

# AFTER THE WORLD'S END, BEFORE THE RESURRECTION: THINKING MOURNING AND CHRISTIAN HOPE AFTER JACQUES DERRIDA

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SARAH HORTON 

## *Abstract*

In light of Jacques Derrida's writings on death and mourning, it may seem that the Christian teaching that the dead will be raised is a betrayal of others, a failure to take up one's responsibility to testify to those who have died. In conversation with Emmanuel Falque's work on finitude, Martin Heidegger's reading of 1 Thessalonians, and Søren Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham, I respond in two movements to this objection to faith that God will raise the dead. First, I propose that even for the Christian, the death of the other remains a loss, since the Christian must surrender the other to God. It is, however, this very surrender of the other to God that seems to be an abdication of responsibility. Second, therefore, I argue that faith in the resurrection decenters the self and challenges our understanding of responsibility even more than does Derrida's own analysis. Faith, I conclude, means giving up the desire to cling to one's own responsibility.

## *Introduction*

It may seem reasonable to charge Christianity with evading the reality of death by teaching that the dead are raised.<sup>1</sup> Here, in light of Jacques Derrida's work on mourning, I take up one specific aspect of that charge: is faith that others will be resurrected a betrayal, a failure to reckon with the mortality of others and with one's own responsibility to testify to and remember them? To this question, I offer a twofold reply. First, in light of the notion of finitude, I argue that death, for the Christian, remains a

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Sarah Horton  
Institut Catholique de Paris, 21 rue d'Assas 75270 Paris cedex 06, FRANCE  
Email: [sehorton42@gmail.com](mailto:sehorton42@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Françoise Dastur writes that because Christianity teaches that the dead will be raised, "one has to look elsewhere for an illustration of a real assumption of mortality" (*La Mort: Essai sur la finitude*, revised edition [Paris: PUF, 2007], 42; *Death: An Essay on Finitude*, trans. John Llewelyn [London: Athlone, 1996], 14). While the question of one's own death and resurrection is beyond the scope of this essay, the themes of self-surrender and of the decentering of the self, which I develop here with regard to the other's resurrection, may provide a way to address Dastur's challenge as well. Seen in light of the arguments I develop over the course of this essay, the desire to fully assume mortality, understood as an absolute end to one's life, may represent an egoistic drive to maintain control of one's identity—but I make this suggestion as a sort of promissory note, and further work on the point would be worthwhile.

loss that calls the survivor to a mourning that cannot be evaded. Second, however, I argue that this first reply is insufficient: the teaching that the dead are raised stands as an offense that challenges the self and calls into question our understanding of responsibility—even more radically than does Derrida's own analysis. Indeed, Christian mourning is not the same as secular mourning, since for the Christian, the other's death is not only the end of the world (following Derrida's description) but is also before the resurrection and the renewal of the world. The Christian faces the impossible task of testifying to the other—but, crucially, the Christian also absolutely surrenders both self and other to God, having faith that God will fulfill the impossible task. Although this faith might seem selfish and self-preserving, I draw on Søren Kierkegaard's (pseudonymously written) *Fear and Trembling* to argue that the Derridean rejection of faith in the resurrection actually fails to decenter the self as radically as does Christian faith, precisely because Derrida does not recognize the profound humility of the one who accepts that salvation and resurrection come from God alone. Examining Christian mourning in conversation with Derrida reveals that, contrary to aspects of Derrida's account, faith in the resurrection is a matter not of self-preservation but of so absolute a surrender that one does not even attempt to prove that one has surrendered or that one does have faith.

### *The Other's Death as the End of the World*

It is because Derrida portrays mourning as incompatible with faith in the resurrection that we must reckon with him here: to see why faith in the resurrection of the dead does not betray the other, it is necessary to respond to this account of mourning and testimony that so deeply resists such faith. That many Christians throughout history have both mourned and affirmed the resurrection is indisputable; whether that affirmation is truly compatible with facing the loss of the other, insofar as one can ever do so, is another question entirely. Derrida's writings force us to ask how it could be possible both to affirm the resurrection and to grapple with loss. For Derrida writes of an impossible mourning: each and every death is the end of the world and thus leaves me alone, after the world, without the other and yet also without any world or any signpost in relation to which I could think myself. Thus he states that

the death of the other, especially but not only if one loves him or her, does not herald an absence, a disappearance, the end of *this or that life*, that is, the possibility of a world (always unique) appearing to *this* living one. Death proclaims each time *the end of the world in totality*, the end of every possible world, and *each time the end of the world as a unique totality, therefore irreplaceable, and therefore infinite*.<sup>2</sup>

The other's death is that of which it is not possible to give an account because it destroys every possible point of orientation. The dead one has not simply departed the world; the world itself is gone. Heidegger emphasizes that Dasein cannot experience its

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 9, emphasis in original, my translation. (These lines are from the preface, which was written after the publication of the English translation that appeared in 2001 under the title *The Work of Mourning* and is therefore not included in it.)

own death;<sup>3</sup> neither, Derrida reminds us, can the self experience the other's death. It is not simply that I cannot take the other's place in death, a point on which Heidegger certainly also insisted; more profoundly, the other's death is also the horizon of my existence. The other shapes the world so fundamentally that the loss of the other amounts to the loss of the world.

In friendship with another, Derrida emphasizes, one is bound in advance to the impossible mourning that follows the loss of the world. Of course, one cannot know who will be the first to die—but one does know, right from the start, that it might be the other who dies first and that one's own death is not the only horizon of the world. From the outset, therefore, friendship is structured by the future mourning: as Derrida puts it in "Rams," written to commemorate his friend Hans-Georg Gadamer after Gadamer's death, "One of the two *will have* been vowed, from the beginning, to carry by himself alone, in himself, both the dialogue, which he must pursue beyond the interruption, and the memory of the first interruption. And—I will say this without the facility of a hyperbole—the world of the other. The world after the end of the world."<sup>4</sup> The present is already defined by the time of a possible future survival: friendship, whatever else it may mean, and insofar as one might dare to speak of it, means being promised from the beginning to a love that lasts beyond death, that testifies to the other forever. This testimony whose possibility structures friendship is both necessary and impossible: necessary because one is promised to it, and impossible because one can never adequately testify to the other even in life, let alone after the other's death has taken the world.

Crucially, in the complex interplay of possibility and impossibility in this bearing of "the world after the end of the world," which Derrida also describes as a translation of "the untranslatable,"<sup>5</sup> one who survives a friend is promised to take up this task of translation, and one cannot seek to evade the promise by protesting that it is impossible to fulfill. And this loss of the friend and this impossibility of fulfilling the promise, for Derrida, cannot be repaired or answered by any resurrection: he writes in the preface to *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* [Each time unique, the end of the world] that "this book is a book of *adieu*. [...] But it is the *adieu* of a salutation [*salut*] that resigns itself to saluting [*saluer*], as I believe any salutation worthy of the name is obliged to do, the always-open possibility, even the necessity of the possible non-return, of the end of the world as the end of every resurrection."<sup>6</sup> The French *salut* may mean *hello* or *goodbye*, and it is also the word for *salvation*—but this *salut* that bids goodbye also greets the possibility that there is no ultimate *salut* in the sense of

<sup>3</sup> "When Dasein reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its 'there'. By its transition to no-longer-Dasein [*Nichtmehrdasein*], it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and understanding it as something experienced. Surely this sort of thing is denied to any particular Dasein in relation to itself" (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, GA 2 [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977], 237; *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [New York: Harper and Row, 1962], 281, translation modified.)

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Béliers: Le dialogue ininterrompu: entre deux infinis, le poème* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 22-23; "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem," in *Sovereignities in Question*, edited by Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 140, emphasis in original, translation modified. See also Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 31; *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 2005), 14: "Hence surviving is at once the essence, the origin, and the possibility, the condition of possibility of friendship; it is the grieved act of loving. This time of survival thus gives the time of friendship."

<sup>5</sup> As he puts it, "I must translate, transfer, transport (*übertragen*) the untranslatable in another turn even where, translated, it remains untranslatable" (Derrida, *Béliers*, 77; "Rams," 162, emphasis in original).

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, 11, my translation.

salvation. This *adieu* (farewell) does not hope for any *à Dieu* (to God; *adieu* comes from the phrase “I commend you to God”). In contrast to the Nietzschean affirmation of life that embraces the possibility of the eternal return of the same,<sup>7</sup> testifying to the other requires recognizing the possibility that the world has ended forever, that there will be no resurrection—this Derrida maintains. The notion of resurrection amounts, so it may seem, to an evasion of the finality of the other’s death and of the promise to testify that conditions my impossible yet inescapable survival. Thus Derrida goes on to state that “‘God’ means: death can put an end to a world; it cannot signify the end of *the* world. One world can always survive another one. There is more than one world. More than one possible world.”<sup>8</sup> To put it another way, “God” means that the other’s death does not leave me alone to bear “the world after the end of the world,” that what is impossible for me is accomplished without me—which suggests that the promise to remember and to testify to the other is taken up by God. The notion of resurrection elevates the *salut* of salvation over the *salut* that greets the end of the world by testifying to the world that is gone.<sup>9</sup>

It bears noting that Derrida does not state definitively that there is no resurrection. He writes, rather, that “death, death itself, if death there be [*s’il y en a*], leaves no place, not the least chance, either to the replacement or to the survival of the one and only world, of the ‘one and only’ that makes each living thing [*vivant*] (animal, human, or divine) a living thing that is one and only.”<sup>10</sup> “Death itself, if death there be”: when the world is gone, who can say if it is gone forever? It remains that the task of testifying to the other seems to exclude the faith that positively affirms the resurrection of the dead. Although Christians often believe that they can both mourn and maintain faith in the resurrection, Derrida’s work suggests that they cannot. What, then, is the Christian’s relation to the promise of mourning and testimony with which Derrida so compellingly wrestles? Ultimately, investigating this question will show that Derrida’s accounts of mourning misunderstand faith by not recognizing that faith requires the surrender even of one’s responsibility. Perhaps surprisingly, responding to Derrida thus helps us explore what it means to have faith. The Christian who has faith in the resurrection does mourn, I will argue, and faces the task of testifying to the other while also believing in faith that God alone fulfills that task—and this faith is not a betrayal of the other but is a still more radical decentering of the self than Derrida proposes.

### *Finitude and the Loss of the Other*

By way of my first reply to the question of the Christian’s relation to mourning, I argue that the other’s death is the end of the world, even if there is resurrection and even if one wholly affirms, by faith, that the dead are indeed raised. For it remains true, for the Christian as for the nonbeliever, that one does not choose to exist within finitude and that in this world the deaths of oneself and of the other stand as

<sup>7</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe Band 3*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), §341, 570; *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §341, 194-95.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, 11, my translation.

<sup>9</sup> Kas Saghafi, in *The World after the End of the World: A Spectro-Poetics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020), meditates at length on these multiple *saluts* as they appear throughout Derrida’s work. He, like Derrida, resists the possibility of resurrection, associating the *salut* of salvation with economy (see, for instance, *ibid.*, xxviii). I will directly address this question of economy in the final section of this article.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, my translation.

horizons of one's finitude. As Emmanuel Falque observes in *The Guide to Gethsemane*, "anxiety over finitude points simply to anxiety about being mortal, independently of my value judgment as to the good—or evil—basis of such mortality."<sup>11</sup> The Christian is not exempt from anxiety over death—which is not to be confused with the fear of death or of dying—because she exists within finitude just as much as does the non-believer. Faith in the resurrection, whether of oneself or of the other, does not annul the primordial confrontation with death as the horizon of existence. I am thrown into existence, toward death—and not only toward my death, as Heidegger would have it, but, as Derrida reminds us, toward the other's death also. The other's death remains, therefore, a shattering of what might have seemed to be "my" horizon, and so I am left to mourn after the end of the world. Paul Ricœur suggests in *Living Up to Death* that "death is truly the end of life in the time common to me while alive and to those who will survive me. Survival is the others."<sup>12</sup> Indeed. Applying the point to the other's death, we may also say that "death is really the end of life in the time that is common to the living other and to me who will survive her." Certainly, the hope of resurrection is the hope of a new time that will also be common to us—yet the other's death is still the end of this world, the end of this time. I am left to bear this time after the end of time, and I myself cannot guarantee any resurrection, for the time of the resurrection that is to come—actually, historically, to come, and therefore not always future—will come from wholly outside myself. Precisely because I cannot guarantee the resurrection of the dead, the other's death is always a surrender of the other; indeed, for the Christian it is a sign of the absolute renunciation of the other to God that is demanded of us. The Christian must, therefore, assume the other's death as the sign of a radical separation even as she hopes in faith for the other's resurrection.<sup>13</sup> With the *à-Dieu* by which one bids farewell to the other who has died, one accepts that one is oneself powerless to restore the world, that the matter must be left to the hands of God. Here and now, in this time after the end of time, one is left to testify to the other whose death is the end of the world.

Indeed, Christ's tears at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:33-38) suggest that death is a loss that resurrection neither simply cancels nor even sublates in a Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Falque has drawn on the anguish of Jesus in Gethsemane to argue that anxiety over death belongs to the experience of all people, Christians as well as nonbelievers; likewise, that Jesus himself mourns the death of his friend teaches us that mourning is common to all who live within finitude. Jesus knows that he will resurrect Lazarus, and yet he shares, in his incarnation, in this experience of mourning that cannot be

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Falque, *Le Passeur de Gethsémani: Essai philosophique sur l'angoisse, la souffrance et la mort*, in *Triduum philosophique* (Paris: Cerf, 2015), 43; *The Guide to Gethsemane: Anguish, Suffering, Death*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 17, emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort: Suivi de Fragments* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 76; *Living Up to Death*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 41. Christina Gschwandtner, commenting on *Living Up to Death*, suggests that "Ricœur seems to have relinquished any hope of personal resurrection in his final reflections" (*Reading Religious Ritual with Ricœur* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2021], 58); whether this is so has, however, no bearing on the validity of the specific point that I am making here in citing Ricœur. Even if there is a resurrection, death does end "the time common to" the one who is now dead and to those who yet survive, precisely because the time of resurrection is not the time of this world.

<sup>13</sup> The questions of universalism, of who will or will not be saved, and of what it might mean for the believer to mourn those who may not be saved are beyond the scope of my argument here. Here I will confine myself to the observation that the death of another person always means, for the believer, surrendering that person to God and admitting one's own inability to save him or her (as I will go on to argue in this article), and although here I will discuss this point only in terms of salvation, it holds true whether or not salvation is universal.

separated from the experience of finitude. Writing of Christ's own death, Falque writes that "only the Son knows what it is to bear unto the end the 'weight of finitude' shared by every human and described at the height of contemporary philosophy [...]. Trinitarianly suffering the passion [*pâtissant*] of this weight of death, he makes it *pass over* [*passer*] to the Father who determines its metamorphosis, transformation, or raising up."<sup>14</sup> Here, similarly, faced with his friend's death, Jesus the God-Man acts by the power of the Father to resurrect Lazarus, abandoning neither his full divinity nor his full humanity, by virtue of which latter he confronts the end of the world in the death of the other.<sup>15</sup>

It is, however, precisely the surrender of the other to God that Derrida's analysis calls into question, and so there is something unsatisfactory about this first reply to Derrida. What, after all, of the transformation—or metamorphosis, to borrow Falque's word—that the resurrection brings about? Moreover, to speak of mourning as an experience that is common to all humans does not adequately wrestle with the apparent solitude of the one who mourns the end of the world—and it is this solitude that the resurrection calls into question, since if the dead are not lost forever, then the mourner is not irrevocably alone. Here it is worth clarifying that the empirical question of how any particular person or group of people react to death is not what is interesting here; there are a wide range of possible reactions to death, and how particular individuals react depends not only on their beliefs but also on their overall temperament. At stake, rather, is the question of time and the sense of mourning: what, exactly, does it mean to mourn the other's death if all time does not end with death, if there will be a new time of resurrection? What does it mean to bear the other's world after the end of the world and before the resurrection of the world?

### *Mourning Before Resurrection*

Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 confirm that faith in the resurrection must in some way transform mourning: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (ESV). Martin Heidegger, commenting on these verses in his 1920-1921 course on the phenomenology of religion, rightly highlights their eschatological context while making clear that Christian eschatology cannot be dissociated from the present time. Thus he notes that "a certain grief is to be resisted"<sup>16</sup> and emphasizes that the Thessalonians are called by

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<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Falque, *Parcours d'embûches: S'expliquer* (Paris: Éditions franciscaines, 2016), 89; *By Way of Obstacles: A Pathway through a Work*, trans. Sarah Horton (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022), 37, emphasis in original.

<sup>15</sup> John Caputo reads the story of Lazarus not as a story of bodily resurrection but as a story about "the courage [Jesus] gave [Mary and Martha] to go on, the joy he taught them to take in a brother well-loved, now lost, but always loved" (*The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006], 258). A longer response to Caputo's reading of the Lazarus story is beyond the scope of this article; suffice it to note that the remaining sections of this essay will argue that faith in the resurrection is a more profound humility, a greater self-surrender, and a fuller renunciation of control than the resistance to resurrection of which Caputo's text provides an example. Caputo, like Derrida, does not recognize that faith in the resurrection is a radical decentering of the self. A detailed engagement with weak theology and the full range of Caputo's arguments for it remains a task for another time.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des Religiösen Lebens*, GA 60 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995), 150; *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 106.

Christ here and now in the present: the Christian relation to the Parousia, the future coming of Christ, has nothing to do with “the broodings of hopeful, falling [*abfallenden*] speculation.”<sup>17</sup> Rather, as Heidegger puts it, “because you *are* called, the foundational sense [*Grundsinn*] of your *Being is*,”<sup>18</sup> and “the *hope* that the Christians have is not simply faith in immortality, but a faithful *perseverance* grounded in Christian factual life.”<sup>19</sup> The resurrection of the dead and the restoration of all things through the Second Coming of Christ are not simply future phenomena but are profoundly related to the past and present life of the Christian: hence the Christian does “not grieve as others do who have no hope” because he or she is already called by Christ, is already grounded in that call, and is therefore already prepared for Christ’s return, even as he or she must actively wait for it. Moreover, Heidegger explains, Paul does not need to tell the Thessalonians when the Parousia will occur, nor indeed does he need to know this himself, since “that is the decisive ‘When,’ that he is prepared for it.”<sup>20</sup> The Parousia will occur within the future of historical time—and, crucially, believers are prepared for its occurrence here and now in the present. Thus past, present, and future are inextricably bound together in Christian hope. To put the point more strongly, the time in which Christians live at present is primordially related to the time that will be inaugurated by the Second Coming. The dead, therefore, are *already* not lost. Heidegger raises in passing the question of what happens immediately after death,<sup>21</sup> but that point is not essential here. What is key is that the future resurrection has already worked backwards in time: although the full glory of the future resurrection is not yet, it already grounds the Christian’s present being-in-the-world. The Christian awaits the new time of resurrection even as that new time serves as the foundation of his or her existence within this time of death and mourning, this time after the end of time.

Thus the Christian finds, through the transformation brought about by Christ’s resurrection, that he or she is always already primordially related to eternity. Falque, in *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, writes that “past and future, memory and anticipation are all radically changed,” while he also maintains that “it is not then *another time* that the metamorphosis produces [...]. It opens up on the contrary to *eternity*—that is to say, onto *another way to live the same time*, just as the communion of saints is another way to live the same world.”<sup>22</sup> The Christian remains primordially within finitude; indeed, the Christian is related to Christ’s resurrection and to the Second Coming precisely as a being who will die and who will suffer the loss of others in death. My argument thus far indeed confirms that the metamorphosis does not simply remove the Christian from the time of mourning, the time after the end of time. But for the Christian, the time of mourning is not only *after* but also *before*: it is a time between times, a time after the end of time and before the full glory of the resurrection, when, so we are told in Revelation 21:4, “[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more,

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des Religiösen Lebens*, 150; *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 106.

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des Religiösen Lebens*, 150; *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 107, emphasis in original, translation modified.

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des Religiösen Lebens*, 151; *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 107, emphasis in original, translation modified.

<sup>20</sup> Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des Religiösen Lebens*, 153; *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des Religiösen Lebens*, 150; *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Emmanuel Falque, *Métamorphose de la finitude: Essai philosophique sur la naissance et la résurrection*, in *Triduum philosophique* (Paris: Cerf, 2015), 320; *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 115, emphasis in original.

neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (ESV). For the Christian, then, the time of mourning opens onto a new time in which we will not be removed from finitude but will be released from mourning.

Neither surrendering the other to God nor having faith in a future release from mourning can absolve the survivor of the promise to remember and to testify to the other here and now. A future without mourning or pain does not annul my present ethical responsibilities; that the other is safe in the hands of God cannot, therefore, mean that I am any less promised to testify to him or her in this time after the end of time, even though it is also before the time of the final resurrection. In this sense, the future resurrection does not diminish my responsibility toward the other. And yet the transformation of time brought about by Christ's resurrection does also limit my responsibility by assuring me that I will one day be released from the task of mourning and that God is with me as I testify to the other now. In the final resurrection, the promise that I cannot fulfill will be fulfilled by God: once the world is restored, I will no longer have to bear it after its end. For the Christian, therefore, the promise of mourning comes with a time limit: I am promised to bear the other's world until such time as Christ returns, within history, to fully inaugurate the time of resurrection, the time of the new heaven and the new earth promised in the book of Revelation.

### *Faith's Irresponsibility*

To be sure, the notion of the self's responsibility is not one that can be taken for granted, as if its meaning could be straightforwardly assumed, especially when one engages with Derrida's thought. It is necessary, therefore, to consider responsibility in more detail in order to address—to responsibly address, one might almost dare to say—this question of the time or times of the promise and its fulfillment. Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death* that

if the concept of responsibility has, in the surest continuity of its history, always implied commitment in acting, doing, a *praxis*, a *decision* that exceeds simple conscience or simple theoretical understanding, the same concept also requires a decision or responsible action to answer for itself *consciously*, that is, with knowledge of a thematics of what is done, of what the action signifies, its causes, ends, etc.<sup>23</sup>

This unity between praxis and theory that is necessary for responsibility to be truly responsible is, however, impossible, since every decision precedes knowledge of what it signifies. One always acts without truly knowing what will come of one's action—without, that is, knowing for what one is responsible, and therefore without knowing what it might mean to be responsible for it. Thus, as Derrida emphasizes, "some part of irresponsibility insinuates itself wherever one demands responsibility without having sufficiently conceptualized and thematically thought what 'responsibility' means; *that is to say everywhere*."<sup>24</sup> Because it is impossible to know in advance what it means to be

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), 45; *The Gift of Death*, in *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills, second edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 25, emphasis in original, translation modified.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 45; *The Gift of Death*, 25-26, emphasis in original, translation modified.



responsible, it is impossible, also, to be wholly responsible—that is, to wholly avoid irresponsibility. In answering for my actions, I never know exactly what I am answering for; I have therefore acted irresponsibly, and yet there is no way to avoid this irresponsibility.

Derrida's wrestling with the question of responsibility leads him to a reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, in which he observes that "the generality of ethics drives to irresponsibility. It impels speaking, answering, providing accounts, and thus dissolving my singularity in the element of the concept."<sup>25</sup> What, however, is responsibility without answering for or providing an account of what one does? Derrida writes that "Abraham is [...] absolutely irresponsible because he is absolutely responsible, absolutely irresponsible before men and his family, and before the ethical, because he responds absolutely to absolute duty."<sup>26</sup> Let us carefully consider, though, why Abraham is unable to answer for his actions before other people. It cannot be because he intends to sacrifice Isaac, since, as Kierkegaard's Johannes de Silentio reminds us, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter and is entirely comprehensible<sup>27</sup>—indeed, Agamemnon is all too comprehensible, too comprehensible to be responsible. He is fully and obviously capable of answering for his action, simply by appealing to the ethical, and therefore he need not answer for it; the ethical absolves him and answers for him. Neither can the difference between Agamemnon and Abraham be summed up in the observation that the gods gave Agamemnon a reason to kill Iphigenia—namely, that her sacrifice was required for the Greek fleets to set sail for Troy—whereas God gave Abraham no reason to kill Isaac. Abraham could have said, after all, that he feared to disobey God lest God punish him. While this response would not have absolved him from the point of view of the ethical, and his hearers would therefore neither have admired him nor thought him wholly justified, such reasoning would at least have had the dubious merit of being comprehensible. De Silentio does not consider the possibility of an Abraham who reasoned thus, and he dwells on the fact that we would be horrified if a man, upon hearing the story of Abraham, set out to kill his own son,<sup>28</sup> but what truly renders Abraham incomprehensible—not merely horrifying or shocking but incomprehensible—is his faith that Isaac will be restored to him. We can comprehend even the demonic—thus we could even understand, though we would also condemn, if in fact Abraham did not love Isaac at all and really meant to kill him without any faith that he would be raised—but we cannot comprehend Abraham, precisely because he has faith that he will receive his son again. It is because of this faith that Abraham cannot communicate.

The shock of the proposed sacrifice of the son must not keep us from realizing that it is faith itself that defies comprehension: as de Silentio indicates, the knight of faith who looks like an ordinary bourgeois, and who, given this ordinariness, presumably does not set out to kill his son, remains incomprehensible. Thus the knight of faith

drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 88; *The Gift of Death*, 61, translation modified.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 103; *The Gift of Death*, 72, translation modified.

<sup>27</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, in *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, vol. 4 (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 1997), 170; *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 79.

<sup>28</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, 124-25; *Fear and Trembling*, 28-29.

the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher, because his remaining in finitude would have no trace of a timorous, anxious routine, and yet he has this security that makes him delight in it as if finitude were the surest thing of all. And yet, yet the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd.<sup>29</sup>

The knight of faith has surrendered the world and received it again, and so he cannot be understood. To have faith that one will receive again all that one has given up—indeed, to have faith that one has already received again, that the transformation has already happened even though its fullness is not yet visible—is ever and always an offense because it defies comprehension. By mourning while also believing that the time of mourning takes place not only after the end of time but also before the time of the resurrection, the believer offends as surely as does Abraham. Crucially, it is not only from the point of view of the ethical, in Kierkegaard's sense of the term, that this faith is an offense. This faith is, after all, irresponsible, is even the height of irresponsibility. For one who has faith is confident of what will happen, while at the same time he or she does not answer for what will happen or even for the other, precisely because it is God who answers. I have maintained that faith does not absolve the believer from the promise to the other, yet considered in light of the strictest understanding of responsibility, there is something deeply suspect about the confidence that someone else will ultimately take care of things, even when the believer also maintains that he or she is fully responsible for testifying to the other here and now.

We have already seen, however, that there is something deeply suspect about the entire notion of responsibility. Responsibility always goes hand in hand with irresponsibility. Consider, moreover, what it means to be promised to mourning: if the other's death is the horizon of my world, if I am thrown toward the other's death and not only toward my own death, then I already owe the world to the other, before any decision on my part. I find myself promised without knowing what, exactly, I am promised to. My responsibility to and for the other therefore truly arises from the height of irresponsibility: I am promised before I myself can make the promise. I am, in other words, born into the promise. Falque observes that "from the point of view of the 'being who is born' or of the engendered one, birth remains always *obscure*, or unclear. I have no perception of it, nor any memory of it."<sup>30</sup> And, Falque reminds us, the same holds for resurrection: "I experience only the effects of my rebirth, or my resurrection, and never the cause of it, nor the goal."<sup>31</sup> The essential difference between birth and resurrection may seem to be the security offered by resurrection. To be born is a great risk, although and even because it is not a risk that one can oneself choose to undertake. In an apparent contrast, the promise of resurrection is a promise of the *salut* of salvation, which, unlike the *salut* that testifies to the irreparable end of the world, seems to be entirely the opposite of risk: those who are saved are safe. Let us not, however, assume the meaning of salvation and even safety too quickly. Birth teaches a profound humility, since I did not bring myself into existence and thus can never answer for my existence: in other words, my existence is my responsibility, and yet at the same time I cannot be responsible for this existence that I

<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, 135; *Fear and Trembling*, 40-41.

<sup>30</sup> Falque, *Métamorphose de la finitude*, 338; *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 129, emphasis in original.

<sup>31</sup> Falque, *Métamorphose de la finitude*, 338; *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 129-30, translation modified.

received from elsewhere. Resurrection teaches a deeper humility still, since being willing to receive resurrection means accepting, finally, not only that I cannot save myself or anyone else but that I must be saved by another. As Falque writes in *The Loving Struggle*, “in my eyes, there is something that is, paradoxically, *more difficult* than bearing ‘always ... one more responsibility’: namely, handing oneself over to ‘one less responsibility.’”<sup>32</sup> Admitting not only my absolute inability to save myself or the other but also my and the other’s dependence on another for salvation is an absolute renunciation of self and certainly does not save or secure the self’s primacy; quite the contrary. Reflecting on the temptation of the demonic, de Silentio exclaims, “For what love for God it takes to be willing to let oneself be healed when from the very beginning one in all innocence has been botched, from the very beginning has been a damaged example of a human being!”<sup>33</sup> That death belongs to our present existence within finitude, and that finitude cannot be understood in terms of damage, does not alter the basic point. It is hard to accept that I cannot save myself or anyone else; it is no less hard, and may well be harder still, both to accept that I am powerless to save and then also to accept salvation from another.

Indeed, to be offended at resurrection out of a resistance to the notion of salvation amounts to a resistance not only to God but also to the other whom one mourns. One cannot fulfill the promise: one can never testify adequately to the other, can never truly bear the other’s world after the end of the world. Should one therefore resist the fulfillment of the promise? Hardly. To be clear, I am in no way suggesting that all who disbelieve in the resurrection are offended by it; there are certainly many for whom there is, as Falque observes, no “drama of atheist humanism.”<sup>34</sup> I recognize also that I have not demonstrated that the promise is in fact fulfilled. My aim here, however, is not to argue for the resurrection; instead, I am investigating the relation between faith in the resurrection and the task of mourning. The *salut* of salvation requires of me the humility to bid the other *salut* in the sense both of leave-taking and of greeting: *salut*, here, after the world’s end, I testify to you while recognizing that I can never do so adequately, that if you were left to me you would be gone forever, and *salut* again, for you were not left to me but to God, and even now, I greet you in faith. I cannot fulfill the promise, and I refuse to be offended that the promise is fulfilled without my playing or being able to play any role in that fulfillment.

### *Faith and the Risk of Economy*

It is at this moment, of course, that one might accuse the believer of cheating: the possibility of salvation that is taken away with one hand is restored with the other. Derrida states that “if one says that resurrection is the horizon of one’s hope then one knows what one names when one says ‘resurrection’—faith is not pure faith. It is already knowledge.”<sup>35</sup> More bluntly, one might say that the believer claims to risk

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Falque, *Le Combat amoureux: Disputes phénoménologiques et théologiques* (Paris: Hermann, 2014), 134; *The Loving Struggle: Phenomenological and Theological Debates*, trans. Bradley B. Onishi and Lucas McCracken (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), 95, translation modified, emphasis in original.

<sup>33</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, 193; *Fear and Trembling*, 104, translation modified.

<sup>34</sup> See Falque, *Metamorphose de la finitude*, chapter 3, 213–33: “Y a-t-il un drame de l’humanisme athée?”; *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, chapter 3, 30–45, “Is There a Drama of Atheist Humanism?”

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Terror and Religion,” in *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*, edited by Peter Gratton and John Manoussakis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 26.

everything through an absolute surrender of herself, even unto her responsibility for the other's ultimate safety, but there was never any risk: the believer knew all along that she was safe, and the other too! Hence the knight of faith looks like an ordinary bourgeois—in fact, “he looks just like a tax collector!”<sup>36</sup> No one can even tell that he has made the movement of infinite resignation: as de Silentio affirms, “no heavenly gaze or any sign [*Tegn*] of the incommensurable betrays him.”<sup>37</sup> It is fitting indeed that the knight of faith is indistinguishable from a tax collector, considering Derrida's warning that “a sort of secret calculation would continue to wager on the gaze of God who sees the invisible and sees in my heart what I decline to have seen by my fellow humans.”<sup>38</sup> Always there is the danger of resisting salvation by trying to offer my own supposed faith in an economic exchange, calculating how much faith I have and banking on it being sufficient for God to absolve me, as though I could exchange faith for salvation and thereby earn salvation. Here, indeed, is the great risk that the knight of faith runs: he risks seeking a sign by which he may prove, to others or to himself, his love for God and also for the other. He does not, in truth, *know* that he and the other are safe: that is, he does not *see* that they are safe, but rather he has faith, and his faith is not in his faith itself but in God.

Although the knight of faith names resurrection, this naming is not knowledge: it is from God that he has received this name for his hope, which means that he does not “know what he names when he says ‘resurrection.’” Because the name and promise of resurrection is a gift that comes from wholly outside himself, he cannot master it or absorb it into himself as a piece of knowledge. Such is his faith that he is more than content to leave knowledge to God. At the same time, he has the humility to appear indistinguishable from a tax collector, open to the charge of claiming knowledge and refusing risk. To be sure, there is a temptation to grasp desperately at resurrection, seeking knowledge instead of faith in order to reassure oneself by removing every hint of uncertainty—but there is also a temptation to suggest that resurrection may be impossible in order to prove one's courage, one's bold acceptance of indeterminacy, uncertainty, and risk, and, ultimately, one's clear difference from that irresponsible tax collector who demands knowledge and clutches greedily at life. Knowing that one does not have faith that God will bring about an actual resurrection is, however, knowledge and not faith; moreover, the refusal to believe in an actual, future resurrection, lest one foreclose any possibilities or be too like a tax collector, does foreclose the possibility of living as a knight of faith. Both grasping at resurrection and refusing to believe in resurrection's actuality are modes of calculation. The knight of faith balances on the knife's edge between these twin temptations, and he moves through the world so freely that no one can even recognize that he is thus balanced. Even he does not know that he is a knight of faith; that, too, he leaves to God.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, 134; *Fear and Trembling*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven*, 134; *Fear and Trembling*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Donner la mort*, 148; *The Gift of Death*, 109, translation modified.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's argument that the sin humans committed in the Fall was desiring to know and judge good and evil for themselves. Faith, then, is following God so entirely that one leaves it to him to know and judge good and evil without attempting to do so oneself. See Bonhoeffer, “Die Liebe Gottes und der Zerfall der Welt,” *Ethik, Werkausgabe*, Band 6 (München: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1998), 301-42; “God's Love and the Disintegration of the World,” *Ethics, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles G. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 299-339.

The tension between one's responsibility to and for the other and one's irresponsibility before God's ultimate responsibility always risks falling into economy, into the too-clever bargains and the overly subtle calculations by which one may seek to prove, to oneself or to others, that one is a knight of faith and not a tax collector, yet by which one would become a tax collector. Between the *salut* of leave-taking and the *salut* of greeting again, made possible through the *salut* of salvation, there is but a light step for the knight of faith, yet also for the tax collector who passes from the former to the expectation of the latter with no awareness of the necessary self-surrender. And while the knight of faith may hope to communicate *about* faith, he or she must not forget that one aspect of this self-surrender is precisely not seeking to prove one's own faith, as if one could be saved thereby. For faith means accepting that salvation, for oneself and for the other, comes from God. It means, therefore, giving up the attempt to prove one's own responsibility, at the risk of seeming too irresponsible. Mourning, for the believer, always takes place within this tension of renunciation and acceptance.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> I wish to thank anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.