

Jacques Derrida on Christianity as sacrifice and gift

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Abstract—

It is the impossibility of Christ's incarnation and forgiveness of sins that makes the law possible as Christ came to fulfil the law rather than to defeat it. Derrida's injunction to forgive the unforgivable and move into a Derridean third space of thinking the impossible forgiveness of sins and holding one accountable to the death penalty for transgressions committed is an extension of his meditations on hospitality and forgiveness, extending Christian charity, forgiveness and hospitality as a move that exceeds the law and exceeds the thinking of the possible but it is precisely this impossibility of grace, mercy, Christian charity and forgiveness which makes the law possible just as the exception is necessary to thinking the rule.

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Derrida writes in *The Gift of Death* that faith is constituted by sacrifice and aporia. Everyday is a living sacrifice, in which I encounter God and make my gift of death like Abraham- a choice between fidelity to the mysterious tremendum and wholly Other that is God or betrayal of God and fidelity to one's kin. Abraham, in choosing to be faithful to God, betrays his own son and makes the gift of death to God as his living sacrifice. Faith is thus constituted by the aporia of simultaneous faith and betrayal, fidelity to the sacred and treachery to the worldly or ties of kinship. Faith is constituted by hatred, a hatred of one's own kinship that enables one to make the gift of death towards God. Faith is a double gesture of love of God as wholly other and hatred of one's own kin that enables one to make a gift of death towards God. Faith is thus a double gesture of love and betrayal. One has to betray in order to be faithful, to make a gift of death as a living sacrifice, to die to world and self in order to display fidelity and duty towards God.

Abraham thus makes a sacrifice that is both responsible and irresponsible – it is absolute duty to God but irresponsibility and a betrayal of his son. It is a duty that transcends human law- devotion to God demands sacrifice and treachery towards the human. Faith is thus paradoxically both love and betrayal. Derrida writes that responsibility is constituted by an aporia as well, it is simultaneously being held accountable to a general law and a unique and singular act of personal decision. It is thus simultaneously the submission to general ethics and a singular act of personal decision, both being subsumed by a general purpose and a singular decision that exceeds the general. Abraham as a knight of faith acts out of duty to God and yet makes the personal decision to make a living sacrifice of his son, thus dying to the self and acting singularly on the other hand. As an act of faith this constitutes a simultaneous death to self and singularity of decision, it is both submission to a general law and duty and a singular choice and decision, thus constituting a paradox.

Responsibility is thus both accountability to a general law and a unique singularity of purpose, it is paradoxically a dying to self and a taking up of a singular purpose. In the opening chapter of the book, Derrida deconstructs the relation between the sacred and the demonic. Religion defines itself by what it is not – the demonic, and thus only exists in a differential relation between the sacred and the demonic. Religion can only be defined in opposition of a mysterious tremendum to a demonic other, and thus can only exist in a relation to this demonic Other, the animal as opposed to Spirit. Religion is only encountered once the demonic secret has been surpassed into the secrecy of the Sacred. Religion thus proceeds by negation – defining itself in opposition to the demonic and thrives on the existence of this opposition to maintain its life and integrity. Faith is thus constituted by paradox- it is a double gesture of love and



betrayal, a dying to the self and a singular purpose, it exists only in negation of what it is not- the demonic. In the final chapters of the book Derrida writes of a central paradox that Jesus elucidates- to love your enemies and those that persecute you. It is thus asymmetrical and exceeds economy. Faith is a gift- to love those that do evil to you and thus exceed the bounds of utility and reciprocity. Faith is a gift that surpasses rationality and exchange. Derrida thus captures the essence of Christianity in his characterization of faith as a gift- a gift of love and a gift of death, it has to exceed reciprocity and to exceed self and world, towards the wholly Other and mysterious tremendum that is God.

In *The Death Penalty*, Derrida thus makes a meditation on the divine law that has enabled the thinking of both abolitionist and anti-abolitionist proponents which is the returning of the right of originating the law to God, in the case of the Abolitionists such as Victor Hugo they hold on to the sanctity of life and its inviolability as something Christ would uphold, and yet the anti-abolitionists too hold on to the view that the law that sanctions the death penalty such as subscribers to Kant's categorical imperative is divine and not of a worldly origin as God made the instruction to put to death anyone who has violated the law or taking another person's life.

Both abolitionist and anti-abolitionist views thus make claims to truth on the basis of interpretation of divine law, and yet what both views fail to account for is the Christian passion which does not hold a sinner accountable to his crime with the passion of Christ in which Christ cancels our debt by bearing our sin and forgiving our sin. Hence both laws uphold a need to hold a person accountable to his actions and the necessity of punishment and retribution while the Christian paradox is precisely a cancellation of debt, a relieving of accountability for one's actions, a forgiving of the unforgiveable.

This is the paradox of Christian charity, it gives and takes the place of sin and wrongdoing, in response to wrongdoing, one is told to turn one's cheek, in response to one's

enemies, one is told to forgive, in response to debts accumulated and owed, one is called to cancel one's debt and forgive, it is a giving in place of receiving, taking the place of he who has sinned and replacing indebtedness with forgiveness and cancellation of debt. While this may seem impossible to worldly eyes, Derrida precisely views Christianity as an impossible religion. As with most of his writing, Derrida holds that both abolitionist and anti-abolitionist views require one another and the truth is rather to be found in the third space of paradox which is neither abolitionist nor anti-abolitionist but to be found in the supreme paradox of the passion in which Christ substituted our debt with his restitution and cancelled the debt of our sin by taking on the role of a Creditor who takes our place for the punishment of sin and cancels our debt by suffering in our place- this paradox of substituting the forgiveness of sins for punishment- forgiving the unforgiveable- is Derrida's response to the necessity of the death penalty.

This third space of forgiving the unforgiveable and cancelling debt is neither abolitionist nor anti-abolitionist but between and beyond and a space that enables the thinking of both as the difference between both abolitionist and anti-abolitionist views because it moves beyond the realm of holding the death sentence holder accountable for his crime and moves into the realm of cancelling debt and forgiveness.

Derrida begins the book by examining a series of death sentences that have taken place in history- Jesus, Socrates, Hallaj and Joan of Arc who made blasphemous claims to be representatives of the divine and messengers of the truth. The paradox of these death sentences was that it was precisely these divine agents who embodied divine messages who were put to death for making true, rather than false claims to embody truth. The conflict was with authorities who construed their claims to truth as blasphemy and put them to death. Derrida thus exposes the paradox that worldly authorities execute divine agents on their own charges of blasphemy and thus the death sentence is in this case a violation of divine law by imposing man made and anthropomorphic judgements upon divine agents who exist beyond the necessity of

law. The aporia between the transcendent and the material is thus examined. It is man's law which is anthropomorphic and insufficient to account for divine law which puts these divine messengers to death.

Derrida moves on to juxtapose the abolitionist views such as Victor Hugo who call for the death penalty with anti-abolitionist views such as Camus and Nietzsche. The abolitionist views are made on the basis of the cruelty of the death penalty and the sacredness of man who is set apart from animals. Derrida further argues that these proponents of the abolitionist view have the hidden agenda of preserving their own lives because they fear death. Anti-abolitionist views found in Nietzsche and Camus argue against the sanctity of human life and the inviolability of human life on the grounds that man is not sacred or holy but no different from beasts as there is nothing sanctified or superior about man compared to animals. Again Derrida's response is that it is neither Victor Hugo or Kant or Camus and Nietzsche who hold the unequivocal truth as each term requires the repudiation of the opposing term to be upheld. It would be impossible to conceive of the inviolability of human life without its opposite view for Nietzsche who holds there is nothing particularly precious or sacred about human life and hence the truth is neither abolitionist nor anti-abolitionist but between.

Both abolitionist and anti-abolitionist views require the thinking of the opposing term to be upheld. It is necessary for the abolitionist to exclude anti-abolitionist views to be coherent, and hence proponents for the inviolability of human life need to recognize that they require the exclusion of the opposing term which is the non-sacredness of human life to be upheld.

These terms exist and have meaning relative to each other, hence it is the difference, paradox between these opposing terms and the Derridean third space that enables the thinking of both that is the truth, and this Derridean third space as I have mentioned earlier is a step beyond thinking the law and holding one accountable to the law to move into the impossible- which is forgiveness and cancellation of debt as Christ's passion and incarnation made possible.

It is the impossibility of Christ's incarnation and forgiveness of sins that makes the law possible as Christ came to fulfil the law rather than to defeat it. Derrida's injunction to forgive the unforgiveable and move into a Derridean third space of thinking the impossible forgiveness of sins and holding one accountable to the death penalty for transgressions committed is an extension of his meditations on hospitality and forgiveness, extending Christian charity, forgiveness and hospitality as a move that exceeds the law and exceeds the thinking of the possible but it is precisely this impossibility of grace, mercy, Christian charity and forgiveness which makes the law possible just as the exception is necessary to thinking the rule.

References:

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