The Gift of Death
JACQUES DERRIDA.

This fascinating little book begins from a reflection on the recent French translation of Jan Patocka’s Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History that winds through the themes of secrecy, death, sacrifice, gift, God and religion in order to pose the question of moral responsibility in the context of the destiny of Europe. Patocka was a student and associate of Edmund Husserl who, toward the end of Husserl’s life, received from him a gift of a desk-top lecturn that had originally been a gift from T.G. Masaryk during their student days in Leipzig. Masaryk was a philosopher and the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic after the First World War who probably influenced Husserl in his early life to take up the study of philosophy. Thus, Patocka symbolically received the weight of a philosophical tradition intertwined with the destiny of Czechoslovakia and Europe. He carried forth this tradition when he became one of the founders and key spokesmen for the dissident democratic civic initiative Charta 77. When, at nearly 70 years of age, he died under police interrogation on March 13, 1977, Patocka became one of the key “events” of contemporary philosophy. Like Socrates, his life embodied the claim and the tragedy of philosophy in the public arena. In Derrida’s formulation, Patocka’s text advocates political and historical action “according to the logic of a messianic eschatology that is nevertheless indissociable from phenomenology” (28).

When Derrida takes up the question of responsibility in dialogue with Patocka, it does not seem to be in a mode of “deconstruction” which his previous studies adopted toward Plato, Saussure, Rousseau, Husserl and others. Pervading this book is a relation of intimate and respectful dialogue with Patocka — and later also Lévinas and Kierkegaard — as he meticulously creeps toward formulating his “obscure proverb” (97) for responsibility “Tout autre est tout autre” which the translator renders as “Every other (one) is every (bit) other.” When Derrida criticizes Patocka — for underestimating the
pervasiveness of the critique of masks in favour of authenticity throughout the history of philosophy (36), and for not considering the possible importance of sexual difference in analyzing death (45) — we seem to be in the presence of philosophical dialogue of a more traditional sort. The radical other, or outside, that previously “motivated,” or worked in, deconstruction seems to have come inside, as it were, to inhere in the singularity of each one that is the secret of European responsibility.

Patočka delineates European history through the Platonic attempt to surpass Greek orgiastic mystery religion through a separation of the individual ego from its prior fusion with the community and the later Christian attempt to surpass the Neoplatonic ego through the notion of a gift from God, unachievable through a humanly motivated ascēsis toward the light, that reaches from the divine toward humanity. There are thus three main epochs of the West, for Patočka, in which death takes on a different meaning — at first more individualized, then, in a manner that weaves together freedom and responsibility and “comes from a gift received from the other, from the one who, in absolute transcendence, sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible” (40). What is important for Derrida in this characterization of European responsibility is Patočka’s “more Nietzschean than Husserlian or Heideggerian” (19) sense of the incorporation of prior epochs within later ones such that they remain unsurpassed and problematic within the later, highest form. “Platonic mystery thus incorporates orgiastic mystery and Christian mystery represses Platonic mystery” (9). We have thus yet to learn the gift of death.

Derrida’s reflections begin to take leave of Patočka at this point. While section one is devoted to Patočka, section two (the shortest, and where his two criticisms of Patočka are located) carefully winds in the theme of the death of the other that is not in Patočka — or, to be more accurate (since Patočka certainly speaks of sacrifice) — is not the main orientation of Patočka’s reflection on responsibility. The influence of Lévinas begins to take over when Derrida claims that “it is because the other is mortal that my responsibility is singular and ‘inalienable’” (46). He renews his meditation on the word “adieu” and problematizes the Christian reference of Patočka’s work by arguing that the reference to a revelatory event is not crucial in this context. Section three interprets the sacrifice of Isaac as “what one might just dare to call the common treasure, the terrifying secret of the mysterium tremendum that is a property of all three so-called religions of the book” (64). The fourth and final section proposes his “obscure proverb” tout autre est tout autre and, significantly, ends with a short passage on Nietzsche. It would be too simple to say that Derrida begins with Patočka’s conception of responsibility as authenticity in the face of one’s own death, a traditional theme in philosophy from Plato to Heidegger (36), and winds gradually
toward a conception which is oriented to the other (and thus indebted to Lévinas) so that one can hear the echoes of a Jewish response to Christian claims to define European ethics — both because Derrida is very careful to avoid such an oversimplifying polarization and because to phrase it that way would threaten to evacuate the space of this “common treasure” and thus of a philosophical-religious speech that could explore it. But it is interesting, after all, that while Derrida says “God” throughout the text, at one point only, in the context of describing God as “wholly other” and as “found everywhere there is something of the wholly other” (78), he instead says “Jahweh.”

Responsibility is thus tied to the singularity of death and, through sacrifice, to the mortality of the other. In this sense, death does not communicate; anything or anyone else cannot replace it. Derrida’s claim, expressed in his own voice distinct from reference to his interlocutors in this text, is that “dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised, or transmitted. ... Death would be this possibility of giving and taking [donner-prendre] that actually exempts itself from the same realm of possibility that it institutes, namely, from giving and taking. But to say that is far from contradicting the fact that it is only on the basis of death, and in its name, that giving and taking become possible” (44). There are thus two utterly distinct registers: one of the ordinary exchange of mutual obligation and indebtedness, another of the exorbitant claim of responsibility that goes beyond, even undermines and sacrifices, the ethical or political generality. The call of responsibility will always go beyond what the community can understand; the community always threatens to make one irresponsible, though the community-to-come will be made possible by this call (74).

The fourth section begins by connecting the story of Abraham and Isaac to the daily institutionalized injustice that structures our current world. The father willing to sacrifice his own son would be a scandal to any civilized community. But such a civilized community, ours in fact, “because of the structure of the laws of the market that society has instituted and controls, because of the mechanisms of external debt and other similar inequities, that same “society” puts to death or (but failing to help someone in distress accounts for only a minor difference) allows to die of hunger and disease tens of millions of children (those neighbours or fellow humans that ethics or the discourse of rights of man refer to) without any moral or legal tribunal ever being considered competent to judge such a sacrifice, the sacrifice of others to avoid being sacrificed oneself” (86). He earlier has considered and rejected the claim that one is responsible in the first place to those to whom one is near. “What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable (this is Abraham’s hyper-ethical sacrifice), as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment” (71). If the nearness of some versus the others is not
a claim on responsibility, but rather a moment of the ethic-political generality that tends toward complacency, then the face of any other, even another that I will never see, shakes to its foundation the joy within my own house. Derrida's exorbitant notion of responsibility is frightening, for it undermines any sense in which the face of my child might have a greater claim on my responsibility than another. Of course, that my child is more precious to me than others is unavoidable, even a necessary aspect of human love, but Derrida seeks to separate this necessary connection to singularities from justification, from anything that might tie it to the story of European responsibility.

This book thus continues Derrida's messianism, his search for justice always beyond the rule of law or of familiar "responsibilities" by undermining any ground from which one might distinguish near from far. One's own particularity through which one is tied to singularities is torn by deconstruction away from justice. In ceasing to be a self-defence, or restitution of my own, deconstruction becomes a messianic justice, a rigorous logic which, in undermining the claims of my own, restitutes the claims of those who are not heard or seen, and demands that we see and hear them. As Derrida has written elsewhere, justice is not subject to deconstruction because deconstruction is justice. It cannot operate without "justifying the principle of a radical and indeterminable infinite" which has "yet another essential affinity between it and a certain messianic spirit." I'm not sure if one should understand political messianism as significantly different than utopianism, but it seems to me that the danger of utopianism is one of the tragic lessons of our century. By leaping over the partial here and now for the remote and complete goal, utopianism has proven too likely to sacrifice present, imperfect human beings as means to ultimate ends. Derrida insists on the separation of messianic eschatology from any teleology, which perhaps utopianism needs, but it seems to me that to equalize responsibilities to all others not only seems to subtract from justice the necessary particularity of my connection to these others more than those, it also seems to come dangerously close to sacrificing the present on the altar of the future. Derrida has clarified the necessarily revolutionary character of messianic hope as "open, waiting for the event as justice" and as "waiting without horizon of expectation." Insofar as this messianism is a waiting without teleology, it may escape the danger of utopianism but surely it could only do this by separating itself from the political action that might attempt to practice the hope. I'm not sure whether Derrida is speaking here of a hope that one may protect and pass on but which would be distorted by entering directly into the practical world, or if he is attempting to clarify the secret impetus to political action. The former case escapes utopianism, but surely also revolution, since it comes down on the side of waiting without political effect whereas the latter one courts exactly
the danger of revolutionary overthrow in impatience with "merely" partial redressing of injustice. To my mind, if there is any hope of bringing these two necessary registers of human hope together, it cannot be by leaping over the particularities of my own life that tie me to other singularities but by in some way linking them to the larger hope that inheres in them. The face of my child links me to the faces of all other children. Surely, my attempt to be a good father connects me to the pain of the mothers and fathers who see their children die of hunger in Somalia, or anywhere. It is not wrong, nor even unjustifiable, that I eat; it is wrong that others do not do so also — though one day there may only be enough bread for one of us and responsibility will be most tested then. I cannot speak with any authority on what messianism is, but it seems to me that the hope of humanity cannot be divorced from what is near and dear in the way that Derrida wants to, and in that sense it appears as though he courts the danger of political utopianism.

The call of responsibility away from the settled community is borne in the interiority of the subjectivity constructed when God looks at me such that I cannot look back. This asymmetry between finite mortal and infinite gift is the basis of guilt (51, 94). "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). This radical other who looks but is not seen refers justice to all "others." "God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere that there is something of the wholly other" (78). Thus, Derrida recalls the Judeo-Christian tradition not as contingent history but follows Patocka in regarding it as essential to justice in our time. The final pages turn to Nietzsche's genealogy of Christian responsibility that finds the origin of God in the reciprocal exchange between debtor and creditor. Nietzsche attempts to integrate even that which cannot be exchanged, grace, which he calls "the privilege of the strongest, better still, their super-law" (Genealogy of Morals, quoted 114) and which Derrida calls a hyperbolic repression, a sacrificial hubris, that "takes this economy to its excess in the sacrifice of Christ for love of the debtor" (114). But he finds another secret within "belief" as that which confers an infinite status on God and which Derrida locates not outside exchange but suspended in the very relation between exchanges. He imagines Nietzsche as asked by his own text how one could "believe" this history of interiority and responsibility. His last sentence remarks cryptically that "Nietzsche must indeed believe he knows what believing means, unless he means it is all make-believe" (115). The book thus ends by suggesting, without explaining, that Nietzsche does not have the last word on the history of Christianity, nor, one could surmise, on the interpretation of European responsibility as ressentiment, insofar as he himself is within the history of belief that not only forms the object of his critique but which makes it possible. By this route, Derrida's text returns to the history of European responsibility that it attempts
to discuss and carry forward. Probably that is why this text is not a deconstruction, nor aims at one. It is oriented to what motivates deconstruction, what links it to justice and the messianic, and thus to deconstruction as an episode of the call of responsibility. Is his attempt to find its secret hidden between what is exchanged rather than outside the relation a gift from deconstruction, from Judaism, from the “common treasure,” or from some hitherto unknown place? There are five blank pages after the final word.

Notes


2 Derrida points out that Patocka’s conception of Christianity is not orthodox, that it conceives of Christianity as a yet unaccomplished task because of the weight of the unsurpassed legacy on which it has built (6, 28, 48-9).

3 Derrida builds one of the strange claims that seem to me characteristic of the “all or nothing” stance of deconstruction on this persistence of the prior in the supposedly surpassed. “The Platonic philosopher is in no better a position than an animal to “look at” death in the face and so assume that authenticity of existence ...” (20, emphasis added). That the Platonist has not definitively overcome orgiastic religion doesn’t imply that nothing has been achieved. It rather indicates the opposite, surely. The statement seems to deny any sort of advance by Platonism because the advance is not as complete or as unequivocal as Platonism would have it. It compares a finite advance, because it was initially claimed to be infinite, to an infinite standard and thereby finds it indistinguishable from nothing. It seems to me that this is why, though this “deconstructive” claim is in the book, the book is not a deconstruction. Responsibility is not nothing, even though it is still to come.


9 Strangely, Derrida feels it necessary to point out to his readers that God is not someone up in the sky (108). This shift of register in the text is striking. It makes one wonder who Derrida’s readers are, or who he thinks they are.

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**Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics**

JEAN GRONDIN


As a brief overview of the historical influences of philosophical hermeneutics, Grondin’s book is first-rate. Evidence of extensive research in various areas of hermeneutics (especially theological hermeneutics) is supplemented by a vast sixty-page bibliography, complete with its own index.

There are two main themes at play in this book, and they cause more tension than harmony. First, Grondin’s task is “to introduce readers to the philosophical dimension of hermeneutics” (xv), in which lies its claim to universality. This claim is not that of absolute certainty but of the “philosophical task” (ix) of re-tracing the “inner word” (xv) of expression. Hermeneutics is explained as the reverse of expression: whereas expression “makes what is contained within knowable from without,” hermeneutics “tries to penetrate an uttered expression to see the spirit contained within it” (21). It is in this spirit, as the attempt to express experience, that the universal dimension of hermeneutics lies.

Grondin uses the various ways in which philosophers have conceived of the universality of hermeneutics in order to trace its history. To summarize briefly, Augustine is noted for countering the view that the meaning of Scripture is merely ‘allegorical’ by claiming that the words themselves bear their ‘spiritual’ meaning. Understanding is always possible insofar as “[t]he word truly perceived — that is, according to its inner tendency — is already spirit” (41). Schleiermacher developed Augustine’s theory to account for the author’s intention. His ‘psychological’ hermeneutics (which was to supplement ‘grammatical’ or contextual hermeneutics) suggests that interpretation is an endless task, since we can never fully grasp the author’s intention; “From the outset, then, the interpreter must be on guard against possible misunderstanding,” promoting “an ever deeper interpretation” (70,