible to any one (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality... I

### *The only real conscience is a bad conscience.*

can never justify the fact that I prefer to sacrifice any one (any other) to the other. I will always be secretive” (70). Absolute sacrifice “is not the sacrifice of irresponsibility on the altar of responsibility, but the sacrifice of the most imperative duty... in favor of another absolutely imperative duty binding me to every other” (71).

Abraham, the “knight of faith” according to Derrida’s Kierkegaard, sacrificed his reputation in the “cour-age to behave like a murderer in the eyes of the world” (71). Abraham “renounced hope” to become “at the same time the most moral and the most immoral” of all because of this “relationship without relation” to God, in that “God is absolute transcendence, hidden, and secret, not giving any reason” (71). Abraham does not know what will happen, yet the knight of faith does not hesitate. According to Derrida, that is the irony involved in every genuine decision: “[I]t cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion or explication” (77). One must take the proverbial leap of faith,

and bear the corresponding bad conscience.

At this juncture, Derrida formalizes his controversial move: “[W]hat can be said about Abraham’s relation to God can be said about my relation to every other... who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh [sic]” (78). Thus “everyone else asks us at every moment to behave like knights of faith” (78). Derrida acknowledges that this reading, inspired by Levinas, “displaces a certain emphasis of Kierkegaard’s analysis,” for whom the absolute uniqueness of God does not “tolerate analogy” (79). Yet he claims that his reading “ensures that Kierkegaard’s text gains added force by underscoring the terrible secret of responsibility.” “[C]ut off both from man and from God” in afflicted faith, “our faith is not assured, because faith can never be, it must never be a certainty” (80). This interpretation makes faith the “highest passion” under Kierkegaard’s conditions of “objective uncertainty” and so something to be “started over by each generation” in “incessant repetition of the absolute beginnings,” as prefigured in the “evangelical” passion, the impassible passibility of Christ Who “forgets the suffering in love [to such an extent] that there would not be the slightest trace of his suffering left if God himself did not remember it, for he sees in secret... and forgets nothing” (81).

Surely this much is right. As my doktorvater Christopher Morse often said, allegedly quoting Karl Barth (though the actual reference proves difficult to find), “But for the light of Easter morn, the cross would spread no shadow.” God the Father remembers His Son’s self-forgetting sacrifice and *therefore* (Philippians 2) has highly exalted Him. The dogma of the heavenly Father Who sees in secret is not only the historically learned foundation of European responsibility; it is the inner secret of the primitive Christian gospel of the resurrection of the crucified. Whether that secrecy of God’s trinitarian being, however, can be equated, as Derrida-cum-Levinas

urge, with our “relation to every other” is quite another question. Derrida tries to complicate the apparent tension between Kierkegaard and Levinas about whether the wholly other should be taken as God alone or as every other, each one every bit as wholly other. Kierkegaard has to admit that ethics is also the order of, and respect for, absolute singularity (of any genuine other) and Levinas has to concede that respect for any other is respect for absolute singularity, i.e. already religious.

The opposition between Levinas and Kierkegaard thus sufficiently collapsed, at least in Derrida’s mind, he returns to the “lack of coherence or consequence” (85) at the core of the modern Kantian ethics of duty. There is an absence of rational foundation for the ethic of responsibility, since one cannot in principle deduce duty “to whom, for whom.” Yet “one simply keeps on denying the aporia and antimony, tirelessly, and one treats as nihilist, relativist, even poststructuralist, and worse still deconstructionist, all those who remain concerned in the face of such a display of good conscience” (85). Yes, Abraham is “a murderer.” But, asks Derrida in recapitulating the argument, is his act not “at the same time the most common event in the world? Is it not inscribed in the structure of our existence?” The society of good conscience “*puts to death... or allows to die of hunger and disease tens of millions of children... to avoid being sacrificed oneself.*” Society actually “organizes” such sacrifice through its legal and economic systems, while “the smooth functioning of its moral discourse and good conscience presupposes the permanent operation of this sacrifice” (86).

### *The Sermon on the Mount*

One wonders then whether there is any hope of salvation. Is there some redemptive sacrifice by the self-made-infinitely-and-so-impossibly-responsible? Or in Patocka’s words,

“trembling in the consciousness of sin and offering one’s whole being in the sacrifice of repentance?” (94). Notice what is hinted at here, which Derrida will focus on in his conclusion: *a new seeking of a good, salvation, by the self for the self.* Kierkegaard’s Abraham had renounced all hope, thus sacrificed “without calculating, without investing, beyond any perspective of recouping the loss... beyond recompense or retribution, beyond economy” (95). Yet, in the biblical tale, God decides to return Isaac to Abraham, as it were, reinscribing a *quid pro quo* now that God “is assured that a gift outside of any economy, the gift of death—and the death of that which is priceless—has been accomplished without any hope of exchange, reward, circulation, or communication.” Isaac is given back “because [Abraham] renounced calculation” (96). But isn’t that a reward, albeit in a new register, on a higher plane, anticipating the Sermon on the Mount?

Derrida takes up this apparent paradox of the return of economic calculation by examining how the Sermon on the Mount speaks of such “reward.” The “pure in heart” are situated by the Sermon as those seeking *true* rather than *false* treasures. The border between true and false treasure is marked by the line separating fools storing up earthly treasure which moth consumes and rust destroys from the wise laying up treasures in heaven. This is as if to say, “you can count on the economy of heaven if you sacrifice the earthly economy” (98), for there the invisible value does not devalue and the profit is infinite. In just this way, however, it seems that the Goodness which gives has once again become the Good which is desired.

The plot, as they say, thickens. Does one calculate on “real heavenly treasure,” gladly paying the price of “sacrifice or renunciation on earth”? (99). “A logic is thus put in place” (91), with a double-sided effect. On the one hand, Derrida writes, the interiorization of God’s gaze puts an end to secrecy (before God Who sees

*all*), at the same time making secrecy “irreducible in its interiority,” i.e., in relation to peers. On the other hand, a new *quid pro quo* is instituted (“you will get a better salary if you give up your earthly salary”) yet with a “dis-symmetrical” twist that breaks with a “simple form of reciprocity.” As the Sermon says melodramatically, “If thy hand offend thee, cut it off!” In this way, the apparent calculation of heavenly reward “integrates absolute loss... sacrificing sacrifice understood as commerce occurring within finite bounds.” Put positively, here, on the earth, in the present order one offers the other cheek to the aggressor, suspending “that hateful form of circulation that involves reprisal, vengeance, returning blow for blow, setting scores” (102). The Sermon’s “logic” is not any obvious *quid pro quo*, but is the secret of the Logos itself, Christ who, as Goodness that forgets itself, “teaches love for one’s enemies.” That involves no simple calculation. It is the logic of the crucified, with his martyrs and confessors.

A digression here is of special interest for Lutheran theology. Derrida cites the fascist philosopher Carl Schmitt who, following Troeltsch’s reading of Luther’s *Zweiweltlehre*, delimits this logic of Christ to the realm of the personal and private, not to political enemies. Schmitt “reminds us, no Christian politics ever advised the West to love the Muslims who invaded Christian Europe” (103). Derrida asks whether “a Christian politics, one that conforms to the Gospels” is possible. Citing Leviticus 19 to show that the neighbor to whom love is due under the Law of Moses is “someone from my community,” Derrida argues that the non-neighbor identified by Christ’s logic of law-surpassing, more-than-economy love is not the “private enemy” but the public “foreigner” (105). The implication is that true Christian sacrifice is more than private; it has to be a public, political passion-and-action.

Derrida elaborates further the distinction between the two types of

salary in the Sermon: "one of retribution, equal exchange within a circular economy; the other of absolute surplus value, heterogeneous to outlay or investment" (105). These two salaries point to an opposition between two peoples (*civitas terrena* and *civitas Dei*, we might say): those of natural filiation who love their own and those who become children of the heavenly Father. These latter become perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect on the unnatural condition that there is a gift beyond economy, hence a love without reserve, also extending to those who belong to the former people, those who love only their own. This is a "calculation that claims to go beyond calculation... There is an economy... but one that creatures cannot calculate and must leave to the appreciation of the father as he who sees in secret" (107). It is an economy of faith, not sight. Its truth really depends on the reality of the Father Who sees in secret, Who remembered the incarnate Word's self-forgotten self-sacrifice, and in Him forgets not His children's little acts of love but remembers their sins no more.

"In Him?" Can He substitute for us so that we can participate in His sonship? Can He give His righteousness for our sin? His death for our life?

#### Can One Credit That?

At this concluding juncture, Derrida finally makes explicit his own *apophatic* theology: "[I]n order to eschew idolatrous or iconistic simplicisms, that is, visible images and ready-made representations, it might be necessary to understand [the Father Who sees in secret] as something other than a proposition concerning God... Then we might say ["at the risk of turning... against" the theological "tradition"]: God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior" (108). "God" then names a "structure of conscience... a witness that others cannot see, and who

is therefore at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself." "God is in me, he is the absolute 'me' or 'self'" that Kierkegaard calls "subjectivity" (109). This "heretical" but "internal critique of Christianity," non-theistically or apophatically refuses the iconic or idolatrous heavenly reward of the heavenly Father Whom Jesus proclaimed and Who in turn proclaimed the self-forgotten Jesus as victor on the third day.

This apophatic move, moreover, is in keeping with the "Pagan School," which, sniffing out "the slightest hint of calculation," calls the evangelical bluff with a critique of mystification and a reproach of its counterfeit currency: one must give without knowing, without recognition, without thanks for the gift of death to be at once real and to go beyond economy. So long as "God sees in secret," Someone knows, and thus sacrifice is hedged and turned into the tawdry Pascalian wager: "We have to believe that he knows. This knowledge at the same time founds and destroys the Christian concept of responsibility and justice and their 'object'" (110). Betting on God? Can one imagine anything more unworthy of God than to reduce Him to a supernatural compensation for earthly repressions resentfully posing as noble sacrifices? It was Nietzsche who detected here a root cruelty hidden in supposed Christian sacrifice. That cruelty is the "self-destruction of justice by means of grace." In fact such grace (the reward expected in Pascal's wager) is but "the privilege of the strongest" (115), masquerading as pious sacrifice. What it really does is effect a self-exemption from responsibility. It is an *égotisme*, a cunning manifestation of the will to power.

A Lutheran theological retort to this Nietzschean critique no doubt ups the ante. What Nietzsche exposes as sacrificial hubris in the notion of grace going beyond justice is the very thing which "takes this economy to its excess in the sacrifice of Christ for the love of the debtor" (115).

That is a *substitution* that at once fulfills the law and goes beyond it. *Can one credit that?* Derrida does not answer Nietzsche's incredulous question but takes leave of us suspended between it and "the irreducible experience of belief" (115).

There is much food for thought in the foregoing. Can we think once more with Luther of God surpassing God by Christ made to be sin, at once fulfilling the Law and superseding it? Can we think of Goodness that does not only forget itself in time *for us* but also remembers itself—with us now conjoined—in eternity, *for our salvation?* Can we reintegrate "ethics" (so-called) into dogmatics and free ourselves from that somber cheerleading of allegedly disinterested secular responsibility under the conditions of good-conscience modernity? Can we re-anchor the wayward search for the Good today in the *imago Dei*, teaching our peers that all hearts are restless until they learn once again to rest in our heavenly Father; Who sees in secret? Can we overcome the Cartesian and Kantian dualisms of the so-called *Zweireichlehre* to think of a evangelical politics that is not, however, the strident utopianism of those who have no sense or knowledge of the irresponsibility that attends all our responsibility this side of the Beloved Community? Can we articulate the sense of the doctrine of original sin to complicate the easy conscience of modern man without the literalism that makes temporal death the consequence rather than the source of faithless anxiety? Can we teach that true humanity is not decided in being-toward-death, but in being-toward-death-and-resurrection. (Luke 14:12-14)?

#### Note

1. Parenthetical citations refer to *The Gift of Death*, trans. D. Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995).

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