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The Sermon on Mount Moriah:

Faith and the Secret in *The Gift of Death*

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an investigation of three attempts to think faith. I find my starting place in Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*¹, one of the most important treatments of Christianity in Derrida's later thought, which was increasingly insistent in its engagement with religious questions up until his death in 2004. This reading of *The Gift of Death* will focus particularly on the question of secrecy and its relationship with faith, leading necessarily to an account of Derrida's reading of two of his primary references in this text: the second essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*² and Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.³ Rather than simply rendering a judgment on Derrida's reading, I will endeavor to read these texts together, extending (or expanding upon) Derrida's reading while questioning some of the positive formulations he makes in his own name—all the while remaining attentive to the gambles involved in thinking faith.

I.

The two chapters on Jan Patočka's 'Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?'⁴ represent perhaps the most serious difficulty for the reader of *The Gift of Death*, not least because of the relative obscurity of Patočka himself. Clearly part of Derrida's motivation in writing on Patočka would be to remedy that obscurity to some degree, and yet there is just as

clearly much more going on in *The Gift of Death* than an attempt at enhancing Patočka's posthumous reputation. The question then becomes *what* Derrida finds to be important in Patočka—why he chooses the essay he does, and why he chooses the passages he does from within that essay. One helpful way to approach this problem is to understand Patočka as something of a stand-in for two thinkers to whom he has some very real proximity and who are both much more important for Derrida: first of all Nietzsche, then also Heidegger.

The reference to Heidegger is much more readily apparent, but the reference to Nietzsche is more important to Derrida's argumentative strategy as a whole. Although it is clear enough that Derrida ends *The Gift of Death* with a consideration of the second essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, it is perhaps less clear that Nietzsche is an implicit dialogue partner from the very beginning. This can be seen in Derrida's very first sentence—just as Nietzsche declares his second essay to be an attempt to tell 'the long story of how *responsibility* originated,'⁵ for Derrida, Patočka's essay represents a 'history of responsibility,' and further, just as in Nietzsche's essay, 'the history of responsibility is tied to a history of religion.'⁶ Speaking of the 'risk in acknowledging a *history* of responsibility,' Derrida outlines a sort of conventional wisdom on concepts such as responsibility that are not usually regarded as having a history:

It is often thought, on the basis of an analysis of the very concepts of responsibility, freedom, or decision, that to be responsible, free, or capable of deciding cannot be something that is acquired, something conditioned or conditional. Even if there is undeniably a history of freedom or responsibility, such a historicity, it is thought, must remain *extrinsic*.... What would responsibility be if it were motivated, conditioned, made possible by a history?⁷

Yet Derrida regards history as something that must be ‘*acknowledged*’ or ‘*admitted to,*’ despite the admittedly great difficulty that ‘historicity must *remain open* as a problem that is never to be resolved’:⁸

Any history worthy of the name can neither be saturated nor sutured.... The history of the secret, the combined history of responsibility and the gift, has the spiral form of these turns [*tours*], intricacies [*tourneures*], versions, turnings back, bends [*virages*], and conversions. One could compare it to a history of revolutions, even to history as revolution.⁹

This reading of Patočka’s project shows it to be ‘more Nietzschean than Heideggerian,’¹⁰ indeed to be an echo of what one might call Nietzsche’s methodological credo in the *Genealogy*:

there is for historiography of any kind no more important proposition than the one it took such effort to establish but which really *ought to be* established now: the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.... the entire history of a ‘thing,’ an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion.¹¹

There are, however, differences in tone and emphasis in Derrida's account of the problems involved in a history of responsibility, and it is here that one can see that Derrida is not concerned to draw out parallels between Patočka and Nietzsche as an end in itself, but rather in order to enact a rereading of Nietzsche's text as well.

For Nietzsche, there is suffering and difficulty involved in historical existence, but seemingly the *decision* is not problematic in itself. One may say that everything is a bit too calculable, and indeed, calculation is the very condition of possibility of responsibility:

Man himself must first of all have become *calculable, regular, necessary*, even in his own image of himself, if he is to be able to stand security for *his own future*, which is what one who promises does!¹²

Later on, discussing the origin of the feeling of debt or guilt [*Schuld*], Nietzsche declares:

Setting prices, determining values, contriving equivalences, exchanging—these preoccupied the earliest thinking of man to so great an extent that in a certain sense they constitute thinking *as such*: here it was that the oldest kind of astuteness developed; here likewise, we may suppose, did human pride, the feeling of superiority in relation to other animals, have its first beginnings.¹³

Even in the end of his essay, where he shows some hesitation at the prospect of proposing a positive ideal, Nietzsche is still using the language of cost:

But have you ever asked yourselves sufficiently how much the erection of *every* ideal on earth has cost? How much reality has to be misunderstood and slandered, how many lies have had to be sanctified, how many consciences disturbed, how much 'God' sacrificed every time?¹⁴

Similarly, too, where Nietzsche extols the power of forgetting, Derrida asserts that ‘history never effaces what it buries,’ using Patočka to read the history of responsibility as ‘a secret history of kept secrets’¹⁵—introducing a higher degree of complexity and of moral gravity to the Nietzschean account, which, while certainly not ‘progressive’ in the usual sense, is in many ways simply ‘successive.’

One might say, then, that Derrida supplements Nietzsche’s essay with Patočka’s. This becomes most clear in the following dense and crucial passage, in which Derrida contrasts Nietzsche’s avowedly anti-Christian genealogy with the terms drawn from Patočka’s avowedly Christian (quasi)genealogy, challenging in turn each of the key concepts of Nietzsche’s account of the history of responsibility:

History can be neither a decidable object nor a totality capable of being mastered, precisely because it is tied to *responsibility*, to *faith*, and to the *gift*. To *responsibility* in the experience of absolute decisions made outside of knowledge or given norms, made therefore through the very ordeal of the undecidable; to religious *faith* through a form of involvement with the other that is a venture into absolute risk, beyond knowledge and certainty; to the *gift* and to the gift of death [*au don de la mort*] that puts me into relation with the transcendence of the other, with God as a goodness forgetful of itself—and that gives me what it gives me through a new experience of death.¹⁶

Against responsibility founded on calculability, responsibility as ‘the very ordeal of the undecidable’; against *Glaube* as credit, *Glaube* as faith and risk; against the economy of willful self-assertion through credit and debit, the gift as gift of death. Combating the crippling effect of the bad conscience, Nietzsche asserts calculation, lust for pleasure, will-to-power—and Derrida’s

reading displaces all this, placing the accent instead on those portions of Nietzsche's argument that valorize the emergence of the bad conscience as

something so new, profound, unheard of, enigmatic, contradictory, *and pregnant with a future* that the aspect of the earth was essentially altered.... [the human being] gives rise to an interest, a tension, a hope, almost a certainty, as if with him something were announcing and preparing itself, as if [the human] were not a goal but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise.—¹⁷

And it is precisely here that Derrida makes a crucial move. Rather than repeating Nietzsche's implicit claim to be discussing the moral development of humanity in general, Derrida (through Patočka) reads the Nietzschean genealogy as having its roots and its hopes precisely in the West—and beyond that, he points to the task of thinking Christianity *all the way through* as the hope of the West.

II.

In the second section of *The Gift of Death*, Derrida substantially concludes his treatment of Patočka, ending with a long quotation into which he inserts various comments. Although Derrida very artfully works his way toward Kierkegaard through a brief phenomenological analysis of trembling (suggested by Patočka's use of the term *mysterium tremendum*) which leads, in turn, to a discussion of Paul's letter to the Philippians and then *Fear and Trembling*, this quotation itself seems to prepare the ground:

The responsible human [in Christian terms] as such is *I*; it is an individual that is not identical with any role it could possibly assume—in Plato this is expressed in the myth of the drawing of life's lot; it is a responsible I because in the confrontation with death and in the coming to terms with nothingness it takes

upon itself what we all must carry out in ourselves, where no one can take our place. Now, however, individuality is vested in a relation to an infinite love and humans are individuals because they are guilty, and *always* guilty, with respect to it. We all, as individuals, are defined by the uniqueness of our individual placement in the universality of sin.¹⁸

In light of the chapter that follows, this can be read as a compendium of Kierkegaardian themes: the contrast between Christianity and Platonism (as in *Philosophical Fragments* and many other works), the idea of the human being as a single and irreplaceable individual standing in essential relation to God (as analyzed, for instance, in *The Sickness Unto Death*), and particularly the idea of always being in the wrong before God (as in the concluding section of the second volume of *Either/Or*).

Working backwards, one finds similar hints of a Kierkegaardian direction in Derrida's argument, first of all in an early passage where Derrida says that the 'passage from exteriority to interiority... assures the transition from Platonism to Christianity.'¹⁹ The connection between inwardness and Christianity appears in virtually all of Kierkegaard's works and could indeed be taken as *the* distinctive mark of his thought. The necessity of bringing Kierkegaard into the discussion becomes even clearer once Derrida lays out what he takes to be the consequences of Patočka's argument:

What is implicit yet explosive in Patočka's text can be extended *in a radical way*, for it is heretical with respect to a certain Christianity and a certain Heideggerianism but also with respect to all the important European discourses. Taken to its extreme, the text seems to suggest on the one hand that Europe will

not be what it must be until it becomes fully Christian, until the *mysterium tremendum* is adequately thematized.²⁰

Or in short: ‘Christianity has not yet come to Christianity’²¹—that is, as Patočka argues, Christianity hasn’t yet thought itself entirely through.²² One is reminded of Kierkegaard’s statement from *Practice in Christianity*:

Christendom has abolished Christianity without really knowing it itself. As a result, if something must be done, one must attempt again to introduce Christianity into Christendom.²³

Just as with Nietzsche, the accent is somewhat displaced in Derrida’s account—and again, the concern becomes the future, and hand in hand with that, the undecidable. In the statement just quoted and throughout Kierkegaard’s work, this introduction of Christianity into Christendom can be understood as a restoration project, bringing back something that has been lost—a sort of ‘Rousseauism of Christianity,’ to quote one of those who is currently taking up Derrida’s challenge to think through the Christian tradition.²⁴ Yet within this same quotation, Kierkegaard introduces a tension between the supposedly lost past and its future restoration, for ‘if something must be done,’ it must be an ‘attempt *again* to *introduce* Christianity’—that is, to repeat Christianity in its becoming, which to Kierkegaard’s way of thinking would entail an encounter with Christ.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that Derrida sidesteps the question of Christ as such through his use of *Fear and Trembling*, a work in which the paradox of God become human is notably absent. At the same time, Derrida situates Kierkegaard’s interpretation of the Abraham story as Christian, and particularly as influenced by the New Testament.²⁵ On a literary level, this is achieved by elaborating on Kierkegaard’s own decision to take the title of *Fear and Trembling*

from Philippians 2:12 ('work out your salvation in fear and trembling') and to end the work with an allusion to Matthew 6:4 ('your Father who sees in secret will reward you'). For Derrida, there is a particular inner necessity in Kierkegaard's choice of the passage from Paul as his title, stemming from the characterization of God that is implicit in Paul's exhortation to the Philippians:

If Paul says 'adieu' and absents himself as he asks [the Philippians] to obey, in fact ordering them to obey (for one doesn't ask for obedience, one orders it), it is because God is himself absent, hidden and silent, separate, secret, at the moment he has to be obeyed. God doesn't give his reasons, he acts as he intends, he doesn't have to give his reasons or share anything with us: neither his motivations, if he has any, nor his deliberations, nor his decisions. Otherwise he wouldn't be God, we wouldn't be dealing with the Other as God or with God as wholly other.²⁶

In Kierkegaard's hands, the God of Abraham becomes 'the one who decides, without revealing his reasons, to demand of Abraham that most cruel, impossible, and untenable gesture: to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice.'²⁷ Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham's sacrifice, then, provides Derrida with the occasion to interrogate further the relationship between responsibility and secrecy with which he began *The Gift of Death*—and to clarify the difference between a Patočkan (but no longer merely Patočkan) secrecy and a Nietzschean forgetting.

On this point, Derrida shifts the emphasis of Kierkegaard's reading, while maintaining Kierkegaard's insistence that the test is ultimately a matter of keeping the secret, even as the secret remains properly incommunicable. Yet whereas for Kierkegaard the incommunicability of

the secret is grounded in the transcendence of the God-relationship, for Derrida, it is perhaps a more straightforward matter:

[Abraham] must keep the secret (that is his duty), but it is also a secret that he *must* keep as a double necessity because in the end he *can't but* keep it: he doesn't know it, he is unaware of its ultimate rhyme and reason. He is sworn to secrecy because he is in secret.²⁸

That is, Abraham hasn't been entrusted with that information. He can tell others of his plan to sacrifice Isaac, but not of God's reason for the command, because God has not communicated that reason.²⁹ Here the question is not, as with Nietzsche, one of a forgetting that serves as a productive force—rather, the motivating force in this situation is a fact that was never known, at least not by the human participants.

In making this seemingly obvious move, however, Derrida opens up the possibility that Kierkegaard has not fully grappled with the aporetic relationship between responsibility and knowledge: a responsible decision must not be taken *outside of* knowledge, but if a decision is made simply *out of* knowledge, then it is 'the technical deployment of a cognitive apparatus, the simple mechanistic deployment of a theorem'³⁰—in other words, it is not a decision at all, still less a responsible decision. Kierkegaard certainly insists on the paradoxical character of Abraham's situation, and yet from a 'God's eye view,' insofar as he is dealing with the God whom Derrida finds alike in Paul and in Kierkegaard, Abraham is in perfect conformity with God's command, which serves as a trump card rendering all of Abraham's other concerns finally irrelevant. Kierkegaard of course insists that such a 'God's eye view' is inaccessible to the subject as existing, and yet for Kierkegaard *there is* a 'God's eye view'—that is, 'Existence itself is a system—for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit.'³¹ The quest of (at least)

the Danish Hegelians to complete ‘the system’ is *not only* impossible given the status of the human subject as existing—it is also an attempt at usurping the place that rightfully belongs to God alone.

Yet if we already *cannot*, where is the necessity of saying that we *must not*? This question reflects a tension that is at play throughout Kierkegaard’s work. For instance, in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard systematically removes the authority of Scripture, creed, baptism, and church as decisive grounds for adherence to Christianity,³² reinforcing his assertion in *Philosophical Fragments* that ‘[t]here is no follower at second hand,’ which is to say:

The first and the latest generation are essentially alike, except that the latter generation has the occasion in the report of the contemporary generation, whereas the contemporary generation has the occasion in its immediate contemporaneity and therefore owes no generation anything.³³

This ‘occasion,’ however, remains indispensable for Kierkegaard. One might even say that in his radical insistence on the subjective character of Christianity, he still manages to sneak the objective in, as it were, through the back door. For instance, in the *Postscript*, he rejects the idea of an ‘Archimedean point’ from which one must make the leap of faith;³⁴ rather, the leap is made from where one is standing, and one always lands back on the ground:

If a dancer could leap very high, we would admire him, but if he wanted to give the impression that he could fly—even though he could leap higher than any dancer had ever leapt before—let laughter overtake him. Leaping means to belong essentially to the earth and to respect the law of gravity so that the leap is merely the momentary, but flying means to be set free from telluric conditions, something

that is reserved exclusively for winged creatures, perhaps also for inhabitants of the moon, perhaps—³⁵

In other words, the leap is not a leap off a cliff, nor is there some special location at which one arrives. Rather, the momentary leap is a movement toward the wholly other that affirms the other as other and, in turn, enacts anew the resignation of the self to itself. In *Fear and Trembling*, this same movement is expressed as an infinite resignation that then miraculously issues in ‘the movements of finitude’³⁶: the knight of faith ‘is continually making the movement of infinity, but he does it with such precision and assurance that he continually gets finitude out of it, and no one ever suspects anything else.’³⁷ One could point to similar argumentation throughout Kierkegaard’s *œuvre*.

In the *Postscript*, however, as in so many of his works, the potentially indiscriminate dissemination of this movement is constrained by reference to Christ. This reference is far from arbitrary, and Kierkegaard works it into his argument very artfully. As a first step, he claims that passion is the culmination of subjectivity and that paradox has a necessary relationship to ‘a person situated in the extremity of existence.’³⁸ Granted that this is the case, then the next step would be to seek the greatest possible paradox. For Kierkegaard, the choice is then obvious: ‘The thesis that God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox.’³⁹ There is, it would seem, an Archimedean point after all—faith in Christ as God become human.

This move of attaching or reattaching Christ to his scheme of the leap of faith is unstable, however, and not necessarily in the sense in which Kierkegaard values instability. On the one hand, one could simply argue that the idea of a qualitative difference among paradoxes is incoherent. On the other hand, granting the possibility of an absolute paradox, one could argue

that unless Christ is the equivalent of God appearing under the form ‘of a rare, enormously large green bird, with a red beak, that perched in a tree on the embankment and perhaps even whistled in an unprecedented manner’⁴⁰—that is, unless in Christ God presents Godself in some obvious way, which for Kierkegaard is emphatically not the case—then there is no way of knowing whether this particular person I happen to have met might not after all be God in the flesh. Something like the continued authority of Christian tradition is necessary to limit this absolute paradox to the one man Jesus Christ and to maintain the encounter with Christ in particular as the outermost possibility of existence.

Kierkegaard is here combining what might be called a ‘philosophical’ argument with a claim of ‘theological’ authority—an argumentative choice that is perhaps warranted, but not necessary. One could always do otherwise, and Derrida in fact does, through the famous turn of phrase *tout autre est tout autre*—that is, one stands in relation to every other as one stands in relation to (Kierkegaard’s) God; there is no single, privileged ‘more other’ other who automatically preempts every other. Derrida could have gotten to this same point precisely through reference to Christ, arguing that the divine incognito in one man must necessarily imply that every other could just as well be God—an idea that has some ground in the New Testament, in particular the parable of the sheep and the goats, where it is stated that whatever one does for the weak and lowly other, one does for Christ. The very fact that he does not choose this option, however, testifies to his attempt to think ‘Christianity without Christ,’ precisely in order to avoid routing the dissemination of otherness through a single, privileged other.⁴¹

III.

Thus Derrida, while clearly taking Kierkegaard’s reading into account, seems to be more interested in what happens if Abraham is playing a game of cards without a trump card—that is,

a game of cards in which there is no super-player ('God,' for example) who will always win. This metaphor of a card game is perhaps not entirely fortuitous, or at least not without grounding in Derrida's text, for the French verb *donner* is used to refer to dealing cards. In his initial explication of the French phrase *donner la mort*, this is admittedly not among his potential meanings, which include putting someone to death, committing suicide, dying for the other, as well as giving meaning to death (*donnée* as a noun can mean 'fact')—or 'simply, and more generally, relating to the possibility of death... even if that means, following Heidegger, relating to the possibility of an impossibility.'⁴² This Heideggerian reference is picked up again, among other places, in connection with Levinas's critique of Heidegger for privileging the death of the self over the death of the other.⁴³ If for Heidegger the death of the other is something accidental, for Levinas as for Derrida, the death of the other is the originary experience of death—and first of all because one always sees the death dealt out to the other before the death dealt to oneself.

Contingency is involved, irreducibly, in either case—and yet there is a very real difference between the Heideggerian *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) and the Derridean *donner la mort* as the foundation of finitude. The verb at the root of *Geworfenheit* is *werfen*, which is used, among other things, to refer to a throw of the dice. Nietzsche frequently uses an etymologically related verb, *würfeln*, and forms thereof in speaking of the contingency of existence—for instance, in the passage cited above in which he affirms the bad conscience as the condition for the great promise of humanity, he refers to the guilt-ridden human subject as among 'the most unexpected and exciting lucky throws [*Glückswürfen*] in the dice game of Heraclitus' "great child," be he called Zeus or chance.'⁴⁴ To put it in perhaps overly schematic terms, if all are agreed that some form of gambling is necessarily involved in existence, then the decisive question is precisely which game we are playing. For Heidegger and for Nietzsche, one could

say, we are playing a game of dice, whereas for Derrida (perhaps carrying along with him Levinas, perhaps also Kierkegaard) we are playing a game of cards.

What is the difference between a game of dice and a game of cards? First, a card game necessarily involves some degree of secrecy, whereas in a dice game, everything is done in the open. This is clear if one considers what it would be like to roll the dice off to the side where one's opponents could not see—such hiddenness would violate the very spirit of a dice game. Second, with the exception of solitaire,⁴⁵ card games are necessarily played with others, involving social interaction (or attempts at thwarting social interaction) in a way that dice games do not. Once the dice are rolled, the result is tabulated according to the rules laid out beforehand, but in the case of a card game, a complex superstructure of betting and bluffing takes on a life of its own and in fact most often generates greater interest and greater hope than the assigned rankings of various cards and combinations thereof. For instance, poker obviously would not be poker if five face-up cards were distributed to each player and the person with the best hand declared the winner as a matter of course—the appeal of poker lies precisely in the fact that the person who objectively has the worst hand can nonetheless win in the most extraordinary way.⁴⁶

One begins to wonder, then, if the roll of the dice is actually the best metaphor for the emergence of the bad conscience in Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, if it might not be better described as the result of a protracted card game that is still in progress. One wonders, in fact, if it is less a matter of becoming master than of playing the cards dealt and winning what in English are called 'tricks.' In fact it would be possible to construe the entire history of responsibility as a history of *bluffing*. Perhaps even Nietzsche's explicit methodological statement at the center of the second essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* cannot fully account for the history he is offering:

the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous 'meaning' and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.... the entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion.⁴⁷

Does 'becoming master' adequately explain how slave morality was able to triumph over master morality? Certainly one could say that the emergence of master morality, of calculation and knowledge, of credit and debit, was necessary for that victory and even remains an indispensable supplement in its perpetuation—but the slave morality triumphs precisely by introducing an excess over against calculation, an excess which is nonetheless expressed in German using the same words as those for the key terms of the master morality: *Glaube* and *Schuld*, credit and debt, belief and guilt.

The history of responsibility begins with the leap of faith of those who know that they belong to the world of calculation in which the greater power always wins and who open up the excessive space of the secret. The situation is similar to that of the protagonist of Jesus' parable of the dishonest manager (Luke 16.1-12). Just alerted that he is going to be fired and lacking any means of supporting himself, a manager calls in his master's debtors behind his back and reduces

their debt, hoping to gain some advantage thereby. What advantage? Certainly not to build *Glaube* in the sense of credit, but perhaps to build *Glaube* in the sense of faith or faithfulness, in the sense in which the master's debtors might believe that the manager wanted to do them a favor and might want to reciprocate when he is in need—not that they would be *Schuldner* of the manager in the sense of debtors, but perhaps might feel guilty seeing this man suffer after trying to help them out. This is the gamble of a desperate man, but when he notices what is happening, the master commends the manager for his shrewdness. Jesus himself somewhat scandalously recommends him as an example of the responsible use of wealth. Use the cards in your hand, Jesus exhorts us, to win friends—and if you have a bad hand, by all means, *bluff*.

IV.

If it is the case that the experience of God that Kierkegaard lays out is, as Derrida characterizes it, a 'still Jewish experience,'⁴⁸ it is still also the case that it is very much a Pauline experience. This is not only because it is Paul who deploys Abraham as the model of faith, but also because outside of a certain Christian or at least Pauline relativization of what Kierkegaard calls 'the ethical'—that is, the sphere of family and state obligation—the idea of Abraham as a model of faith *by virtue of* his willingness to sacrifice Isaac is simply incomprehensible. Indeed, there is a long Jewish tradition of reading Abraham as having failed God's test, rather than passed it in an exemplary way. At the same time, if there is something specifically Jewish *as opposed to* Christian about Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham, it is his insistence that

Abraham had faith, and had faith for this life. In fact, if his faith had been only for a life to come, he certainly would have more readily discarded everything in order to rush out of a world in which he did not belong.... But Abraham had faith specifically for this life—faith that he would grow old in this country, be honored

among the people, blessed by posterity, and unforgettable in Isaac, the most precious thing in his life....⁴⁹

So while it may not be only in the end, with an allusion to the Gospel, that Kierkegaard 'reinscribes the secret of Abraham within a space that seems, in its literality at least, to be evangelical,'⁵⁰ it is nonetheless at that point that Kierkegaard opens the door to an area of Christian thought that he has perhaps not adequately addressed, that of eternal reward.

Kierkegaard makes continual reference to the fact that eternal happiness is at stake in being and becoming a Christian, yet it is arguably not finally because he is concerned with that eternal happiness as such, but rather because the reference to eternal happiness serves to clarify the all-consuming existential stakes of something like Christianity. One might similarly explain the reference to 'eternal homes' in the parable just cited (Luke 16:9), where Jesus positions the recommended shrewd stewardship as training for a time when the listeners can have 'true riches' placed at their disposal (Luke 16:11). Yet one of the distinctive traits of Derrida's practice of reading is never to allow a metaphor to slip by as "just a metaphor," and so, following up on Kierkegaard's reference, Derrida turns to a consideration of the Gospel of Matthew, in particular the Sermon on the Mount, which he finds to be saturated with similar language of debt and payment. This is not, however, an ordinary economy, but a hyperbolic economy that 'integrates absolute loss'; for instance, turning the other cheek

interrupts the parity and symmetry, for instead of paying back the slap on the cheek (right cheek for left cheek, eye for eye), one is to offer the other cheek. It is a matter of suspending the strict economy of exchange, of payback, of giving and giving back, of the 'one lent for every one borrowed,' of that hateful form of

circulation that involves reprisal, vengeance, returning blow for blow, settling scores.⁵¹

Thus, in the terms of the Gospel narrative, one must ‘distinguish between two types of salary: one of retribution, equal exchange, within a circular economy; the other of absolute surplus value, heterogeneous to outlay or investment’⁵²—the distinctiveness of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is grounded in the displacement of the first economy by the promise of the second.

This distinction between the two economies is constantly menaced by the temptation idolatrously to envision God as a real Father really watching over us and ‘capable, more than any satellite orbiting in space, of seeing into the most secret of the most interior places.’⁵³ Such a move renders this other economy ‘the same one in simulacrum, an economy that is ambiguous enough to seem to integrate noneconomy’⁵⁴—a little too calculating, a little too certain of the balance on the heavenly ledger sheets. Yet this very critique of Christianity is only possible from within the perspective of Christianity—it represents a heretical or hyperbolic form of Christianity, perhaps a certain repetition of Christianity within Christianity, an introduction of Christianity into Christendom, or else perhaps also an act of ‘proposing a nondogmatic doublet of dogma, a philosophical and metaphysical doublet, in any case a thinking that ‘repeats’ the possibility of religion without religion.’⁵⁵ In this latter camp, Derrida places several thinkers: Levinas, Marion, Patočka, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger—and now, it would appear, even Nietzsche.

For Derrida, Nietzsche’s critique is leveled not just at the cruelty at the root of the bad conscience, but also ‘at economy, speculation, and commercial trafficking (buying and selling) in the institution of morality and justice.’⁵⁶ Nietzsche seeks to cheapen the moral conscience by

identifying it with the realm of calculation and debt, but in doing so he capitalizes upon and ultimately reinscribes the claim of morality to be above the realm of calculation—even his horror at the sacrifice of Christ ‘out of love for his debtor’ is grounded in the fact that it effectively increases humanity’s debt load and intensifies the cruelty of guilt rather than providing a definitive short-circuit of the economy of debt and credit. He recognizes that pushing the concepts of guilt and duty ‘back into the *bad* conscience’ through detaching them from the realm of economy and placing them in the (higher) realm of morality represents an attempt to bring the economy ‘to a halt’:

the *aim* now is to preclude pessimistically, once and for all, the prospect of a final discharge; the *aim* now is to make the glance recoil disconsolately from an iron impossibility; the *aim* now is to turn back the concepts ‘guilt’ and ‘duty’—back against whom? There can be no doubt: against the ‘debtor’ first of all... Finally, however, they are turned back against the ‘creditor,’ too.⁵⁷

This creditor can be conceived in several ways: as the human race’s ‘primal ancestor who is from now on burdened with a curse,’ as the natural world thought as a realm of demonic activity, as ‘existence in general, which is now considered *worthless as such*.’⁵⁸

So far, all of these steps involve targets that fundamentally cannot fight back—a long-dead ancestor, the natural world as indifferent to human desires, or the abstraction of pure being. Yet there is one more step to take, back to God himself, who can be conceived as a person, as a responsible party, as someone who can *do something*. What God in fact does in the face of the suspension of the hope for repayment is strikingly similar to what human beings did when ‘suddenly all their instincts were disvalued and “suspended”’⁵⁹—he turns on himself:

suddenly we stand before the paradoxical and horrifying expedient that afforded temporary relief for tormented humanity, that stroke of genius on the part of *Christianity* [*Geniestreich des Christentums*]: God himself sacrificing himself for the guilt of mankind [*Gott selbst sich für die Schuld des Menschen opfernd*], God himself making payment to himself [*Gott selbst sich an sich selbst bezahlt machend*], God as the only being who can redeem man from what has become unredeemable for man himself—the creditor [*Gläubiger*] sacrificing himself for his debtor, out of *love* (can one credit that? [*sollte man's glauben?*]), out of love for his debtor!—⁶⁰

The sheer piling on of reflexive pronouns, beyond the capacity of the English language to convey intelligibly, serves to emphasize Nietzsche's conviction that, in terms of his argument, God in Christ becomes 'fully human.' And just as the invention of human reflexivity continued the cruelty of the wild by other more dangerous means, so also God's reflexive sacrifice provides even more fine-tuned means of self-flagellation:

that will to self-tormenting, that repressed cruelty of the animal-man made inward and scared back into himself, the creature imprisoned in the 'state' so as to be tamed, who invented bad conscience in order to hurt himself after the *more natural* vent for this desire to hurt had been blocked—this man of the bad conscience has seized upon the presupposition of religion so as to drive his self-torture to its most gruesome pitch of severity and rigor. Guilt before *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him.⁶¹

The supposed discharge of all debts will have been a consolidation loan, putting humanity at the mercy of one creditor.

V.

For Nietzsche, the preachers of morality are the preachers of death, those who look forward to death—yet one could see them as just the opposite, as the deniers of death, those for whom death will open onto an even better version of this world (better, notably, in that the adherents of this teaching will hold all the power). They anthropomorphize God as an existing entity who, in Derrida's words, 'would be endowed with attributes such as paternity and the power to penetrate secrets, to see the invisible, to see in me better than I, to be more powerful and more intimate with me than myself.'⁶² Here Derrida repeats Nietzsche's move of positioning God as the outer limit of reflectivity: 'God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior'⁶³—that is, I am the Father who sees in secret. What is more, the Father who sees in secret is me: 'God is in me, he is the absolute "me" or "self," he is that structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard's sense, subjectivity.'⁶⁴

One rightly asks whether such a concept of God as another name of the subject is adequate. In the example of Abraham, one would read this definition of God as entailing that Abraham was hiding from himself the reason he was offering up Isaac—whether through willful 'forgetting' or through something akin to the psychoanalytic concept of 'repression' to which the Nietzschean 'forgetting' looks forward. Is this really what is going on, or really what Derrida thinks is going on, with Abraham? If for Derrida, subjectivity is the structure of invisible interiority, it is also founded in death as 'that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place.... It is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility.'⁶⁵ This death is impossible to give, except insofar as one 'give[s] it to oneself by taking it upon oneself.'⁶⁶

But surely the experience of death is not one fact [*donnée*] among others. It is the one experience that is, one might say, ‘structurally’ unknown, the most secret of secrets—ungiveable, unrepresentable as a given fact.⁶⁷ It is precisely this ungivability that allows death to function as the constitutive exception founding the ‘possibility of *giving-taking* [*donner-prendre*]:

Death would be the name of that which suspends every experience of *giving-taking*. This does not exclude the possibility, on the contrary, that it would be only because of it, and in its name, that *giving* and *taking* are possible.⁶⁸

One could first of all read this as saying that the inevitability of death, of *my* death, founds the possibility of something like an economic realm, in which humans give and take, perhaps in a manner governed by law and the state or perhaps in a more anarchic fashion in which the strongest prevails. One could supplement such a picture by claiming that death as the irreducible brute fact of human finitude founds the possibility, to return to the gambling metaphor, of something like *dealing* and *taking in*, in the sense of duping, which the French *prendre* shares with the English *take*. Just as in Nietzsche’s *Glaube* and *Schuld*, both ‘levels’ are expressed in the same words—and so of course are not ‘levels’ at all, the second representing only a space of secrecy provisionally opened up within the first. But the condition of possibility of this space of secrecy is the secret of secrets, the one secret for which I *can never be* and yet *can only be* the Father who sees in secret: the secret of the experience of my death.

Although my death will be experienced by others, it will not be experienced as *their own* death; the only person who can experience it is precisely I who am dead and therefore cannot experience it. God, as the Father who sees in secret, names the constitutive impossibility of the subject: my ownmost potentiality of being is precisely that which I can never experience as my own. The Father who sees in secret, then, could perhaps be read as a critique or expansion of

Levinas's 'idea of the infinite in me': more an idea of the incommensurable in me, the unaccountable in me, that which it is impossible definitively to assign to the column of either credit or debit, *Glaube* or *Schuld*—the condition of impossibility of the economic realm.

Derrida will return to all this in a variety of texts. For now, however, he ends, as he (implicitly) begins: with Nietzsche. In discussing Nietzsche's above-quoted rhetorical question ('Who could credit that?'), Derrida highlights the unthought in Nietzsche's *Genealogy*:

As often, the call of the question, and the claim that resonates in it, carries farther than the response. The question, the claim, and the call must indeed have begun, since the eve of their awakening, by being accredited to the other: by being believed. Nietzsche must indeed believe he knows what believing means, unless he intends merely to lead one to believe that he does.⁶⁹

Said differently: with regard to the subject of believing, perhaps Nietzsche is bluffing.

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Donner la mort,' originally published in Jean-Michel Rabaté and Michael Wetzell, eds., *L'Éthique du don : Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don* (Paris: Transition, 1992) and translated by David Wills as *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). This essay was republished, with slight additions, in the book *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), along with a supplementary essay entitled 'La littérature au secret : Une filiation impossible'; citations of the French text refer to this edition.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "'Guilt," "Bad Conscience," and the Like,' second essay of *Genealogy of Morals*, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1992).

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

⁴ Jan Patočka, 'Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?' in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. James Dodd, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1996).

⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pg. 494; §2.

⁶ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 5.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 7-8 (*//* Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 23). Translation modified.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 19, 38.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pg. 513; §12.

¹² Ibid., pg. 494; §1.

¹³ Ibid., pg. 506; §8.

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 531; §24.

¹⁵ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 21.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 5-6 (*//* Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 20-21). Translation modified.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pg. 521; §16.

¹⁸ Patočka, 'Technological Civilization,' pg. 107; qtd. in Derrida, *op. cit.*, pg. 52. I have both quoted from the more recent English translation (as opposed to the translation in *The Gift of Death*, which was necessarily at a second remove from the original Czech) and omitted Derrida's editorial comments, which point backward toward the discussion of Heidegger, whereas I will argue the text of the quotation itself points forward to the discussion of Kierkegaard.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 6.

²⁰ Ibid., pg. 29.

²¹ Ibid., pg. 28.

²² Ibid., pg. 64.

²³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pg. 36.

²⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Déclousion : Déconstruction du christianisme, I* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), pg. 218. My translation.

²⁵ Cf. John D. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pg. 197.

²⁶ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 57.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 58.

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 59 (*// Donner la mort*, 86); translation modified.

²⁹ Even the idea that this is some kind of ‘test’ is stated by the narrator in Genesis and not by God himself as a character in that narrative.

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 24.

³¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pg. 118.

³² Ibid., pp. 9-49.

³³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 104-105.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 102.

³⁵ Ibid., 124.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pg. 38.

³⁷ Ibid., pg. 41.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 230.

³⁹ Ibid., pg. 217.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pg. 245.

⁴¹ It is in this sense, then, that one may object to the translation of the title ‘Donner la mort’ as *The Gift of Death*, because such a title inevitably calls to mind the sacrifice of Christ as the singular ‘gift of death.’

⁴² Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 10.

⁴³ Ibid., pg. 42.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pg. 521; §16.

⁴⁵ Solitaire is of course a very boring game, usually conceived as a way to pass the time in the absence of the other. Beyond that, there are the many office workers who have ‘stolen time’ from their employers by playing Windows solitaire, which allows them to appear to be hard at work on the computer. And as anyone can attest who has tried to play solitaire while other people are around, solitaire can quickly become a social, all-too-social game—hence the frequently heard declaration, ‘It’s called solitaire for a reason.’ Solitaire then becomes a way of enacting neglect by another or of asserting one’s own private space in spite of the other—so that one might say that whenever I play cards, the other is party to it.

⁴⁶ This aspect of card games is brought into sharp focus during the process of teaching someone a new game. When it is sometimes suggested that an open-card hand be played for instructional purposes, it quickly becomes apparent that what it is to play the game is something entirely other than simply making prudent calculations about what cards to play where—in fact, the student often loses patience and declares that she will figure it out as she goes.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pg. 513; §12.

⁴⁸ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 58.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pg. 20.

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 80-81.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 102.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pg. 105.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. 108.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 109.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 49.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 113.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, pg. 527; §21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 528; §21.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 520; §16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 528; §21. Translation altered—although one always hesitates to go against Kaufmann's translation, here it seemed necessary to translate the gerunds in this paragraph as gerunds rather than as present tense indicative verbs, both to match the translation Derrida gives in *Donner la mort* and to emphasize that Nietzsche is here discussing the idea of such a thing happening, rather than pointing to a specific time when it is supposed to have actually happened.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 528; §22.

⁶² Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 108.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 109.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 45.

⁶⁷ Cf. Derrida's analysis in *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

⁶⁸ Derrida, *Gift of Death*, pg. 44 (*// Donner la mort*, 68). Translation modified.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 115 (*// Donner la mort*, 157). Translation modified. The published translation renders the final clause as 'unless he means it is all make-believe [*à moins qu'il n'entende le faire accroire*].' Although I have at times modified the published translation in minor ways, such a significant change—particularly a change that coheres almost *too* well with my argument in this essay—perhaps warrants some explanation. The verb *accroire* is rare in French, appearing only in the infinitive in idioms with *faire* or *laisser*, where it has the meaning of 'causing (someone) to believe (something)' in the sense of deluding or tricking them. Thus one would use such a construction in the same context in which in English one would ask incredulously, 'Would you have me believe....?' My translation is not entirely literal—in addition to including the word 'merely' to capture the connotations of delusion, I have supplied the pronoun 'one' where in the original French construction there is simply nothing there filling the spot for 'someone' in 'causing (someone) to believe (something).'