

RELIGION AND POSTMODERNISM
A series edited by Mark C. Taylor and Thomas A. Carlson

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THE GIFT
OF DEATH
SECOND EDITION
&
LITERATURE
IN SECRET

JACQUES DERRIDA

TRANSLATED BY
DAVID WILLS

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THREE

Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know)

Mysterium tremendum. A frightful mystery, a secret to make you tremble.

Tremble. What does one do when one trembles? What is it that makes you tremble?

A secret always *makes* you tremble. Not simply quiver or shiver, which also happens sometimes, but tremble. A quiver can of course manifest fear, anguish, apprehension of death; as when one quivers in advance, in anticipation of what is to come. But it can be slight, on the surface of the skin, like when it announces the arrival of pleasure or an orgasm. It is a moment in passing, the suspended time of seduction. A quiver is not always very serious; it is sometimes discreet, barely discernible, somewhat epiphenomenal. It prepares for, rather than follows the event. One could say that water quivers before it boils; that is the idea I was referring to as seduction: a superficial pre-boil, a preliminary and visible agitation.

On the other hand, trembling, at least as a signal or symptom, is something that has already taken place, as in the case of an earthquake [*tremblement de terre*] or when one trembles all over. It is no longer preliminary even if, unsettling everything so as to imprint upon the body an irrepressible shaking, the event that makes one tremble portends and threatens still. It suggests that violence

WHOM TO GIVE TO (KNOWING NOT TO KNOW)

is going to break out again, that some trauma will insist on being repeated. As different as dread, fear, anxiety, terror, panic, or anguish remain from one another, they have already begun in the trembling, and what has provoked them continues, or threatens to continue to make us tremble. Most often we neither know nor see the origin—secret, therefore—of what is coming upon us. We are afraid of the fear, we anguish over the anguish, and we tremble. We tremble in the strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past (a shock has been felt, some trauma has already affected us) to a future that cannot be anticipated; anticipated but unpredictable; *apprehended*, yet, and this is why there is a future, *apprehended* precisely *as* unforeseeable, unpredictable; approached *as* unapproachable. Even if one thinks one knows what is going to happen, the new instant, the arriving [*arrivant*] of that arrival remains untouched, still inaccessible, in fact unlivable. In the repetition of what still remains unpredictable, we tremble first of all because we don't know from which direction the shock came, whence it was given (whether a good surprise or a bad shock, sometimes a surprise received *as* a shock); and we tremble from not knowing, in the form of a double secret, whether it is going to continue, start again, insist, be repeated: whether it will, how it will, where, when; and why this shock. Hence I tremble because I am still afraid of what already makes me afraid and which I can neither see nor foresee. I tremble before what exceeds my seeing and my knowing [*mon voir et mon savoir*] although it concerns the innermost parts of me, right down to my soul, down to the bone, as we say. Inasmuch as it tends to undo both seeing and knowing, trembling is indeed an experience of secrecy or of mystery, but another secret, another enigma, or another mystery comes to overlay the unlivable experience, adding yet another seal or concealment to the *tremor*. (That is the Latin word for "trembling," from *tremo*, which in Greek as in Latin means *I tremble*, *I am afflicted by trembling*; in Greek there is also *tromeō*: I tremble, I shiver, I am afraid; and *tromos*, which means trembling, fear, fright. In Latin, *tremendus*, *tremendum*, as in *mysterium tremendum*, is a gerundive derived from *tremo*: what makes one tremble, something frightening, distressing, terrifying.)

Where does this supplementary seal come from? One doesn't know *why one trembles*. This limit to knowledge no longer relates only to the cause or event, the unfamiliar, unseen, or unknown that makes us tremble. Neither do we know why it produces this particular symptom, a certain irrepressible agitation of the body, the uncontrollable instability of its members, a tremor of the skin or muscles. Why does the irrepressible take this form? Why does terror make us tremble, since one can also tremble with cold, and such analogous physiological manifestations translate experiences and sentiments that appear, at least, not to have anything in common? This symptomatology is as enigmatic as that of tears. Even if one knows why one weeps, in what situation and what it signifies (I weep because I have lost one of my nearest and dearest, the child cries because he has been beaten or because she is not loved: she causes herself grief, complains, he makes himself complain or allows himself to be felt sorry for—by means of the other), but that still doesn't explain why the lachrymal glands come to secrete these drops of water which are brought to the eyes rather than elsewhere, the mouth or the ears. We would need to make new inroads into the thinking of the body, without dissociating the registers of discourse (thought, philosophy, the bio-genetico-psychoanalytic sciences, phylo- and ontogenesis), in order to one day come closer to what makes us tremble or what makes us cry, to that *cause* which is not the final cause that can be called God or death (God is the cause of the *mysterium tremendum*, and the death that is given is always what makes us tremble, or what makes us weep as well) but the closest cause; not the immediate cause, that is to say the accident or circumstance, but the cause closest to our body, that which brings about trembling or weeping rather than something else. What are they metaphors or figures for? What does *the body mean (to say)* by trembling or crying, presuming one can speak here of the body, of saying or meaning, and of rhetoric?

What makes us tremble in the *mysterium tremendum*? It is the gift of infinite love, the dissymmetry that exists between the divine regard that sees me, and myself, who doesn't see what is looking at me; it is the gift and endurance of death that exists in the irreplaceable, the disproportion between the infinite gift and my

finitude, responsibility as culpability, sin, salvation, repentance, and sacrifice. As in the title of Kierkegaard's essay *Fear and Trembling*,¹ the *mysterium tremendum* includes an at least implicit and indirect reference to Saint Paul. In the Epistle to the Philippians 2:12, the disciples are asked to work toward their salvation in fear and trembling. They will have to work for their salvation knowing all along that it is God who decides: the Other has no reason to give to us and no explanation to make, no reason to share his reasons with us. We fear and tremble because we are already in the hands of God, although free to work, but in the hands and under the gaze of God, whom we don't see and whose will we cannot know, no more than the decisions he will hand down, nor his reasons for wanting this or that, our life or death, our salvation or perdition. We fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible, that is to say free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death.

So Paul says—and this is one of the “adieux” I mentioned earlier:

Wherefore my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence (*non ut in praesentia mei tantum, sed multo magis nunc in absentia mea*/mē hōs en tē parousia mou monon alla nun pollō mallon en tē apousia mou), work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (*cum metu et tremore/meta phobou kai tromou*).²

This is a first explanation of the fear and of the trembling, and of “fear and trembling.” The disciples are asked to work toward their salvation not in the presence (*parousia*) but in the absence (*apousia*) of the master: without either seeing or knowing, without hearing the law or the reasons for the law. Without knowing from whence the thing comes and what awaits us, we are given over to absolute solitude. No one can speak with us and no one can speak for us; we

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 6, *Fear and Trembling, and Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Page references are to this edition.

2. Philippians 2:12. All biblical quotations are from the King James Version. —Trans.

must take it upon ourselves, each of us must take it upon himself (*auf sich nehmen*, as Heidegger was saying concerning death, our death, concerning what is always “my death,” and which no one can take on in place of me). But there is something even more serious at the origin of this trembling. If Paul says “adieu” and absents himself as he asks them to obey, in fact ordering them to obey (for one doesn’t ask for obedience, one orders it), it is because God is himself absent, hidden and silent, separate, secret, at the moment he has to be obeyed. God doesn’t give his reasons, he acts as he intends, he doesn’t have to give his reasons or share anything with us: neither his motivations, if he has any, nor his deliberations, nor even his decisions. Otherwise he wouldn’t be God, we wouldn’t be dealing with the Other as God or with God as *wholly other* [*tout autre*]. If the other were to share his reasons with us by explaining them to us, if he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn’t be the other, we would share a type of homogeneity. Discourse also partakes of that sameness; we don’t speak with God or to God, we don’t speak with God or to God as with others or to our fellows. Paul continues in fact:

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)³

One can understand why Kierkegaard chose, for his title, the words of a great Jewish convert, Paul, when it came to meditating on the still Jewish experience of a secret, hidden, separate, absent, or mysterious God, the one who decides, without revealing his reasons, to demand of Abraham that most cruel, impossible, and untenable

3. In sometimes adding the Greek or Latin, I am following the Grosjean and Léturmy translation (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade). What they translate as *son bon plaisir* (“his good pleasure”) doesn’t refer to God’s pleasure but to his *sovereign* will that is not required to consult with anybody, just as the king acts as he pleases without revealing his secret reasons, without having to account for it or explain it. The text names not God’s pleasure but his will: *pro bona voluntate* or *hyper tēs eudokias*. *Eudokia* means “good will,” not just in the sense of a will that is good (desiring the good), but of a simple will that judges well, for its pleasure, as in their translation; for that is his will and it suffices. *Eudokeō*: “I judge well,” “I approve,” sometimes “I am pleased” or “I take pleasure in,” “I consent.”

gesture: to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. All that goes on in secret. God keeps silent about his reasons. Abraham does also, and the book is not signed by Kierkegaard, but by Johannes de Silentio (“a poetic person who only exists among poets,” Kierkegaard writes in the margin of his text [Pap. IV B 79, *Fear and Trembling*, 243]).

This pseudonym keeps silent, it expresses the silence that is kept. Like all pseudonyms, it seems destined to keep secret the real name *as* patronym, namely the name of the father of the work, in fact the name of the father of the father of the work. This pseudonym, one among many that Kierkegaard employed, reminds us of something obvious: a meditation linking the question of secrecy to that of responsibility immediately addresses the name and the signature. One often thinks that responsibility consists in acting and signing *in one’s name*. A responsible reflection on responsibility is interested in advance in whatever happens to the name in the event of pseudonymity, metonymy, homonymy, in the question of what constitutes a *real name*. Sometimes one says or wishes it more effectively, more authentically, in the secret name by which *one calls oneself*, which *one gives oneself or affects to give oneself*, the name that is more *naming* and *named* in the pseudonym that in the official legality of the public patronym.

The trembling of *Fear and Trembling*, is, or so it seems, the very experience of sacrifice. Not, first of all, in the Hebraic sense of the term, *korban*, which refers more to an approach or a “coming close to,” and which has been wrongly translated as “sacrifice,” but inasmuch as sacrifice presumes the putting to death of the unique in terms of its being unique, irreplaceable, and most precious. It also therefore refers to the impossibility of substitution, the unsubstitutable; and then also to the substitution of an animal for man; and finally, especially this, by means of this impossible substitution itself, it refers to what links the sacred to sacrifice and sacrifice to secrecy.

Kierkegaard—de Silentio recalls Abraham’s strange reply to Isaac when the latter asks him where the lamb is to be found for the sacrifice. It can’t be said that Abraham doesn’t respond to him. He says God will provide. God will provide a lamb for the holocaust ([“burnt offering,”] Genesis 22:8). Abraham thus keeps his secret at the same time as he replies to Isaac. He doesn’t keep silent and he

doesn't lie. He doesn't speak nontruth. In *Fear and Trembling* (*Problema III*), Kierkegaard reflects on this double secret: between God and Abraham but also between the latter and his family. Abraham doesn't speak of what God has ordered him, and him alone, to do, he doesn't speak of it to Sarah, or to Eliezer, or to Isaac. He must keep the secret (that is his duty), but it is also a secret which he *must* keep as a double necessity because at bottom he *can only* keep it: he doesn't know it, he is unaware of its ultimate rhyme and reason. He is sworn to secrecy because he is in secret.

Because, in this way, he doesn't speak, Abraham transgresses the ethical order. According to Kierkegaard, the highest expression of the ethical is in terms of what binds us to our own and to our fellows (that can be the family but also the actual community of friends or the nation). By keeping the secret, Abraham betrays ethics. His silence, or at least the fact that he doesn't divulge the secret of the sacrifice he has been asked to make, is certainly not designed to save Isaac.

Of course, in some respects Abraham does speak. He says a lot. But even if he says everything, he need only keep silent on one single thing for it to be concluded that he hasn't spoken. Such a silence takes over his whole discourse. So he speaks and doesn't speak. He responds without responding. He responds and doesn't respond. He responds indirectly. He speaks in order not to say anything about the essential thing that he must keep secret. Speaking in order not to say anything is always the best technique for keeping a secret. Still, Abraham doesn't just speak in order not to say anything when he replies to Isaac. He says something that is not nothing and that is not false. He says something that is not a nontruth, something moreover that, although *he doesn't know it yet*, will turn out to be true.

To the extent that, in not saying the essential thing, namely the secret between God and him, Abraham doesn't speak, he assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, retrenched in one's own singularity at the moment of decision. Just as no one can die in my place, no one can make a decision, what we call "a decision," in my place. But as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity. One

therefore loses the possibility or the right to decide. Thus every decision would, fundamentally, remain at the same time solitary, secret, and silent. Speaking relieves us, Kierkegaard notes, for it "translates" into the general (113).⁴

The first effect or first destination of language therefore deprives me of, or delivers me from, my singularity. By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak, I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique. This is such a strange contract—both paradoxical and terrifying—that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secret. It goes against what one usually thinks, even in the most philosophical mode. For common sense, just as for philosophical reasoning, the most widely shared presumption is that responsibility is tied to the public and to the nonsecret, to the possibility and even the necessity of accounting for one's words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them. Here, on the contrary, it appears just as necessarily that the absolute responsibility of my actions, to the extent that it has to remain mine, singularly so, something no one else can perform in my place, implies instead secrecy. But what is also implied is that, by not speaking to others, I don't account for my actions, I answer for nothing, I make no response to others or before others. It is both a scandal and a paradox. According to Kierkegaard, *ethical* exigency is regulated by the generality; and it therefore defines a responsibility that consists of *speaking*, that is to say of involving oneself sufficiently in the generality to justify oneself, to give an account of one's decision and to answer for one's actions. On the other hand, what does Abraham teach us, in his approach to sacrifice? That far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to irresponsibility. It impels me to speak, to reply, to account for, and thus to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept.

4. The English translation gives "the universal" for *det Almene*, whereas "the general" is closer to the Danish and is the term Derrida uses. Note also Kierkegaard's distinction between *individueel* ("individual") and *enkelt* ("singular"), which anticipates Derrida's here. For this and other clarifications of the English translation I am grateful to Elsebet Jegstrup and Mark Taylor.—Trans.

Such is the aporia of responsibility: one always risks not managing to accede to the concept of responsibility in the process of *forming* it. For responsibility (we would no longer dare speak of "the universal concept of responsibility") demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution; and on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence, and secrecy. What I am saying here about responsibility can also be said about decision. The ethical involves me in substitution, as does speaking. Whence the insolence of the paradox: for Abraham, Kierkegaard declares, *the ethical is a temptation*. He must therefore resist it. He keeps silent in order to escape the moral temptation which, under the pretext of calling him to responsibility, to self-justification, would make him lose his ultimate responsibility along with his singularity, make him lose his unjustifiable, secret, and absolute responsibility before God. This is ethics as "irresponsibilization," as an insoluble and therefore paradoxical contradiction between responsibility *in general* and *absolute* responsibility. Absolute responsibility is not a responsibility, at least it is not general responsibility or responsibility in general. It needs to be exceptional or extraordinary, and it needs to be that absolutely and par excellence: it is as if absolute responsibility could no longer be derived from a *concept* of responsibility, and therefore, in order for it to be what it must be, it must remain inconceivable, indeed unthinkable: it must therefore be irresponsible in order to be absolutely responsible. "Abraham *cannot* speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything . . . that it is an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation" (115).

The ethical can therefore end up making us irresponsible. It is a temptation, a tendency or a facility that would sometimes have to be refused in the name of a responsibility that doesn't calculate or give an account, neither to man, to humans, to society, to our fellows, or to our own. Such a responsibility keeps its secret, it cannot and need not present itself. Tyrannically, jealously, it refuses to present itself before the violence that consists of asking for accounts and justifications, summonses to appear before the law of men. It declines the autobiography that is always auto-justification, *égodicée*.

Abraham *presents himself*, of course, but before God, the unique, jealous, secret God, the one to whom he says "Here I am." But in order to do that, he must renounce his family loyalties, which amounts to violating his oath, and refuse to present himself before men. He no longer speaks to them. That at least is what the sacrifice of Isaac suggests (it would be different for a tragic hero such as Agamemnon).

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In the end secrecy is as intolerable for ethics as it is for philosophy or for dialectics in general, from Plato to Hegel:

The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed. The single individual, qualified as immediate, sensate, and psychical, is the hidden. Thus his ethical task is to work himself out of his hiddenness and to become disclosed in the universal. Every time he desires to remain in the hidden, he trespasses and is immersed in spiritual trial from which he can emerge only by disclosing himself.

Once again we stand at the same point. If there is no hiddenness rooted in the fact that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal, then Abraham's conduct cannot be defended, for he disregarded the intermediary ethical categories. But if there is such a hiddenness, then we face the paradox, which does not allow itself to be mediated, since it is based precisely on this: the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal. . . . The Hegelian philosophy assumes no justified hiddenness, no justified incommensurability. It is, then, consistent for it to demand disclosure, but it is a little bemuddled when it wants to regard Abraham as the father of faith and to speak about faith. (82, translation modified)

In the exemplary form of its absolute coherence, Hegel's philosophy represents the irrefutable demand for manifestation, phenomenalization, and unveiling; thus, it is thought, it represents the request for truth that inspires philosophy and ethics in their most powerful forms. There are no final secrets for philosophy, ethics, or politics. The manifest is given priority over the secret; universal generality is superior to individual singularity; no irre-

ducible secret can be legally justified (*fondé en droit* says the French translation)—and hence the instance of the law has to be added to those of philosophy and ethics; there is no absolutely legitimate secret. But the paradox of faith is that interiority remains “incommensurable with exteriority” (69). No manifestation can consist in rendering the interior exterior or in showing what is hidden. The knight of faith can neither communicate to nor be understood by anyone, she can’t help the other at all (71). The absolute duty that obligates her with respect to God cannot have the form of generality that is called duty. If I obey in my duty toward God (which is my absolute duty) *in terms of duty alone*, I am not entering into a relation with God. In order to fulfill my duty toward God himself, I must not act *out of duty*, by means of that form of generality called duty, which can always be mediated and communicated. The absolute duty that binds me to God himself, in faith, must function beyond and against all duty: “The duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God” (68). Kant explains that to act morally is to act “out of duty” and not only “by conforming to duty.” Kierkegaard sees acting “out of duty,” in the universalizable sense of the law, as a dereliction of one’s absolute duty. It is in this sense that absolute duty (toward God and in the singularity of faith) implies a sort of gift or sacrifice that reaches toward a faith beyond both debt and duty, beyond duty as a form of debt. This is the dimension that provides for a “gift of death” which, beyond human responsibility, beyond the universal concept of duty, is a response to absolute duty.

In the order of human generality, a duty of hate is implied. Kierkegaard quotes Luke 14:26: “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and his wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Recognizing that “this is a hard saying” (72), Kierkegaard nevertheless upholds the necessity of it. He refines its rigor without seeking to make it less shocking or paradoxical. But Abraham’s hatred for the ethical and thus for his own (family, friends, relatives, nation, but at the outside humanity as a whole, his own kind or species) must remain an absolute source of pain. If I put to death or

grant death to what I hate, it is not a sacrifice. I must sacrifice what I love. I must come to hate what I love, in the same moment, at the instant of granting death. I must hate and betray my own, that is to say offer them the gift of death by means of the sacrifice, not insofar as I hate them—that would be too easy—but insofar as I love them. I must hate them insofar as I love them. Hate wouldn’t be hate if it hated only the hateful, that would be too easy. It must hate and betray what is most lovable. Hate cannot be hate, it can only be the sacrifice of love to love. It is not a matter of hating, of betraying by a breach of trust, or of offering the gift of death to what one doesn’t love.

But is this heretical or paradoxical knight of faith Jewish, Christian, or Judeo-Christian-Islamic? The sacrifice of Isaac belongs to what one might just dare to call the common treasury, the terrifying secret of the *mysterium tremendum* that is a property of all three so-called religions of the Book, the religions of the races of Abraham. This exaggerated rigor, and the demand it entails, compel the knight of faith to say and do things that will appear (and *must* even be) atrocious. They will necessarily revolt those who profess allegiance to morality in general, to Judeo-Christian-Islamic morality or to the religion of love in general. But as Patočka will say, perhaps Christianity has not yet thought through its own essence, any more than it has the irrefutable events out of which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have emerged. One cannot ignore or erase the sacrifice of Isaac recounted in Genesis, nor that recounted by Luke in the Gospels. It has to be taken into account, which is what Kierkegaard proposes. Abraham comes to hate those closest to him by keeping silent, he comes to hate his only beloved son by consenting to put him to death [*lui donner la mort*]. He hates them not out of hatred, of course, but out of love. He doesn’t hate any less for all that, on the contrary. Abraham must love his son absolutely in order to come to the point where he will grant him death, to commit what ethics would call hatred and murder.

How does one hate one’s own? Kierkegaard rejects the common distinction between love and hate, he finds it egoistic and without interest. He reinterprets it as a paradox. God wouldn’t have asked Abraham to put Isaac to death, that is to say to make a gift of death

as a sacrificial offering to himself, to God, unless Abraham's love for his son was absolute, unique, and incommensurable:

for it is indeed this love for Isaac that makes his act a sacrifice by its paradoxical contrast to his love for God. But the distress and the anxiety in the paradox is that he, humanly speaking, is thoroughly incapable of making himself understandable. Only *in the instant* when his act is in absolute contradiction to his feelings, only then does he sacrifice Isaac, but the reality of his act is that by which he belongs to the universal, and there he is and remains a murderer. (74, translation modified)

I have underlined the word *instant*: "the instant of decision is madness," Kierkegaard says elsewhere. The paradox cannot be grasped in time and through mediation, that is to say in language and through reason. Like the gift and "the gift of death," it remains irreducible to presence or to presentation, it demands a temporality of the instant without ever constituting a present. It belongs to an atemporal temporality, to a duration that cannot be grasped: something one can neither stabilize, establish, *grasp* [*prendre*], *apprehend*, or *comprehend*. Understanding, common sense, and reason cannot seize, conceive, understand [*begreifen*], or mediate it; neither can they negate or deny it, implicate it in the labor of the negative, make it work: in the act of *giving death*, sacrifice suspends both the labor of the negative and labor itself, perhaps even the work of mourning. The tragic hero has access to mourning. Abraham, on the other hand, is neither a man of mourning nor a tragic hero.

In order to assume his absolute responsibility vis-à-vis absolute duty, to put his faith in God to work, or to the test, he must also in reality remain a hateful murderer, for he consents to put to death. In both general and abstract terms, the absoluteness of duty, of responsibility, and of obligation certainly demands that one transgress ethical duty, although in betraying it one still belongs to it and at the same time recognizes it. The contradiction and the paradox must be endured *in the instant itself*. The two duties must contradict one another, one must subordinate (incorporate, repress) the other. Abraham must assume absolute responsibility for sacrificing his son

by sacrificing ethics, but in order for there to be a sacrifice, the ethical must retain all its value; the love for his son must remain intact, and the order of human duty must continue to insist on its rights.

The account of Isaac's sacrifice can be read as a narrative development of the paradox that inhabits the concept of duty or of absolute responsibility. This concept puts us into relation (but without relating to it, in a double secret) with the absolute other, with the absolute singularity of the other, whose name here is God. Whether or not one believes the biblical story, whatever credence or credit one gives to it, whether one doubts or transposes it, it could still be said that there is a moral to this story, even if we take it to be a fable (but taking it to be a fable still amounts to losing it to philosophical or poetic generality; it means that it loses the quality of an historic event). The moral of the fable would be morality itself, the point where morality brings into play the gift of the death that is so given. The absolutes of duty and of responsibility presume that one denounce, refute, and transcend, at the same time, all duty, all responsibility, and every human law. They call for a betrayal of everything that manifests itself within the order of universal generality, and everything that manifests itself in general, the very order and essence of manifestation; namely essence itself, essence in general to the extent that it is inseparable from presence and from manifestation. Absolute duty demands that one behave in an irresponsible manner (by means of treachery or betrayal), while still recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming the very thing one sacrifices, namely the order of human ethics and responsibility. In a word, ethics must be sacrificed in the name of duty. It is a duty not to respect, out of duty, ethical duty. One must behave not only in an ethical or responsible manner, but in a nonethical, nonresponsible manner, and one must do that *in the name of* duty, of an infinite duty, *in the name of* absolute duty. And this name, which must always be singular, is here none other than the name of God as wholly other, the nameless name of God, the unpronounceable name of God as other to which I am bound by an absolute, unconditional obligation, by an incomparable, nonnegotiable duty. The other as absolute other, namely God, must remain transcendent, hidden, secret, jealous of the love, requests, and commands that he gives and that he asks to

be kept secret. Secrecy is essential to the exercise of this absolute responsibility as sacrificial responsibility.

In terms of the moral of morality, let us here insist upon what is too often forgotten by the moralizing moralists and good consciences who preach to us with assurance every morning and every week, in newspapers and magazines, on the radio and on television, about ethical or political responsibility. Philosophers who don't write ethics are failing in their duty, one often hears, and the first duty of the philosopher is to think about ethics, to add a chapter on ethics to each of his or her books and, in order to do that, to come back to Kant as often as possible. What the knights of good conscience don't realize, is that "the sacrifice of Isaac" illustrates—if that is the word in the case of such a nocturnal mystery—the most common and everyday experience of responsibility. The story is no doubt monstrous, outrageous, barely conceivable: a father is ready to put to death his beloved son, his irreplaceable loved one, and that because the Other, the great Other, asks him or orders him without giving the slightest explanation. An infanticide father who hides what he is going to do, without knowing why, from his son and from his family, what could be more abominable, what mystery could be more frightful (*tremendum*) vis-à-vis love, humanity, the family, or morality?

But isn't this also the most common thing? what the most cursory examination of the concept of responsibility cannot fail to affirm? Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and binds me in my absolute singularity to the other as other. God is the name of the absolute other as other and as unique (the God of Abraham defined as the one and unique). As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty. I am responsible before the other as other; I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him. But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order).

I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other* [*tout autre est tout autre*]; everyone else is completely or wholly other. The simple concepts of alterity and of singularity constitute the concept of duty as much as that of responsibility. As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned *a priori* to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the exposure of conceptual thinking to its limit, to its death and finitude. As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is to say by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. I put to death, I betray and lie, I don't need to raise my knife over my son on Mount Moriah for that. Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over the other, to this or that other to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably. Abraham is faithful to God only in his treachery, in the betrayal of his own, and in the betrayal of the uniqueness of each one of them, exemplified here in his only beloved son. He would not be able to opt for fidelity to his own, or to his son, unless he were to betray the absolute other: God, if you wish.

Let us not look for examples, there would be too many of them, at every step we took. By preferring what I am doing here and now, simply by giving it my time and attention, by giving priority to my work or my activity as a citizen or professorial and professional philosopher, writing and speaking here in a public language, French in my case, I am perhaps fulfilling my duty. But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don't know, the billions of my fellows [*semblables*] (without mentioning the animals that are even more other than my fellows) who are dying of starvation or sickness. I betray my fidelity or my obligations to other citizens, to those who don't speak my language and to whom I neither speak nor respond, to each of those who listen or read, and to whom I

neither respond nor address myself in the proper manner, that is to say in a singular manner (this for the so-called public space to which I sacrifice my so-called private space), thus also to those I love in private, my own, my family, my sons, each of whom is the only son I sacrifice to the other, every one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day.

This is not just a figure of style or an effect of rhetoric. According to 2 Chronicles, chapters 3 and 8, the place where the sacrifice of Abraham or of Isaac (and it is the sacrifice of both of them, it is the gift of death one makes to the other in putting *oneself* to death, mortifying oneself in order to make a gift of this death as a sacrificial offering to God) is said to have occurred, this place where death is given or offered, is the place where Solomon decided to build the House of the Lord in Jerusalem, as well as the place where God appeared to Solomon's father, David. However, it is also the place of the grand Mosque of Jerusalem, the place called the Dome of the Rock near the grand mosque of El Aksa where the sacrifice of Ibrahim is supposed to have taken place, and from where Mahomet was transported on horseback toward paradise after his death. It is just above the destroyed temple of Jerusalem and the Wailing Wall, not far from the Way of the Cross. It is therefore a holy place but also a place that is in dispute, radically and rabidly, fought over by all the monotheisms, by all the religions of the unique and transcendent God, of the absolute other. These three monotheisms fight over it, it is useless to deny it by means of some wide-eyed ecumenism; they make war with fire and blood, have always done so and all the more fiercely today, each claiming its particular perspective on this place and claiming an original historical and political interpretation of Messianism and of the sacrifice of Isaac. The reading, interpretation, and tradition of the sacrifice of Isaac are themselves sites of bloody, holocaustic sacrifice. Isaac's sacrifice continues every day. Countless machines of death wage a war that has no front. There is no front between responsibility and irresponsibility but only between different appropriations of the same sacrifice, different orders of responsibility also, different other orders: the religious and the ethical, the

religious and the ethico-political, the theological and the political, the theologico-political, the theocratic and the ethico-political, and so on; the secret and the public, the profane and the sacred, the specific and the generic, the human and the nonhuman. Sacrificial war rages not only among the religions of the Book and the races of Abraham that expressly refer to the sacrifice of Isaac, Ishmael, Abraham or Ibrahim, but between them and the rest of the starving world, within the immense majority of humankind and even those living (not to mention the others, dead or nonliving, dead or not yet born) who don't belong to the people of Abraham or Ibrahim, all those others to whom the names of Abraham and Ibrahim have never meant anything because they don't conform or correspond to anything.

I can respond to the one (or to the One), that is to say to the other, only by sacrificing to that one the other. I am responsible to any one (that is to say to the other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice, I must always hold my peace about it. Whether I want to or not, I will never be able to justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other. I will always be in secret, held to secrecy in respect of this, for nothing can be said about it. What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable (this is Abraham's hyperethical sacrifice), as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment. These singularities represent others, a wholly other form of alterity: one other or some other persons, but also places, animals, languages. How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every day for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people? How would you justify your presence here speaking one particular language, rather than there speaking to others in another language? And yet we also do our duty by behaving thus. There is no language, no reason, no generality or mediation to justify this ultimate responsibility which leads us to absolute sacrifice; absolute sacrifice that is not the sacrifice of irresponsibility on the altar of responsibility, but the sacrifice of the most imperative

duty (that which binds me to the other as a singularity in general) in favor of another absolutely imperative duty binding me to the wholly other.

God decides to suspend the sacrificial process. He addresses Abraham, who has just said, "Here I am." "Here I am": the first and only possible response to the call by the other, the originary moment of responsibility such as it exposes me to the singular other, the one who appeals to me. "Here I am" is the only self-presentation presumed by every form of responsibility: I am ready to respond, I reply that I am ready to respond. Whereas Abraham has just said "Here I am," and taken his knife to slit his son's throat, God says to him, "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me" (Genesis 22:12). This terrible declaration seems to display God's satisfaction at the terror that has been expressed (I see that "you fear God [*Elohim*]," you tremble before me). It causes one to tremble through the fear and trembling it evokes as its only reason (I see that you have trembled before me, okay, we are quits, I free you from your obligation). But it can also be translated or argued as follows: I see that you have understood what absolute duty means, namely how to respond to the absolute other, to his call, request, or command. These different registers amount to the same thing: by commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, to put his son to death by offering a gift of death to God, by means of this double gift wherein the gift of death consists in putting to death by raising one's knife over someone and of putting death forward by giving it as an offering, God leaves him free to refuse—and that is the test. The command is requesting, like a prayer from God, a declaration of love that implores: tell me that you love me, tell me that you turn toward me, toward the unique one, toward the other as unique and, above all, over everything else, unconditionally; and in order to do that, make a gift of death, give death to your only son and give me the death I ask for, that I give to you by asking you for it. In short God says to Abraham: I can see right away [*à l'instant*] that you have understood what absolute duty toward the unique one means, that it means responding where there is no reason to be asked for or

given; I see that not only have you understood that as an idea, but that—and here lies responsibility—you have acted on it, you have put it into effect, you were ready to carry it out *at this very instant* (God stops him *at the instant when there is no more time, where time is no more given*, as if Abraham had *already* killed Isaac: the concept of the instant is always indispensable): thus you had *already* acted on it, you are absolute responsibility, you had the courage to behave like a murderer in the eyes of the world and of your loved ones, in the eyes of morality, politics, and of the generality of the general or of your kind [*du générique*]. And you had even renounced hope.

Abraham is thus at the same time the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible of men, absolutely irresponsible because he is absolutely responsible, absolutely irresponsible in the face of men and his family, and in the face of the ethical, because he responds absolutely to absolute duty, disinterestedly and without hoping for a reward, without knowing why yet keeping it secret; answering to God and before God. He recognizes neither debt nor duty to his fellows because he is in a relationship with God—a relationship without relation because God is absolutely transcendent, hidden, and secret, not giving any reason he can share in exchange for this doubly given death, not sharing anything in this dissymmetrical covenant. Abraham considers himself to be all square. He acts as if he were discharged of his duty toward his fellows, his son, and humankind; but he continues to love them. He must *love* them and also *owe* them everything in order to be able to sacrifice them. Without being so, then, he nevertheless feels absolved of his duty toward his family, toward the human species [*le genre humain*] and the generality of the ethical, absolved by the absolute of a unique duty that binds him to God the one. Absolute duty absolves him of every debt and releases him from every duty. Absolute ab-solution.

The ideas of secrecy and exclusivity [*non-partage*] are essential here, as is Abraham's silence. He doesn't speak, he doesn't tell his secret to his loved ones. He is, like the knight of faith, a witness and not a teacher (*Fear and Trembling*, 80), and it is true that this witness enters into an absolute relation with the absolute, but he doesn't witness to it in the sense that to witness means to show, teach, il-