

Derrida on the Possibility of Responsibility

Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History* and subsequent history of European responsibility serve as the grounding framework for the phenomenological construction of the conception of the apprehension of death given in Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*. Building additionally on similar arguments given by Heidegger and Levinas, Derrida provides a positive account of the self and its necessary irreplaceability. Such an absolutely individual self is then shown to be the only method for the establishment of the possibility of responsibility, the possibility of a responsible moral subject. Such a subject itself obtains identification in the face of death. But Derrida also finds that the finitude of such a responsible self gives way to a necessary inheritance of guilt or inequality in relation to the gift. The possibility of responsibility is important for Derrida as it plays a deciding role in his later treatment of ethics and religion. In this essay I first sketch the essential context from Patočka's history of responsibility and then examine the justifications given for each move in Derrida's argument for the irreplaceable self and the possibility of responsibility and the mentioned corollaries.

The history of responsibility in Patočka is given in terms of the mystery of the sacred. Patočka divides this history into three religious periods or stages: the orgiastic, the Platonic, and the Christian. The assertion here is that religion is fundamentally connected to the relation between the secret of the demonic sacred and its subsequent repression or integration into the sphere of responsibility: "The subject of responsibility will be the subject that has managed to make orgiastic or demonic mystery subject to itself; and has done that in order to freely subject itself to the wholly and infinite other that sees without being seen" (2). Indeed, religion, insofar as it begins at the surpassing of the orgiastic, is absolutely necessary for the possibility of responsibility. It is impossible to have a responsible agent without the outmoding of the orgiastic secret, without religious access

to the gift. But Patočka and Derrida want to attribute to religion a relation above mere condition or correlate of responsibility, namely religion *as* responsibility: "In the authentic sense of the word, religion comes into being the moment that the experience of responsibility extracts itself from that form of secrecy called demonic mystery" (3). It is the very unveiling of responsibility and servitude to the wholly and infinite other that creates religion. Regardless of whether this establishes strict equality between religion and responsibility, at the very least the history of religion is then determined by the passage to responsibility and the history of responsibility determined by the passage of religion.

This is the grounding of Patočka's three stages within the history of responsibility. Each period represents a fundamental change in European religion and thus also a fundamental change in European responsibility. The orgiastic is the experience of the sacred as an enthusiasm in which the demonic mystery is unlimited. The concept of self is unavailable and so there is no possibility of responsibility. Derrida explains Patočka's conception of the demonic as:

Irresponsibility, or, if one wishes, as nonresponsibility... it belongs to a space in which there has not yet resounded the injunction to *respond*; a space in which one does not yet hear the call to explain oneself [sic], one's actions or one's thoughts, to respond to the other and answer for oneself before the other (3).

Here we get a conception of self defined in terms of the other, as a call for an explanation of oneself in face of the other. The orgiastic is self-less because it provides no medium for such a response. Platonism sees the introduction of the idea of the Good, accessible and exterior, and so the first means for questioning and responding to the other. That is to say Platonism allows for a conception of self lacking in the orgiastic. The Platonic dialogues demonstrate a medium in which one can call upon the other (and have the other call upon us) through rationality and critique while also introducing philosophy as an apprehension of death, as *melete thanatou*, a concern or mindfulness of death. Finally, the introduction of Christianity in the history of responsibility sees the institution of the *mysterium tremendum*, the dissymmetrical gift, the gaze of God thus another apprehension of death as the ability to give (in the sense of the gift) oneself to death.

In contrast to the apparent changes between each period, the underlying mystery of the sacred is always present; it is only incorporated or repressed in each consecutive stage despite perhaps its apparent revealing from within the period. Derrida explains this duality of mystery and its resulting irresponsibility:

There is first the structure of secrecy that keeps that mystery hidden, incorporated, concealed but alive, in the structure of free responsibility that claims to go beyond it and that in fact only succeeds by subordinating mystery and keeping it subjugated. The secret of responsibility would consist of keeping secret, or "incorporated," the secret of the demonic and thus of preserving within itself a nucleus of irresponsibility or of absolute unconsciousness, something Patočka will later call "orgiastic irresponsibility (20).

It is a duality of mystery because the secret refers to that which is hidden in virtue of being secret while also referring to the secrecy of the secret itself hidden in virtue of incorporation or repression. This later secrecy of the secret is more thoroughly the secrecy of the secret of the demonic which we see most manifest in the context of orgiastic mystery. On the one hand Derrida is only pointing out what Patočka has said before: in this context, there cannot be a sense of self and so there cannot be a sense of responsibility, that is to say there must be a sense of irresponsibility. On the other hand, because the secret of the demonic is never destroyed and ubiquitous there must always also be a sense of irresponsibility—derived from the orgiastic—within Platonism and onward. For Patočka and Derrida, the failure of the Platonic incorporation (destruction) of orgiastic irresponsibility is in fact its defining characteristic. Derrida says Platonism "presents itself as a moment without mystery" so far as to "openly declare that secrecy will not be allowed" (33), a claim found in neither orgiastic nor Christian mystery.

How then does the Christian *mysterium tremendum* find such a place for secrecy and its characterizing link between responsibility and the keeping of a secret, thus the sole means for giving the secret of death, the possibility for the gift of death? The story of the ongoing transition to an interior and inaccessible Christianity begins with both the repression of Platonism and a sort of

revival of the orgiastic, in what Patočka calls the Christian reversal: "the *mysterium tremendum* gets carried away, in the double sense of the term: it rises *against* another mystery [Platonism] but it rises *on the back of* a past mystery [demonic]" (7). Conversion to Christianity means a return to an acceptance of secrecy, the "properly Christian event of *another secret*, or more precisely of a mystery, the *mysterium tremendum*: the terrifying mystery, the dread, fear and trembling of the Christian in the experience of the sacrificial gift" (6). It is only in the Christian *mysterium tremendum* that we experience the gift which grants us a relation with the transcendence of the other. Moreover, the experience of the sacrificial gift is itself an identification of the dissymmetrical gaze of God; the very experience of Christian fear presupposes a moment of becoming a person, and a person can only come about through an experience of singularity in the gaze of God. The gaze and the gift are both inaccessible and unpresentable outside of the self and so necessarily secret. The consequence of such new terrifying experiences in the conversion from Platonism is "nothing other than death itself, a new significance for death, a new apprehension of death, a new way in which to give oneself death or to put oneself to death" (31). Again, the conversion to Christianity involves mystification and thus gives both the secret of death and the gift of death itself to the other as opposed to the Platonic effort of preparing oneself for death, of demystifying death, taking one's death for oneself. Finally, the link between responsibility and the keeping of a secret comes from Derrida's assertion of the necessary connection between death and responsibility, sufficiently demonstrated, he believes, by the history of responsibility.

What I have discussed hitherto has been only the necessary context for Derrida's later argument for the possibility of responsibility, which begins by returning to the notion of the apprehension of death and the way of giving oneself death. Apprehension of death is asserted to be contextual:

What we are here calling the apprehension of death refers as much to the concern, anxious solicitude, care taken for the soul (*epimeleia tes psykhes*) in the *melete thanatou*, as it does to the meaning given to death by the interpretative attitude that, in different cultures and at particular moments... apprehends death differently, giving itself each time a different approach (40).

The term lends itself to two ideas, first the traditional concern or preparation for death and second the attitude towards death perpetuated by the given periodic mystery. In other words, the apprehension of death refers both to the ("actual") experience of anticipation of death and to the perception of death, which in turn ascribes the meaning of death. Therefore if responsibility is to be derived from the meaning or apprehension of death it must be with respect to the mystery that subjugates it.

In Platonism the derivation of responsibility from its apprehension of death is relatively simple—by means of the passage to death. It is the transformation of the experience of death that generates responsibility:

Philosophy is born out of this form of responsibility, and in the same movement philosophy is born to its own responsibility. It comes into being *as such* at the moment when the soul is not only gathering itself in the preparation for death but when it is ready to receive death, giving it to itself even, in an acceptance that delivers it from the body, and at the same time delivers it from the demonic and the orgiastic (40).

The conversion or transformation occurs at the moment in which the soul is absolutely comfortable with death, ready to receive it or give it to itself à la Socrates; this is the Platonic apprehension of death. As we have seen already, the proper apprehension of death gives way to philosophy but how then do we get to responsibility, how is philosophy *born to* its own responsibility? It is in the literal passage to death, the delivery of the soul from the body and the demonic and thus from orgiastic irresponsibility. It is in this sense that philosophy is born to responsibility, as a delivery from irresponsibility. And here we can clearly see how philosophy is born out of this delivery, for Platonism as defined begins with the understanding of philosophy as such an apprehension to death. The possibility of responsibility in Plato is assured by its dogma of rationality and the Good resulting in the absolute incorporation of the orgiastic. Orgiastic mystery, firmly in place, ensures the possibility of that crucial moment in which the soul is ready to receive death by providing an opposition to move away from, thereby cementing the possibility for a conversion with respect to the experience of death.

The derivation of responsibility under the Christian *mysterium tremendum* is more involved and begins with a completely new apprehension of death, a way of giving oneself death, in terms of the gift. This is the disproportionate gift of the infinite other:

This other way of apprehending death [*mysterium tremendum*], and of acceding to responsibility, comes from a gift received from the other, from the one who, in absolute transcendence, sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible... [quoting Patočka] 'The responsible life is itself conceived as the *gift* of something that, in the final analysis, while having the characteristics of the Good, also shows traits of something inaccessible to which one must permanently submit—traits of a mystery that has the last word' (40).

What gift does this other impart onto us? Patočka's answer is the conception of a responsible life. Responsibility is here conceived in terms of the gift which itself must remain a mystery. Patočka adds that while the *mysterium tremendum* contains characteristics of Platonism, it is an unequivocally unanswerable mystery at its heart. But Derrida wishes to make a stronger statement about the conversion from Platonism to Christianity and the gift at stake, that it is more than just something that must submit to mystery. Derrida's answer to the same question is that the other, responsible for imparting the gift, "gives the gift that transforms the Good into a Goodness that is forgetful of itself, into a love that renounces itself" such that what is given "is not some thing, but goodness itself, a giving goodness, the act of giving or the donation of the gift... whose source remains inaccessible to the donee" (41). The conversion to Christianity is an inauguration of goodness in replacement of Plato's form of the Good that acts in fulfillment of the gift, attributed with the property of forgetfulness and inaccessibility. What I interpret Derrida to be arguing here is that the forgetting or renouncing of goodness in itself does the work of guaranteeing such inaccessibility. The goodness itself is given to us in the donation of the gift, but we do not receive it as goodness, it is not fully known to us, we receive it in part as mystery from the other. The fact that we receive the goodness in part as mystery ensures the impossibility of discovering its source. How do we receive goodness in part as mystery? Derrida gives a potential answer in explaining that the donee

"receives by means of a dissymmetry of the gift that is also a death, a death given, the gift of a death that arrives in one way but not another" (41). Namely, we receive the goodness through a medium that is itself a death, itself unknowable, and thus the goodness must be in part unknowable as well. The problem with this interpretation of Derrida's argument is that the realization of goodness as received by a means of a given death given would seem to be enough alone for Derrida to secure the inaccessibility of the source of the goodness to the donee, making the original connection between the self-renouncing nature of the goodness and such inaccessibility unnecessary. An alternative interpretation is understanding goodness in terms of the conditions of its existence, outlined by Derrida that "goodness forget itself, that the movement be a movement of the gift that renounces itself, hence a movement of infinite love" (51). Here the forgetfulness of the goodness is a necessary attribute responsible for establishing infinite love (and thus the referred dissymmetry) whose inaccessibility is generated by its relation to death. In any case, the source of the gift of goodness remains impenetrable to the one who receives it.

The next move in Derrida's argument is to claim that the inaccessibility of the goodness "acts as a command to the donee" (41). Derrida elaborates: "It subjects its receivers, giving itself to them as goodness itself but also as the law" (41). I interpret Derrida to be deriving this conclusion from the dissymmetry of the gift. The goodness discovered in the gift is given without our ability to question or have correspondence with its author; in no way can we respond to what is given to us. At the same time, what is received is necessarily received and the goodness found there within is the only measure available to us with respect to goodness. Thus by the inaccessibility of the goodness (and also by lack of any other alternative to it) we must accept such goodness as law. Derrida calls this the gift of law, and asserts that it is the pivotal point in which Christianity experiences a new responsibility and a new kind of death.

But what is the connection between the gift of law and responsibility or death? In order to answer this question, Derrida introduces one of the most crucial points in his argument towards responsibility, the irreplaceability or singularity of the self in its encounter of death: "Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is

therefore conferred, delivered, "given", one can say, by death" (41). What this immediately means for Derrida is that through such singularity the possibility of the substitution of existence is out the window. And here we see the connection between the gift of law and death: the gift given establishes the irreplaceability of my fulfillment of death in a way that might have been up for grabs in Platonism or the orgiastic. Derrida continues the same line of thought with regards to responsibility:

To have the experience of responsibility on the basis of the law that is given, that is, to have the experience of one's absolute singularity and apprehend one's own death, amounts to the same thing... it is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. (41)

The gift of law, the goodness, and the gift itself are all the creators of Christian responsibility, that is the connection. Such gifts assure of me of my irreplaceability and through my experience of such singularity I am called upon by responsibility. Death shows me that I alone can undertake it, I alone am answerable to my own death, I am responsible. Furthermore, Derrida asserts that it is *only* through such a relation to death (namely, the gift) that one can become responsible, leading him to conclude that "in this sense only a mortal can be responsible" (41). In other words, without the sight of death one cannot be assured of their singularity or irreplaceability and so never called to proper responsibility.

At a risk of glossing over the details of Derrida's position, I question the privileged status he attributes to death in this later conclusion. I think it would be rather unfair to Derrida to imply that the *only* role being played by death in here is its essential uniqueness for every self. Every self appears to have countless unique experiences or undertakings that we could substitute into Derrida's statements regarding death such as 'having a first child' or even 'being born'. No one can have my first child or be born for me in the same sense that no one can experience my death. And certainly the event of 'having a first child' could be described as mysterious or unknown (perhaps also 'being born') Similarly, it cannot be the necessary secrecy of death because other events such as 'going out into the black forest forever, never to speak to anyone again' would

also be necessarily secret. So why is death different? While we have already seen that there is a consistent connection between death and the history of responsibility, the role played by death seems to be grounded in its relation to the other. All of the examples I have given are apparently lacking in the potential for the important relation with the infinite other that death provides us with. But such an explanation begs the question of why death must be the medium for our relation with the infinite other, it seems to be an unfinished answer. A reasonable response to the inquiry might be that death is privileged because of all factors imaginable: because of its place in history, religion, and the common consciousness (as a fear of death), because only death is death.

The subject who experiences death as gift also finds from it an identity. If death is something that can only be taken upon oneself, then "the sameness of the self, what remains irreplaceable in dying, only becomes what it is, in the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to itself, by means of this idea of mortality as irreplaceability" (45). There is an identity of oneself that is only manifest in the apprehension of death, in the unveiling of the self as singular. And it is the self's unique possession of death that allows it to give it's life to the other. Derrida explains that "There is no gift of self, it cannot be thought of, except in terms of this irreplaceability" (42). So Derrida has made two moves with respect to the self. The first is the necessary connection between the self and the identity of the self to itself and the gift of death. The second is the ownership of the self over its own life, the ability of the self to give itself to death, which in turn allows for the self to give itself to the other.

Now we can recognize structure in the relationship between the responsible subject, realized as such by the gift of death, and the movement of infinite love of the other, realized from goodness itself, the gift that renounces itself. The gift of infinite love does not operate in the same way as the Platonic Good, and there are important distinctions between the infinite love of the other and the finite love of the self: "Only infinite love can renounce itself and, in order to *become finite*, become incarnated in order to love the other, to love the other as a finite other" (51). Finite love cannot extend itself so as to love the other as infinite lover, it's a one-way street. So now we have a finite, responsible, and moral subject that must be concerned itself with the goodness of the

infinite love or gift, a disproportion which Derrida concludes "inevitably transforms the experience of responsibility into one of guilt: I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift" (51). If the subject is to be responsible, it must also necessarily be just as guilty for the very same reasons it was capable of responsibility in the first place, namely an experience of singularity via an approach to death. Additionally, there is a seemingly mathematical recursion property in the relation of responsibility to itself such that for each step we take towards complete responsibility it itself has already moved forward, described by Derrida as responsibility never being equal to itself. But it is not just the infinitude of the responsible subject that determines its guilt. There is also what Derrida calls two contradictory movements involved with a subject's responsibility: "It requires one to respond as oneself and as irreplaceable singularity, to answer for what one does, says, gives; but it also requires that, being good and through goodness, one forget or efface the origin of what one gives" (51). We've already seen the argument behind the first movement of the relation between singularity and responsibility but why must we take up the second movement of forgetting the origin of what one gives? The reciprocation of the gift to the infinite other must be in the form of that which it is received, the infinite subjugating the finite, for the finite is only defined in what is available to it from the infinite.

Finally I would like to address the potential complaint that a treatment of Derrida's building of responsibility ought to also address his issue regarding the disconnect between responsibility's thematization and practice. Derrida's position is that:

Some part of irresponsibility [always] insinuates itself wherever one demands responsibility without sufficiently conceptualizing and thematizing what "responsibility" means... the theoretical and practical that we just referred to is, quite clearly, irreducible... the activating of responsibility (decision, act, *praxis*) will always take place before and beyond any theoretical or thematic determination (25).

Theoretical descriptions of responsibility fail to capture responsibility in its entirety, for there is always an aspect of responsibility that extends beyond general knowledge, that is to say the limits of thematization. But this does not apply to what has been said about the possibility of responsibility.

The interplay between responsibility's exercise and theoretical development only occurs *after* the possibility of responsibility has been established, after the gift.