



Usually, Christianity is seen as suppressing “moral luck,” or the idea that, to a degree at least, we require good fortune if we are to be good. However, in this essay, I want to argue, to the contrary, that Christianity embraces moral luck to such an extreme degree that it transforms all received ideas of the ethical. In the course of this argument, I shall try to show that these received ideas of the ethical, which may or may not permit some play to “moral luck,” all subscribe to a “sacrificial economy.” And that they do so in two different variants: either in terms of the giving up of the lesser for the greater, or else of a more radical notion of absolute sacrifice of self for the other, without any “return” for, or of, the self in any guise whatsoever. The second variant, which would usually see itself as *escaping* the sacrificial economy of *do ut des* (“I give that you may give”), but which I will argue is but this same economy taken to its logical extreme, has been recently espoused in different but profoundly analogous ways by Jan Patočka, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida.<sup>2</sup> Against this view, which now enjoys a wide consensus, I shall argue that a self-sacrificial view of morality is first, immoral, second, impossible, and third, a deformation, not the fulfilment, as Patočka echoed by Derrida claims, of the Christian gospel.

The article has two parts: first, a consideration of “moral luck” accompanied by an intermittent analysis of Shakespeare’s late play *The Winter’s Tale*. Second, a more systematic spelling out of the implications of this analysis for a consideration of “morality, gift and sacrifice.”

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Let me first rehearse, briefly, the usual arguments concerning “moral luck.”<sup>3</sup> Morality, for the Greeks, concerned the attainment of the truly happy life. True happiness was regarded as

john milbank

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*a sequel to “can morality be christian?”<sup>1</sup>*

secure, abiding happiness, impregnable to assault. Hence it came to be associated with self-possession and “autarchy” or *self-government*, whether of the city or of the self, and increasingly of the immaterial soul, deemed to be free of need. However, there was a tension implicit in this notion of a secure happiness. Happiness usually concerns reception of gifts from without, and a total immunity would lock a person within a tower where neither sorrow *nor* joy would be able to gain entrance. Hence Aristotle, for at least a part of his output, articulates a compromise: the ethical life is to be found in the *relative* security of the *polis*, and within the *polis* in the *relative* security of the well-born, good-looking man, owning sufficient store of goods to permit him to exercise a virtuous generosity, and *through* this to sustain his relative power and independence. This example indicates that while the Greeks fundamentally defined the ethical in opposition

to fortune or luck, they were sometimes prepared to admit, to a degree, fortune or luck as a necessary pre-condition for the ethical: a circumstance that Martha Nussbaum terms “the fragility of goodness,” although she repeatedly loses sight of the fact that a security of self-possessed good *remains* Aristotle’s fundamental determining notion. It is nonetheless true that, for Aristotle, just as we need good fortune to begin to be good, so we must continue to enjoy it if we are to remain good. If we fall, for example, under the rule of a tyrant who commands us either to betray the city or else to allow a member of our own family to die, we have, by bad stroke of fortune, been tragically removed from the context in which we can continue to be unambiguously virtuous people.<sup>4</sup>

The Greeks, therefore, *first of all* in defining the ethical goal as secure happiness, deemed the good and fortune to be opposites, but in the *second* place did tend to admit an element of moral luck. And, after all, their very deliberations involved a presupposition of the *supreme* moral luck of being born Greek and not barbarian. However, in later times of greater political anxiety, thinkers sought a more absolute total security of the inner citadel of the soul. Since such security precludes joy as well as sorrow, the goal of happiness tended to be redefined as a passionless *tranquillity*: this, roughly speaking, is the Stoic position.<sup>5</sup> Now how, in this late antique period and later, has it stood by contrast with Christianity? It will usually be noted that Christianity permitted no such stoic security: the Christian was not offered any inner refuge against what time may bring, nor was an utterly passionless (in the sense of emotionless) life regarded as desirable. It may, however, also be noted that, for a Christian, “to be good” was dependent on “fortune” in the new guise of the grace of God. Grace does involve external circumstance since it is in part externally mediated, and furthermore renders *even the inner citadel of the soul* subject to an arrival from without. This observation already introduces a note of considerable uncertainty into construals of the Christian stance vis-à-vis moral luck. However, it is also usually concluded that Christianity radically extirpates this thematic,

since it holds that every person, whatever their birth and whatever their degree of learning (so one does not have to live the minority life of a philosopher) can always, in every situation, respond in a moral fashion – even in an unambiguously moral fashion. This is partly because virtue itself has now been redefined: the more apparently “passive” modes of humility, patience, forgiveness, suffering unto death, even the non-despairing endurance of tragic dilemma, are modes universally available in every situation. These virtues can be perfectly performed by us “alone,” they can be offered to the world as gifts, all the more secure in their gratuity by the possibility of their derelict abandonment through the refusals of others.<sup>6</sup> One might, perhaps, qualify this in the direction of saying that one needs the initial fortune to belong to the *community* of such a novel form of practice: that to be able to give and forgive one must first have the sense that one is oneself given and forgiven; that one owes in gratitude a certain return and a certain repetition. In other words, it is true that we never entirely originate our own virtuous acts – they are responses, even mere continuations in the face of the gift that we have always first received. However, this point is after all but a small qualification, since God, for the Bible, has never been without witnesses, and the Church through typology and prolepsis is a universal reality. No one anywhere, by virtue of mere human birth alone, would appear to be entirely outside the logic of donation, which seems to permit a certain immunity to moral luck.

Now I do not, without qualification, accept the above account as true. However, supposing, for the moment, that it is, there is one all-important point to take note of. This is that Christian ethics, *so construed*, retains the antique requirement of security and, indeed, *maximizes* it, yet wrenches it away from its original logical foundation in the pursuit of happiness which even the Stoics still followed – albeit to the point of logical collapse. Christianity apparently still thinks of the ethical life as the deepest identity, *as that of which we cannot be dispossessed*, and therefore as that which we have *no excuse* to lack, and yet this inner possession may not make us happy, at least in any recognizable worldly sense, and

according to later mystical writers celebrating “indifference,” whose legacy passes to Kant, not necessarily happy in any sense at all.<sup>7</sup> Christian ethics, on this latter construal, has ceased to pursue “happiness” and instead has become “other-regarding.”<sup>8</sup> The orientation to the other, by intentional *gesture*, is that which we alone can own. There is a latent paradox here, because the priority given to the other at the limit demands the laying down of our own life. Hence what we “own,” the ethical, is nothing other than radical self-dispossession. However – and this will become relevant for my wider argument – this paradox does *not* necessarily overthrow the logic of ownership: to the contrary, it dialectically preserves it at the limits of contradiction. The idea of a non-eudaemonistic other-regarding ethic is finally that, to be ethical, is to offer your life as a gift without hope of return in time (since your offering outreaches your death). Such a stance remains always possible, for what we absolutely cannot be robbed of is indeed (as Heidegger realized) our own death.<sup>9</sup> Hence also we cannot be robbed of the will to offer ourselves, if necessary, in death.

This account of Christian ethics as “other-regarding” appears then, at first glance, to be logically coherent. It regards the ethical attitude as essentially one of altruism, which is only *guaranteed* by the gesture of self-sacrifice, the willingness to give oneself even unto death. It is *this* gesture, or the latent will to this gesture, of which we cannot be deprived, which appears absolutely immune to “moral luck.”

However, at this point we need already to note something else. If this *is* the Christian stance par excellence, then it can be readily secularized, as Patočka argued, because omission of the hope for resurrection and eternal life will tend to *purify* the strictly other-regarding motive still further. Thus Patočka, and Derrida ambiguously in his wake, urge on us a “heretical” Christianity that is nonetheless really a demythologized one, more Christian than Christianity so far. In this new, perfected Christianity, the injunction of St Luke not to invite to feasts those who can invite you back (Luke 14.26), thereby guaranteeing the austerity of your giving as “unilateral” and self-sacrificial, is no longer to be contaminated at the

eschatological level by the Lucan promise that such conduct will receive a reward from our heavenly father.<sup>10</sup> Hence, if the construal of Christian ethics as *most* essentially “other-regarding,” and in consequence sacrificial, is valid, then it might well be the case that Christianity’s true destiny is to be demythologized and secularized.

However, this construal may be called into question. *Should* one read Christian ethics as abandoning the antique concern with happiness, and yet sustaining its requirement for secure self-possession (even if this is now reduced to the will to the gesture of absolute non self-possession)? Or *can* one construe things precisely the other way round? That is to say, that Christianity, unlike stoicism, was able to stick with and even augment the goal of happiness or beatitude through a novel *abandonment* of the goal of self-possession, *even* in its mode of ethical reduction? And along with the notion of self-possession, to abandon also the cognate themes of self-achievement, self-control and above all self-government, which rule nearly all our inherited ideas of what is ethical? This is what I eventually wish to argue.

Let us, however, for the moment strategically remain with our two inherited notions of the ethical (as identified by Robert Spaemann) that are both linked to the supremacy of self-possession and self-government: on the one hand, classical eudaemonism, on the other hand, post-Enlightenment (perhaps post-Renaissance) other-regarding ethics whether Kantian or utilitarian (the latter at least in its altruistic versions (Sidgwick)). I now want to show (drawing freely on Spaemann, Derrida, and Bernard Williams) how both notions are subject to inner dialectical collapse (or deconstruction) in a fashion concerning precisely their attempts to manage and control “fortune.”

First of all, eudaemonism. Can one secure happiness? No, it seems that it is never present as secure, and so never present as genuine happiness that need not turn its face away from reality to seek refuge in illusion. At most we have only “virtual happiness.” Why? First, because to open ourselves to the most genuine happiness (for example one including friendship, as Aristotle stipulated) risks also the greatest ultimate sorrow, and therefore for self-protection we must

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remain to a degree self-enclosed and will never be free from the anxious calculus of precisely to what degree this should be the case; exactly what balance of adventure and security we should espouse. Second, because happiness is not punctual; as Aristotle realized, it is rather the course of a whole life. Yet we never get to the end of our lives, nor their upshots; we are bound to “die before our time,” and only others will read our lives as a whole, rather than as still open to further development. It is for them to say “happy” or “unhappy,” yet they *cannot* say this, since, as Spaemann argues, happiness retains something of a secret unpredictability and inviolability relating to *my* specific physical body, whose movements are not entirely subject to cultural control.<sup>11</sup> Third, happiness is comparative. To take Spaemann’s example: for the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa in one of his poems, the shepherd in Arcadia is happy *over there*, for *me*, the non-Arcadian.<sup>12</sup> But no more than the shepherd will experience his own death, does he (even in Arcadia also) know, reflectively and consciously, his own pastoral joy. Again, it seems that one’s own happiness is known only by the other and yet it is still not *his* happiness. Happiness is nowhere replete and therefore never itself: nowhere in life and nowhere in space. Likewise in the fourth place, it is nowhere in time. For happiness must be present to us now, yet now is never, but always over or yet to come. Perhaps, indeed, happiness might be just thus stretched-out anxiety, this “joy over time.” But not, at least, in our time, since for now the past is always contaminated by loss and mourning, and the future by fear and anxiety. Happiness must be present, without these negations, yet *cannot* be so. And in these four ways, not just *ordinary joys* remain illusive, but *also* our tranquil enjoyment and realization of a consistent ethical excellence (or even of an unperturbed entry into impersonal communion with abiding Platonic forms).

Antiquity, therefore, early and late, still underrated the contamination of morality by luck or fortune. How stands it, by contrast, with modern, “other-regarding morality” from Kant and Bentham to Levinas and Parfit? Its plight is equally dire. First of all, there is Hegel’s critique

of Kant, in its broad thrust: as soon as we act, with patience, humility, forgiveness, suffering unto death and so forth, we run the risk that this act will be mis-taken, misinterpreted and abused (perhaps because we have badly *expressed* it, since aesthetics can always contaminate and ruin the ethical imperative) in a fashion that is both not our fault, and yet somewhat our fault, because of our tactlessness, and often both in a disentangleable fashion. What use, then, are these derelict, abandoned acts: are they, as Jean-Luc Marion would have it,<sup>13</sup> still perfect gifts, since he takes the content of a gift to be a mere “sign” of the real ethereal gift of intention or more fundamentally the unobjectifiable passage of the “self-giving” gift itself? Surely, one should argue, they are not, for intentions (or rather passages) are only ever instantiated in signs and gestures and are therefore always somewhat particular, somewhat content-specific. The abandoned, useless gift is to the contrary reduced to the most *general* and therefore impotent, unintending invitation to be patient, humble, suffer unto death and so on. Abandoned, inert, without upshot, it is reversely corroded even in its most original intention – it is, in short, *objectified*. A duty, therefore, which fails to make the other happy surely ceases to be a moral act (and perhaps not just Hegel, but even Kant himself remained haunted by this thought). Other-regarding ethics *cannot* ignore happiness, yet happiness is often the child of whim and circumstance.

Therefore, “other regarding ethics” is also undermined, as we have seen, by the self-implosion of the notion of pure duty. But hard on the heels of this “loss of duty” comes also “loss of self.” Can we possess ourselves as ethical through a sacrificial self-offering in death? If this alone proves the good, then we *need* the misfortunes of others to demonstrate our worth – and therefore this seemingly ethical self is utterly lost in its secret longing for the sorrows of others as the occasions of its own heroism. Moreover, *till* we are martyrs, we can never be sure that we possess ourselves as ethical, since martyrdom is the paradigmatic test – passing it, at the end beyond ourselves, we also lose ourselves and *never* come to possess a good will, ever. For always, in the

next gasp before expiry we *may* despair, we may recant, we may come to curse the very one we think we propose to save. And if even the *dying* self is not immune to luck (the “weakness of the flesh” in dying) then a fortiori we have lost the living self who enjoys his life but is subject to still greater uncertainties and contingencies.

These contingencies are, supremely, the *needs of others*. In the case of the moral subject of consequentialist ethics, this subject is liable to limitless persecution by the needs of others, who are regarded contradictorily as *not* subject to this persecution, but as somehow already in the endlessly postponed telos of “enjoyment.”<sup>14</sup> And just the same “bad infinite” haunts the seemingly greater refinement of Kantian and Levinasian ethics. Both exhibit the same obliteration of the living self in the form of the circular pointlessness of a subjectivity constituted through its respect for the (free or suffering) subjectivity of the other which is only subjective in returning that respect. Modern ethics, just because it enthrones altruism, is pathological in its degree of obliteration of the possibility of *consummation*, or of the beginning of beatitude in a time simply to be enjoyed, and a conviviality to be celebrated by the living self.

However, if, as we have seen, the living and dying self of self-sacrificial ethics is not after all secure – save in a bizarre kind of hope for a gesture of martyrdom that can never arrive, which is just how Derrida construes it<sup>15</sup> – *nor*, in the third place, is the self of the other whom we are supposed to “regard” secure in its turn. Insofar as the other is alive, I will tend to take her for granted, and her visibility (here I am strategically somewhat agreeing with Levinas), will tend to make her “part” of me, like a kind of extension of my body. She cannot, by appearing, fully appear as other. Her otherness will rather emerge in her absence, especially her death, which partially defines her uniqueness and non-dispossessibility. When she is gone, I mourn, and first come to value her as irreplaceable, in a way that I could *not* have done while she lived. But now she can no longer speak to me and so she has emerged as irreplaceable in that very moment in which she has lost that *other* crucial aspect of otherness, namely free spontaneity.

Indeed, a mourning that neglects this second aspect of otherness can degenerate into the most ferocious mode of possession of the other. And, moreover, mourning, although *it alone* tends to *reveal* to us the subject as subject of our ethical concern (as irreplaceable), is also a domain in which we can sing an orphic song but do no ethical deed towards the other, just as she can no longer respond to us. For this reason there is *no* virtue in mourning, and yet if we cease to mourn the other is lost and we forget the *only* occasion for the realization of the possibility of virtue and thereby become supremely evil. For what is more evil than to burn a human body like an animal without a funeral? But if mourning is a vision, it is not a work, for the work of mourning or of coming to terms with loss is *immoral* and unchristian since it would always mean we *forget* the subject as irreplaceable. And yet to act again towards the living we *must* recover, must betray the good, must become evil.

This situation is acutely dramatized when it is *uncertain* whether someone is dead or alive, but they have merely *disappeared*. In Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *L’Avventura* (1959) a woman, Anna, disappears, and her fiancé immediately starts to court her best friend, Claudia. If she is dead, this relationship may retrieve something from her decease, yet if she is alive it is contaminated by guilt. But given her mere disappearance, a state of irresolvable uncertainty pertains: life simply cannot go forwards. Likewise in the film *Le Colonel Chabert* (based on a short story by Balzac), a soldier returns “from the dead” to find his wife remarried. Should she resume her previous life, or abandon a later life undertaken in good faith? Both the earlier and the later lives have now become unresumable as ethical imperatives. So, on one level, these stories show how we need *definite death* to sustain morality; to pass to a new good, an earlier claim on our attention must be “over.” And that in itself is enough to cast suspicion on “morality” as such: why does it require absolute death for its repeated exercise? Yet at a deeper level still, these stories indicate how death itself functions *only* as “disappearance.” For we can only register the dead one as “missing,” not in a state of death, since death is *not* a state. Hence, in any case, even if Anna is

really dead, Claudia will be faced with the choice between guilt and a certain callousness, and the only answer to her dilemma, as to that posed by *Le Colonel Chabert*, is Christ's answer to the Pharisees that in heaven "there will be neither giving nor taking in marriage."

In the case of Shakespeare's late play *The Winter's Tale*, we have the case of a death and a presumed death that turns out to be only a double disappearance. But the one who mourns, Leontes, King of Sicily, treats the death from the outset like a "disappearance," which cripples the very possibility of moral action. Hence Leontes' courtiers beseech him to forget his dead wife and son and lost daughter and resume his rule again, for politics requires self-control, although morality seems after all to disallow it (V.I). Here mourning is complicated by guilt (but it usually is). Leontes' false accusation of his wife as adulteress has led to her death, the death of his heir, and loss of his daughter, Perdita. His courtiers urge that he has now *atoned* through mourning, thereby claiming that mourning is a moral work that may be completed. But Leontes, echoing Lear's repeated "Never" after the loss of Cordelia, absolutely denies this. *Nothing* could compensate for the monstrousness of his deed, since he has betrayed what for him are the unique, *irreplaceable* ones; only reconciliation with them could cancel out the deed, and that is impossible since they are dead and lost. Time, with its irreversibility, Leontes perceives, is stern: it permits justice and the punishment that sin automatically incurs. But it does *not* permit forgiveness and reconciliation, because that would be to trivialize a past that in the mode of the death of responding persons can be irretrievably lost.

Leontes, via his loss, has finally come to love. He loves because he is wounded, and so at last sees what is missing. He enjoys, one might say, this one advantage, that unlike those chronically wounded *by others* he is not rendered incapable of love, and yet this advantage is cancelled in that his mainly self-inflicted wounds permit him only the futile *gesture* of love. Like the initially complacent in general, he sees what is lost with absolute clarity only too late, and therefore tragically. Hence in our world half the potential

moral subjects – the wounded – see too late, and only through loss of the other, which is either their fault, or has been inflicted upon them from the first. By contrast, the other potentially moral subjects – the *apparently innocent* – who have abundantly received love from the living, and therefore are able to pass this gift on, are always infected by complacency, the non-realization of the fragility of the gift in its passage through time. They have always been too sheltered in their development from the knowledge of wounds inflicted elsewhere. Not having lost, they do not sufficiently attend to the voice of the present loved one. And since *all* are either wounded and complacent, or rather all are relative mixtures of both, since this is an exhaustive human typology, there exist *no* potential moral subjects at all. Rather, we are all embroiled in the *aporia* of the present versus the absent other, where *neither* can adequately fulfil the role of the other: neither the living beloved, nor the dead.

"Other-regarding ethics," whose paradigm is self-sacrifice, has now therefore lost its duty, its self and its other to regard. It is ruinously subject to the vagaries of fortune in the first case, and in the second two cases to the universal bad fortune of temporal loss and death combined with the subjection of even the best human wills to a kind of routinization in respect of the other, which sometimes, as in Leontes' case, spills over into suspicion.

However, things are worse than this. As Spaemann details, there are no criteria by which to prioritize either the pursuit of self-fulfilling happiness or the regard of the other. To pursue entirely the latter path of self-sacrifice would pathologically erode the self, which is alone able to offer itself. But, then, when to live and when to give? A further anxiety enters the picture, and as Bernard Williams once suggested, a further dimension of moral luck.<sup>16</sup> Was the painter Gauguin right to leave wife and children to go to Tahiti? (Against Williams one can conceive the pursuit of aesthetic self-fulfilment as *also* a moral choice, but this merely renders more acute what he says.) Williams suggested that only the success of his wager on being a good painter can retrospectively justify this decision. He comes to enjoy the moral luck of finding he has talent

(a “gift”), or that his talent was able to come to fruition. But it might have been otherwise. Williams’s analysis assumes that this instance is an anomaly, and that *normally* an intention to do something is not at all like Gauguin’s intention to be a painter. Hence one can usually know that one can realize one’s intention, and exactly what that intention is (whereas Gauguin does not really know what kind of painter he will turn out to be). However, I think, to the contrary, that all of us are always in the situation of Gauguin. This is for two reasons: first of all, as Derrida suggests,<sup>17</sup> the giving of ourselves to one person or purpose frequently involves sacrificing other goods or people, and often without reason. Our sense of responsibility *must*, in order to fulfil itself, be always exceptional and particular because attentive to a specific unique demand, yet to be responsible it must also by definition be answerable to a public forum. But how can these two demands ever be reconciled? And what explanation could ever be given to the neglected ones? There are *never*, it seems, any *adequate*, that is to say, publicly stateable reasons for lavishing devotion on one person rather than another – to the public gaze this will always appear excessively aesthetic or erotic. Yet to the private impulse it may appear to fulfil the logic of the ethical itself. Second, an intention is never precise until we begin to formulate it in words, which already amounts to a kind of actual performance. We *never* know in advance, strictly speaking, what we are going to do or say. Intentions “come to us,” as it were, from the Muses, and we are not in command of them. (Intention is, therefore, merely the way an intention turns out to be.) Heterogenesis of ends (beyond Hegel) has *always already begun*. Even to formulate a good intention, it seems, we need moral luck.

But here, at last, at the most extreme point of ruination of even the ethical intention, everything can run into reverse. Christianity is, perhaps, (sporadically) the history of this running into reverse. Supposing it is the case that to be ethical is not to possess something, not even to possess one’s own deed. Supposing it is, from the outset, to receive the gift of the other as something that diverts one’s life, and to offer one’s life in such a way that you do not know in

advance what it is you will give, but must reclaim it retrospectively. A total exposure to fortune, or rather to grace. Were it *simply* the former, then one would have run resignedly into nihilism – all the *aporias* of the ethical already sketched would still stand, but one would simply embrace the impossibility of the ethical and yet the necessity of temporary ethical conventions. Perhaps, in addition, one would qualify this, like Derrida (and Levinas?), with a mysticism of infinitely postponed hope for the arrival of the good. Life would either be construed as utterly arbitrary after Lear or Schopenhauer, or else as a comedy beyond the ethical, in “postmodern” mode. However, the Christian construal of the total sway of moral luck is to understand fortune, as always, however disguisedly, the personal gift of grace: to believe therefore that only *utter exposure* constitutes the ethical. It follows from this that no *secularization* of Christian ethics along the lines proposed by Patočka is possible: we have already seen how the mere attitudes of patience, humility, and so forth, regarded as things we can of ourselves perform, can turn out to be not ethical at all. To the contrary, they only assume an ethical complexion as a waiting on God – in other words, as a kind of meta-ethical trust that it *will* (beyond perpetual postponement) be given to us to be ethical, given to us again to receive and again to give in such a way that a certain “asymmetrical reciprocity” (Michael Welker) or genuine community, will ceaselessly arrive (for now in part and eschatologically without interruption). It ceases, on this perspective, to be the case that the Christian is the person who knows that he can be good in any merely *given* situation. On the contrary, the Christian can rather be seen as the person who recognizes that there is no *apparent* good to be found or performed in any given situation. Original sin and death (the results of the fall) are perceived as locked in a complicity that prevents the ethical from coming to pass. By naturally and culturally inherited contamination of our wills we are all either wounded or complacent or both, capable only of valuing what is lost, obliged, therefore, to take measures to prevent future loss, congratulating ourselves on these measures (law) and so secretly celebrating loss as the occa-

sion for our greatness, and instead of festively enjoying present loved ones, subject to boredom with them tending always to suspicion. Death, the experience of loss, contaminates our wills: this leads in turn to more barriers, more wars, more loss. Loss is ineradicable, and so we tend to assume that ethics is a sort of maximum possible minimization of loss. Yet I have shown that so long as there is loss, there *cannot* be any ethical, not even in any degree. Hence hope, hope that it may be given to me in the next moment to act well, is inseparable from hope that there may be universal acting well, and at last a non-futile mourning; to be ethical, therefore, is to believe in the resurrection, and somehow to participate in it. And *outside* this belief and participation there is, quite simply, no “ethical” whatsoever.

From these considerations I would argue that there are three aspects to ethics. First the mundane, everyday hope that community is possible, that people and objects can analogically blend beyond identity or difference, though we can never prove such a possibility a priori or a posteriori. We can only receive instances that we judge to constitute such blending and seek, in hope, to perpetuate them: here hope is conjoined to receptive charity. Both the living out and the search for such a life in common is neither simply eudaemonistic nor “other regarding” but, as Spaemann puts it, “ecstatic.” However, this is neither a self-sacrificial nor a sado-masochistically erotic ecstasy (and are not these two things secretly natural counterparts?) since both are unto death and thereby subject to the *aporia* I have already outlined (we cannot live to enjoy it). Rather, this ecstasy passes *through* death, or in trusting it *will* be given to us to offer in death, and not just *to* death (which would be ethical/masochistic) but through death because in hope of our own return along with the return of others. Thus to look for our collective participation in divine fullness of being is to transcend in an “objective” and self-less manner either egotistic or self-sacrificial concerns. For Spaemann this ecstasy is epitomized by the feast in which mere bodily need is transfigured in collective celebration: here we eat *only* because and when others eat, and yet we do not renounce ourselves, for we eat also.<sup>18</sup>

Hence the everyday ethical hope naturally leads to hope for resurrection. However, by contrast, the second two aspects of ethics are not mundane, but mythical, miraculous, magical, indeed in a sense child-like (and therefore Christian). After Shakespeare had written *Lear*, there was no possibility of his remaining with the unsurpassability of the tragic, because this would actually be to *underestimate* the end of *Lear*. Since this play discloses a universal tragic sway (we cannot redeem our losses and misdeeds, there is no forgiveness), one cannot either mitigate this circumstance nor come to terms with it; that is to say *accept* it, even though it is true. It is so bad, it *should* be turned away from, and yet it cannot be. It *must* be turned away from because it leaves *no possibility for the ethical* (and this is where “a piety of the tragic,” such as that of Donald Mackinnon, simply will not do, partly because it *still*, after all, *evades* the tragic). Hence the late Shakespeare has to imagine “another place,” or a mythical post-tragic sphere. Herein lie the second two aspects. First of all, Christianity *refuses*, having recognized a universal tragic condition, to ontologize this, but makes the extraordinary move of seeing the universal itself as but a contingent narrative upshot. Hence the story of the fall, and to ontologize this story in the manner of Hegel is to miss what here profoundly disturbs the entire project of “ontology” itself. For without the fall, or with the substitution of the notion of a necessary fall, one starts with an irreducible scarcity and egotism, and the ethical becomes that which reacts to a bad situation that it is secretly in love with, and needs ceaselessly to reinstate, despite the fact that this compromises the very character of the ethical. Therefore one *needs* the myth of the fall in order to think a genuine good, which to be non-reactive can only be an original plenitude. However, the danger here is to imagine that the fall originated in the *doing* of something bad. How can this be, if originally and by divine intention, to give or receive the gift in ignorance is always to give or receive an unknown good action? If, that is to say, the *entire* field of action is by definition “good” in a manner that cannot be qualified by the character of an intention. In this case original sin must instead mean *refusal*

of the field of action itself, defined as giving with joyful uncertainty in faith, a refusal that commences in the suspicion that one does not, after all, receive a good gift from the other. This is articulated better by Shakespeare than by *Genesis*: in *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes and Polixenes, Kings of Sicily and Bohemia, respectively, passed their boyhoods in seeming innocence, as if outside of time. Early in the play, Polixenes interprets their meeting with women, their future wives, or the arrival of "the other" in the course of time, as the moment of fall. But Hermione (Leontes' wife), to the contrary, ascribes marriage still to the reign of innocence, and indeed views the arrival of the women as the event of grace itself (an association that is maintained throughout the play) (I.2). This is an ironic passage, for in the context of the play the fall is still to come, and involves not a first *misdeed* by Leontes, but rather a first *suspicion* that Hermione has committed the sin of adultery. Here the fall is not an act, but rather a first mistrusting of the joyfully confident "risk" and uncertainty constitutive of the field of action (or, one might say, it is a first diminishing of act). Leontes misreads the *signs* of Hermione's affection for Polixenes, and thereby offends against necessary trust in the secrecy of the other. Hence "original sin," on this rendering, is the imagination of sin, the reading of the unknown as source of threat or poison rather than potential or gift. (In Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* the philosopher notes that the Hebrew words for adultery (*niouph*) and jealousy (*kinneah*), would have been invented by Adam<sup>19</sup> before the *actuality* of adultery on the grounds of suspicion alone.)

This reading of original sin therefore understands original blessedness by implication, not as deliberately "doing good" but as a state of good moral luck, or reception of grace. And original sin is here seen as nothing but the imagination that there could be a perversion of the field of action, malice from the other, such that the bad dream gives birth to a bad reality. The third aspect of ethics we have already detailed as hope for resurrection. Again, *The Winter's Tale* is instructive. Were this play more "realist" in the mode of Shakespeare's earlier plays, it could not be post-

tragic. Were Leontes to relent from mourning, resume control over his kingdom and ask pardon from Polixenes whom he has accused of adultery with Hermione, it would not, after all, for reasons we have seen, reinstate the ethical, although equivalents to such actions are our only usual recourse. The ethical, to the contrary, only returns fabulously with the return of Perdita and the seeming "resurrection" of Hermione (V.3). The reappearance of the latter as, at first, apparently a statue, who only gradually moves, is of crucial significance. For it dramatizes our fracture between a world of life that is real, in which the other can speak to us for a time and yet is doomed to be lost in a manner that renders life irredeemable, unforgivable and therefore *meaningless*, with a world of meaning or "art" (one could say language and culture) that is permanent, deathless and yet sterile: the statue cannot speak (and indeed only speaks again once, to acknowledge Perdita, the lost daughter). This fracture between meaningless life and lifeless meaning is another way of expressing our fallenness and incapacity to be good. Hence, when Hermione returns, she is not just resuscitated, but returns as both life and art, returns indeed like a kind of *perfected human intention*, where it is shown that the only good deed that could be given to us would be the capacity to raise another from the dead (after the fashion of the one good man who walked on earth). And, in addition, Hermione's continuing to be a statue means that her loss as living person is not simply *cancelled* – the spectators *continue*, we are told in the play, to sorrow, and are not sure whether their surprised ecstasy is one of mourning or of joy. In the resurrection of the dead, the dead one is given back to the living as in a sense still dead, still wounded, and yet uniquely innocent, so that he or she appears in the space of living exchange as surprising gift, beyond our life now in time, which is always the mere pursuit of security. In other words, Shakespeare does not articulate magic on this earth, but magic in another, transfigured earth which is the earth given back as manifest gift, rather like the walking crippled boy and the once again blooming garden of the forever mourned dead wife of the Lord of the Manor in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.<sup>20</sup>

## midwinter sacrifice

The transfiguration at the end of *The Winter's Tale* culminates in a double marriage: first of all of Perdita to Florizel, and so of Sicily to Bohemia (V.3). Thereby, in a final mutual giving of all future time, fallen anxiety is mended: for this had begun with the separation of bounded political kingdoms that were traditionally close allies. Again, this separation had commenced with suspicion, not deed. Leontes considered that he had become too friendly with Sicily (in the person of Hermione) – conversely, Polixenes wondered whether he had already stayed too long as a guest; in other words, received too much from Leontes, thereby incurring an unreturnable debt (since he comes from poorer, less exotic, northern Bohemia). The lack of permanent bonding, the lack of marriage and the ceaseless need for guarantees, with the consequent problematics of interpretation of signs, means that there is an anxiety about duty and extent of duty between the two kingdoms, an anxiety about when to live, enjoy, and consummate, and when to sacrifice and give to the other. This, as we have seen, renders ethics undecidable and impossible. Anxiety is surmounted only when enjoying and giving coincide in a communal ecstatic feast that is perpetual and so secure, no longer in need of any contractual re-establishment (which is not to preclude the need for constant mutual readjustments within the security of faith). Marriage is clearly a figure for this, as is confirmed by the second marriage in the play, of Camillo (Polixenes' servant) to Paulina (Hermione's maidservant), as the final deed of the play. Camillo had been in service to Leontes, but deserted to Polixenes, because he refused to go along with Leontes' suspicions. He nonetheless longed to return to Sicily, but Polixenes says to him that as he has come to rely on Camillo's sacrificial gifts of service, if Camillo ceases to give them he will in effect take back all that he has so far given. (George Herbert was soon to confront God with the same *aporia* in his poem *Gratefulness*.) Here an *aporia* of gift follows from a situation of forced obligation and alienated exile. But once again marriage restores free but mutual giving in asymmetrical reciprocity, since in marriage there is no interval of *debt* between gift and return (which would reduce gift

to a contractual economy) but rather absolute eternal coincidence of gift and exchange in the same moment that is ceaselessly perpetuated. Once Camillo is returned to his home, once political order is restored in the light of *resurrection*, the *aporias* of gift and the ethical are both suspended and resolved.

Nonetheless, we must at this point bear the examples of *L'Avventura* and *Le Colonel Chabert* in mind; Leontes might have remarried, and yet still resurrection could betoken a healing of the inevitable guilt involved. If the angelic state (as Christ says) does not inaugurate new marriages, then this implies a compatibility in the resurrected order of all erotic unions entered into on earth, since somehow they will all be taken up into the more general eschatological marriage of the Church as bride with the crucified lamb of God.

The opposite to the condition of married reconciliation in *The Winter's Tale* is the condition of utter abandonment. When Perdita was lost she was left in the capitalist north (Bohemia) with a cache of money (IV). As *only* alive, estranged from the inheritance of honour down the generations (which is all her mother Hermione declares she lives for: Act III, Scene 2, 92–115), she is reduced to a thing, a commodity. For that which is abandoned, outside donation, reception and mutuality, is after all such a mere *object* and *not*, as Marion would have it, a gift. Hence Derrida, Marion, Levinas, and Blanchot have all utterly failed to see that the private supposedly “free” gift of market society is *identical* precisely *as* abandoned, with the commodity of the capitalist mode of exchange.<sup>21</sup> Thus in Bohemia the abandoned Hermione has fallen into the world of calculating exchanges for money presided over by Autolycus, son of the mediating god Mercury. This is already the world in which we live, a modern world in which, unlike the past, nothing shields *everyone* from tragedy or the doom of endless “choice” that results in the sacrifice of some for others and unresolvable dilemmas and unhealed regret: a poisoning of the heterogenesis of ends that issues in ceaseless perversion of our intentions. Am I saying that our mercantile reality then reveals the raw truth of life in fallen time? Yes, but I am not, like

Derrida, ontologizing this truth. For I insist, instead, on the possibility of imagining the counter-reality of resurrection, and the possibility that this world already mysteriously participates in that reality. Embracing this possibility leads us to hope, even now, after the fall and before the end, for the gracious arrival of something better and to act within this hope. Such hope will note that the resolution of *The Winter's Tale* is political as well as religious – that Camillo, at home in the restored *polis* and *oikos*, can at last give freely. Hence, should our polity be restored by grace, would not anxiety about our necessary preference for some not others, and our apparent sacrifice of some for others, be eased in the knowledge that we are to love our *neighbours*, because we know that others are loving theirs? In other words we would rediscover that even the condition of *agape* can be fulfilled only within a *polis* where each of us exercises a particular – albeit unique and non-identically repeated – role. Equally, should hopeful ventures be encouraged and not thwarted, we would tend to rejoice at the course taken and laugh at the courses, thereby not taken, in the confident knowledge that everything is in any case excess, and there is an infinity on which all roads may be taken in the end. And, thirdly, if we lived in an economy of gift we would not be indifferent to the consequences of our acts, now treated like sellable products, but we would “go” with our gifts, and others in receiving them creatively would continue to care for us in this employment. Joyfully estranged from ourselves, we should sometimes find in this loss our gain, and always know that it would finally be so.

## II

Through the above reflections, incorporating a partial re-reading of one of Shakespeare's late plays, I have sought to suggest, first, that the ethical is only genuinely imaginable as a mutual and unending gift-exchange, construed as an absolute surrender to moral luck, or absolute faith in the arrival of the divine gift, which is grace. Secondly, that the sustaining of such an exchange requires a notion of resurrection and faith in the reality of participation in resurrec-

tion. The first element, gift-exchange, is paradigmatically figured either as feast or as marriage, and therefore is appropriately combined with the second element, resurrection, in terms of images of the heavenly banquet or the eschatological marriage of God and humanity, heaven and earth. Outside an overcoming of the present economy of death *as well as* sin, I have argued, and a practice that seeks to anticipate the resurrection Sabbath, there can be no notion of the good that does not fall prey to irresolvable *aporias*. Hence, in theological terms, I am arguing that resurrection is an inseparable moment of atonement, or that sacrifice is ethical only when it is also resurrection.

This complex of ideas, or characterization of the ethical as gift-exchange, feast, marriage, and resurrection, I am seeking to set in deliberate opposition to a recent consensus that would try to understand the ethical as *primarily* self-sacrifice for the other, without any necessary “return” issuing from the other back to oneself. This consensus itself involves an alternative complex of ideas: first of all, one has the notion that only an entirely sacrificial giving without any expectation of a counter-gift distinguishes the gift from a form of self-interested *contract*. Second, one has the notion that *death*, far from being complicit with evil (as I would understand it to be), is the *necessary condition for the event of the ethical as such*.<sup>22</sup> This is supposedly for two reasons: first, only our vulnerability, the possibility that we might die, allows us to make an appeal as needy people to our neighbour; only this circumstance provides the condition for an ethical demand. Second, only the capacity of the ethical subject to respond to the needy person, if necessary with his own death, guarantees his deed as truly ethical, as truly disinterested gift. Thirdly, one has the notion that “God” must be reduced to a shadowy hypostasized other lurking just behind the human other, because any God who interfered to “reward” the disinterested giver would undo the purity of this disinterest and the purity of the ethical realm. And so, in the fourth place, one arrives at the paradoxical affirmation that the true nobility and purity of religious self-sacrifice is realized only in a *secular* sphere, that here alone a dying for the other

achieves genuine sacred value. These positions are common to Patočka, Derrida, and probably Levinas, while the first point is espoused by Marion (although logically it should lead to the other three).

Let me now, in this second part of the essay, summarize and make more explicit the grounds for my rejection of ethics as unilateral gift and sacrifice in favour of ethics as gift-exchange and openness to divine grace, dealing with each of these four notions in turn. First, the idea of a fundamentally sacrificial, or unilateral gift, makes absolute one's inalienable self-possession of a will to sacrifice and so *preserves* the Hellenic notion of the ethical as the overcoming of moral luck or the arrival of that which unperturbably belongs to one, even if, or *especially* if, as for Derrida, this belonging or identity is secured only when one is no longer, when one is dead, and even if, or *especially* if, this identity is construed, as with Marion, as the debt to a giver that inaugurates subjectively as such (for this subjectivity supposedly outside all agency and judgement is thereby all the more inviolable). There is no true respect for the other involved here, since the gesture that allows the other to persist outside of his communication with you is seen as more definitive of the good than the living communication which you enjoy with the other: hence Levinas sees the other as only genuinely present in "trace," not in present image. But if we truly value the other we must value meeting him in his specificity and therefore *my* presence before the other is ineradicable from a situation that is paradigmatic for the ethical. Of course, one's celebration of such an encounter may *require* one in certain circumstances to sacrifice oneself, even unto death, and one can go further to say that in a fallen world the only path to the recovery of mutual giving will *always* pass through an element of apparently "unredeemed" sacrifice and apparently unilateral gift. But the point is that this gesture is not *in itself* the good and, indeed, I have argued, is *not* good at all outside the hope for a redemptive return of the self. To speak of such a return is not at all, however, to surrender to the lure of contract, because it is not the case that actual, self-present life is a mode of self-possession that we then

*surrender* in the sacrificial gesture unto death. Quite to the contrary, it is when we are giving, letting ourselves go, sometimes with unavoidable sacrificial pain, that we are always living and receiving back as ever different a true, abundant life (this is the gospel). Therefore, the resurrection hope preserves this logic at the limit: we do not hope (as Patočka and Derrida allege) for an extrinsic super-added reward for our giving up of an illusory self-possessed life; rather, we take it that a final surrender of an isolated life, a life indifferent to the pain of others, issues of itself – dare one say *automatically* – in a better more abundant life (and this "automatic" self-raising dimension of Jesus' resurrection, clearly articulated in the New Testament is shamefully glossed over by the pseudo-piety and mythologizing bent of exegetes who wish to speak only of a "a mighty act of the Father" (John 11.25; 12.24).

The fuller, more abundant life is a return of life always afresh, always differently. Hence, as I have argued elsewhere, what distinguishes gift from contract is not the absolute freedom and non-binding character of the gift (this is our Western counterpart to the *reduction* of exchange to contract that remains entirely uncriticized by Derrida and Marion, who are unable to assimilate the more truly critical lesson of Mauss) but rather the surprisingness and unpredictability of gift and counter-gift, or their character in space as *asymmetrical reciprocity*, and their character in time as *non-identical repetition*.<sup>23</sup> It should also be noted here that Derrida regards the event of a gift construed as a free, unilateral gift as an *impossibility*, since, short of death, one always does cancel one's giving in receiving something back, be it only the consciousness that one is a giver.<sup>24</sup> Only the dead person, on this account, only the subject who has passed beyond subjectivity, can be a true giver, just as the only disinterested gift is to an absolutely anonymous other – paradigmatically the enemy, says Marion – and cannot possess any identifiable content beyond the gesture of giving, because there is nothing about an object on this construal that makes it in itself a gift – although I would argue that the content of a gift alone determines whether it is an *appropriate* gift and therefore a gift at all.<sup>25</sup> For Derrida, therefore, a gift is only

ever a promise of a gift, perpetual postponement. And Marion's attempt to show that this impossible gift is really a phenomenologically *reduced* gift, having its special mode of being present outside the "presence" of Being and the mutual coincidence of giver and receiver, fails entirely. For this reduced gift, which is no identifiable object, and derives from no known source, and passes to no known willing recipient, can only be "recognized" in a fashion that can make no conceivable difference to actual ethical life. Such recognition acknowledges only the idol of an abstract God, whose gift is as effectively abyssal and absent as that of Marion's atheistic interlocutors. And where there is no intimation *whatsoever* of the donating source, a gift is simply an impersonal intrusion, whose lack of objectifiable content further renders it *arbitrary* on our part to interpret it *as* gift rather than as violent rupture. Equally, where there is no knowledge of a recipient, and one assumes even that he is hostile, there cannot truly be a gift, because a true gift must be considered and *appropriate* to its donee; hence one must *already* have entered into an exchange with her. Before a gift can be given, it must already have started to be received. For gift-giving is a mode of social being, and, in ignoring this, both Derrida and Marion remain trapped within Cartesian myths of prior subjectivity after all. However, Derrida is right, against Marion, to deconstruct his unnecessary Cartesian starting point, and one can agree with him that a unilateral, purely sacrificial gift can *never* occur, even if it is perhaps more defensible as a *gesture* than he alleges (see n 24). If there is a gift that can truly be, then this must be the event of reciprocal, but asymmetrical and non-identically repeated, exchange.

The second element in the complex of notions that construes the ethical as sacrificial is the idea of death as the ground of morality. I have already indicated how this manifestly celebrates something negative as the pre-condition of something positive, in a way that is self-contradictory, and I have already shown also how a self-surrender without hope of self-return *gives up on* the hope for ecstatic communication, for "feasting" and for "marriage," which is the only viable paradigm for the good itself. Although I take this paradigm

to be fully articulated only by Christianity, it is notably anticipated by Plato in the *Phaedo*, when he insists that warriors who die for the city out of fear of loss of honour are trading lesser fear for greater and lesser pain for greater pleasure of anticipation of undying fame (*Phaedo* 68d–69e). Socrates, in this dialogue, refuses the idea that virtue is a kind of coinage, and therefore refuses an ethical market economy that is also a *sacrificial* economy – something is given up, abandoned, in order to gain more. By contrast, the philosopher is in his essence a person who begins with absolute confidence, with the vision of the forms as that which cannot possibly be endangered, and therefore acts with genuine positivity, without fear and not with a merely apparent fearlessness that is in thrall to an even greater fear. For this reason the philosopher is good as first merely knowing, or receiving the vision of the forms and *not* as acting or as sacrificing in the sense of giving up something. (And, indeed, the Pythagorean tradition that precedes Plato already refrained from bloody, sacrificial rituals.<sup>26</sup>) Only in a secondary moment, out of the plenitude of vision, does he offer himself entirely, giving his whole body over to death, if the occasion arises (as it has, for Socrates). This is not, as modern philosophy tends to claim, *itself* an aspect of a sacrificial economy, in the sense of a "giving up" of the body and the passions for the gain of knowledge, since formed materiality and the passions are for Plato simply weak participations in a fuller ontological and erotic reality. Nothing real is lost here: there is only in *this* exercise of virtue a passage from lesser to greater. And later, in the Christian era, the records of the deaths of martyrs record a similar acceptance of suffering out of an already commenced plenitude of paradisaic vision.<sup>27</sup> (One should also note that the above implies a qualification of Nussbaum's verdicts on Plato and Aristotle: it is *Aristotle*, seeking a relatively secure inner citadel in time who limits "moral luck," whereas for Plato one entirely abandons oneself to the forms that arrive through the erotic lure of the other.)

This leads me to a discussion of the fourth notion in the complex of ideas that define the ethical as sacrificial: this is the idea that the sacred is fully realized in an atheistic or

demythologized mode. What this notion seeks ideologically to occlude from our view is the ever-present role of the city or the state intervening in order to maintain civic order<sup>28</sup> within our relationship to the other person or to God. This mediation is fundamentally inscribed in the very historical “transport” of sacrifice from practice to metaphor. One can mention two moments here in particular. First, the way in which, as Marcel Detienne has recounted, in Greek sacrifice the same scents and spices were involved in erotic play as in religious sacrifice, and it was in consequence thought important to divert an excess of sensation from the horizontal to the vertical plane. Unlike the Platonic instance, the bodily erotic is here not regarded as participatory, but as a real thing to be limited, kept in its place and to a degree “given up.” The burning spices should most appropriately spiral upwards to the divine realm. Here, then, is a kind of “giving up” or offering of material passion in favour of its sublimation, and so a limitation and confinement of its scope of operations.

In this context one should note that the specific language of “sacrifice of passions” does not, as far as I can see, occur in Greek philosophy. This is because, after Pythagoras, the more immaterialist tendency tended to advocate a non-bloody, non-civic sacrifice in which the upward passage of smoke indicated not so much the *offering* of passion as the transmutation of passion within the philosopher into higher passion.<sup>29</sup> Hence, amongst the Neoplatonists, sacrifice is specifically construed as *initiatory passage*, rather than as gift or offering.<sup>30</sup> It is only, perhaps, with Paul in *Romans* that one gets the language of “sacrifice of passions” and so an “internalization” of sacrifice – but the import here is entirely different from the vertical deviation of horizontal scents and spices. Rather, Paul is talking about an offering of self (soul and body) to a personal God that implicitly involves a trust in a return of self as a more abundant living soul and body.

The second moment concerns, as Martin Hengel has described, the way in which the death of the hero for the city was construed by the Greeks (and later still more the Romans) as equivalent to sacrifice, and indeed as rendering

the hero himself a fit recipient of sacrifice in turn.<sup>31</sup> In both these instances – that of the sacrifice of passion and of the sacrifice of the hero – one has the idea of the subsumption of something ontologically real and irreducible into a greater whole: in the one case the city, in the other the cosmic order. There is a notion here of loss without return, save for the posthumous praise of celebration of one’s austerity or bravery. A return of the *living self* is not involved, save in rather shadowy intimations of an after-life. But the point here to grasp is that modern secularity gets rid of even such intimations, and so *perfects* pagan logic, a logic of sacrificial obliteration of self either for an ideal, or for the city, or for both. Such a logic elevates *an abstract space*,<sup>32</sup> the notion of the perpetually abiding city that outlasts the lives of its citizens and is elevated in value above the lives of individual humans, even where this is disguised in the form of the notion of “sacrifice for future generations.” For since *every* generation should logically be subject to the same imperative, consummation is forever postponed, and indeed morality itself is *defined* as perpetual postponement or else as self-sacrifice (this *aporia* applies both to consequentialism focused upon the capital of pleasure, and to Kantianism focused upon the capital of “freedom”). Hence, already (as I have recounted elsewhere),<sup>33</sup> nineteenth-century positivism proclaimed that the secular, science-based community understands the true sacrality of sacrifice as “altruism” or surrender of the self for the future, for science, and for the state. And when our contemporary “postmodern” or else Levinasian thinkers discover the good, or the moral act or self-giving sacrifice to be perpetual postponement, they are simply perfecting this cruel and annihilating logic under whose tyranny we all now live. The *opposite* to this tyranny was remarkably articulated by John Buchan in his novel *Midwinter*, in which (in a highly Kierkegaardian fashion) the Jacobite hero of the story puts the salvation of a young girl in whom he is erotically interested before the well-being of his political cause, and, indeed, according to the plot of the novel, destroys that cause altogether. The extremity of his situation is not downplayed: “He saw his clan, which might have become great

again, reduced to famished vagrants,” and yet, encouraged by a fictionalized “Dr Johnson,” and the mysterious “Midwinter,” who represents in the story the mysteries of Diana, he is reconciled to his option as a truly Christian one:

Love had come to him, and he had passed it by, but not without making sacrifice, for to the goddess [Diana] he had offered his most cherished loyalties. Now it was all behind him – but by God, he did not, he would not regret it ... He had sacrificed one loyalty to a more urgent, and with the thought bitterness went out of his soul. Would Loehiel, would the Prince, blame him? Assuredly no.<sup>34</sup>

Reduced to a Lear-like “nakedness,” he is yet consoled by the thought that instead of sacrificing the singular to the all, he has sacrificed an (after all idolatrous and finally merely nominal) “all” to the singular, and so affirmed the resurrection hope for the return of each and every one, beyond the *aporia* of sacrificial options.

My claim, therefore, is that the idea of self-sacrifice unto death without return for the sake of “the whole,” even if that be the rule of moral duty to an unspecified other, is *not at all* the true moral kernel of the Jewish and Christian legacy, but much more a transcription of secular modernity that reads time not as a gift-of-self in the hope of an eternal return, but rather as a giving up of self in time for a future absolutized space that will never truly be set in place. One may note, for example, that parents who entirely sacrifice themselves for their children thereby betray them, since they fail to present them with any *telos* and example of a lived, enjoyed (and sexual) adult life. This claim can be substantiated from the evidence of the Bible. Biblical criticism shows that a typically near-eastern idea that “doing good” is a one-way operation proceeding downwards from the King towards those in need – “the widows and orphans” – was heavily qualified in the intertestamental period by the influence of Greek notions that good can be done by anyone – even a slave – and is more reciprocal or “exchangist” in character.<sup>35</sup> (And it would also be premature to conclude that the earlier Jewish perspective is wholly “unilateral” – this would ignore, in particular, the notion of “covenant.”<sup>36</sup>) A tension between the two

perspectives appears to be registered in the New Testament itself, where in Luke’s gospels “benefactors” or those who wield power by giving are regarded with suspicion, where one is adjoined to love one’s enemies and also, as already noted, not to invite to feasts those who can invite you back (Luke 6.32–35)<sup>37</sup> (though one may contrast this with the way Jesus’ death is preceded in this gospel by a *symposium* amongst friends). This is Derrida’s favoured locus for the Christian essence, and yet it is surely to be contrasted with St John’s gospel where there is no mention of loving enemies, where love seems to ceaselessly circulate amongst friends – I in you, and you in me – where there are erotic gestures, and where the disciples are described as the Father’s “gift” to the son, just as the son is his gift to the disciples. Also one finds here an integration of Hellenistic notions (deriving from the Socratic paradigm) of a dying for friends rather than the city, which is also a dying for the truly *ethical*.

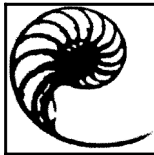
Now it may very well be argued that Christianity has combined both perspectives on giving, but if it has done so it is surely more fundamentally under the *aegis* of reciprocity. The final gift from the divine height (to “widows and orphans”) is received only as a gift also returned from below, in the incarnation of the *logos*, as the return of humanity to the Father. Likewise, God ceases to be a gesture of lonely superabundant giving, but instead his gift, which is the Holy Spirit, only *results* from, and is the manifestation of, the perfect mutuality of Father and Son. And, finally, the Son offers himself *not at all* for the earthly city, and not at all as the giving up of something for the sake of an even greater something else, not even himself for the sake of the cosmos or the other. The manner in which “he dies for his friends” is indeed not that they should live their self-possessed lives while he has lost his – as if he had saved them from drowning, or defended them in war – but rather in defence of the truth he has taught them, which is the absolute creative power of the Father, as truth only maintained and indeed fully taught in his resurrected return. It is this return that is commemorated when in the eucharistic gesture there is offered up to God *without division* bread and wine, and yet the people immediately

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consume this all themselves in its return to them as God's very flesh and blood.

In the eucharistic liturgy, humanity enters in advance into the divine Sabbath, the eschatological banquet and the cosmic nuptial, into the realm where once again we can entirely trust our every act as good precisely because we know that it will not merely follow our intention but be transformed and given back to us in a different and surprising mode.

Here, therefore, in the eucharist, we see the only possible paradigm for gift and therefore for ethics, not as one-way sacrifice but as total surrender for re-reception. Within this paradigm we can realize that to the degree that we are involved in some sense at certain times in both "feast" and "marriage" we are transported by the divine *logos*, which gives only to those reclined at the *symposium*, already above the time of death, such that we participate already in the time of resurrection. At this *symposium* and within this *conubium*, we give up everything, but not for the terrestrial city, and not even primarily for others: here we give up "absurdly" to God in order to confess our inherent nothingness and to receive life in the only possible genuine mode of life, as created anew. Here we hold on to nothing, here we possess nothing securely, in contrast with exclusively ethical models that are also sacrificial. Here instead we render ourselves entirely a prey to the mere good fortune that it might turn out that we have been ethical. But the name of this fortune is itself secretly grace, the gift or the Good; those names that convey all our Western longing.



### notes

1 John Milbank, "Can Morality be Christian?," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 8.1 (1995); reprinted in John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

2 Jan Patočka, *Essais hérétiques sur la philosophie de l'histoire*, trans. E. Abrams (Paris: Verdier, 1981). Jacques Derrida, "Donner la mort" in *L'Éthique du don*, eds. J.-M. Rabaté and Michael Wetzell (Paris: Métailié-Transition, 1992). Emmanuel Levinas, "Time and the Other" (Extract) in *The Levinas*

*Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Paris: Kluwer, 1990).

3 Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck" in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–80* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981) 20–39. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 1986).

4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109–1110.

5 See Robert Spaemann, *Glück und Wohlwollen: Versuch über Ethik* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1989) 85–95: "Die Antinomien des Glücks."

6 As seems to be affirmed by Jean-Luc Marion. See "Esquisse d'un concept phénoménologique du don," *Archivio di Filosofia* 62.1–3 (1994): 75–94.

7 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord vol. V, The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius P, 1991) 451–597.

8 See Spaemann, *Glück und Wohlwollen*, for this characterization, esp. "Vorwort" 9–11.

9 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978) 279–312.

10 Derrida, "Donner la mort" 64–65.

11 Spaemann 85–95: "Die Antinomien des Glücks"; 110–22: "Vernunft und Leben"; 123–140: "Wohlwollen."

12 Spaemann 89.

13 Marion, "Esquisse d'un concept phénoménologique du don."

14 For the arid pursuit of such conundra to their bitter end without *aufhebung*, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).

15 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991).

16 Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck."

17 Jacques Derrida, "Donner la mort" 54 ff., 64 ff.

18 Spaemann 110–22: "Vernunft und Leben," esp. 114–15.

19 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) III; VI, 44–47; V, 1–8.

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20 Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993). These magical aspects are very well brought out in Agnieska Holland's film of this novel (1994).

21 Marion, "Esquisse d'un concept phénoménologique du don."

22 See, especially, Derrida, "Donner la mort." And for a critique of this, Catherine Pickstock, *Seraphic Voices: Language, Death and Liturgy* (Oxford: Blackwell, forthcoming), chapter 3: "Signs of Death."

23 John Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given?" in *Rethinking Metaphysics*, eds. L.G. Jones and S.E. Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 119–61.

24 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time*. However, it might be contended here that there is no real contradiction between being truly disinterested and a virtuous satisfaction at a meta-level of awareness that we *are* disinterested. The unilateral gift is not so much impossible as objectionable as a final *telos*, even if in a fallen world it is normally an inescapable *imperative*. Marion's attempt to regard gratitude as a "meta-level" awareness that does not cancel the gratuity of the gift by returning it will *not*, however, work, because there is an imperative to *display* generosity and to do this in a delightful manner: gratitude *is* a counter-gift.

25 See Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given?"

26 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII, 13, 22 and see Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis* (New York: Hassocks, 1975).

27 I am indebted to Villiers Breytenbach for this point.

28 Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*.

29 I am grateful for discussions with Hildegard Canuk-Lindemaier on this point.

30 See Robert Alun Jones, "Robertson Smith, Durkheim and Sacrifice," *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences* XVIII (Apr. 1981): 184–205.

31 Martin Hengel, *The Atonement*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1981) 1–32. I am indebted to Wolfgang Stegemann for the point that Antique texts often use *sphagein* (whole-offering) rather than *plusia* in this context. It should be said, however, that Hildegard Canuk-Lindemaier thinks Hengel and Stegemann exaggerate lightly metaphorical usages.

32 See Pickstock, *Seraphic Voices*, chapter 2.

33 John Milbank, "Stories of Sacrifice," *Modern Theology* 12.1 (Jan. 1996): 27–56.

34 John Buchan, *Midwinter: Certain Travellers in Old England* (Edinburgh: B & W Publishing, 1993) 229–30. The "Sacrifice to Diana," which Buchan has, of course, derived from reading J.G. Frazer and Margaret Murray, is here deployed typologically (a) as a figure for genuine Christian sacrifice (a trope used also in the equally remarkable *Witchwood*) and (b) to suggest that since the foretype is still included, there can be an integration of a Platonic erotic and romantic moment in Christianity. (Again *Witchwood* conveys the same message and suggests that a "catholic" and "Platonic" Christianity holds the balance between a bleak uncharitable puritanism and a demonic neo-paganism; in the latter novel, it is Calvinist "justified sinners" who are also devil worshippers, implying that a fatalistic construal of grace, where our "return" of love is irrelevant and the divine decree is impersonal and arbitrary, is *dialectically identical* with an equally "returnless" love for the powers of darkness and destruction.)

35 See Hendrik Bolkestein, *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege in Vorchristlichen Altertum* (Utrecht: A. Oosthoek, 1939) and Willem Cornelis van Unnick, "Eine Merkwürdige Liturgische Aussage bei Josephus (Jos. Ant 111–113)" in *Josephus-Studien*, eds. O. Betz et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1974) 362–69.

36 See Milbank, "Can a Gift be Given?"

37 See Willem Cornelis van Unnick, "Die Motivierung der Feindeshebe in Lukas VI, 32–35," *Novum Testamentum* VII (1966): 284–300.

John Milbank  
Department of Religious Studies  
University of Virginia  
Charlottesville  
VA 22904-4126  
USA  
E-mail: milbank@virginia.edu