Book reviews / Comptes rendus

The Gift of Death
JACQUES DERRIDA.
Translated by David Willis. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 115p.

This fascinating little book begins from a reflection on the recent French translation of Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History* that winds through the themes of secrecy, death, sacrifice, gift, God and religion in order to pose the question of moral responsibility in the context of the destiny of Europe. Patočka was a student and associate of Edmund Husserl who, toward the end of Husserl's life, received from him a gift of a desk-top lectum that had originally been a gift from T.G. Masaryk during their student days in Leipzig.[1] Masaryk was a philosopher and the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic after the First World War who probably influenced Husserl in his early life to take up the study of philosophy. Thus, Patočka symbolically received the weight of a philosophical tradition intertwined with the destiny of Czechoslovakia and Europe. He carried forth this tradition when he became one of the founders and key spokesmen for the dissident democratic civic initiative Charta 77. When, at nearly 70 years of age, he died under police interrogation on March 13, 1977, Patočka became one of the key "events" of contemporary philosophy. Like Socrates, his life embodied the claim and the tragedy of philosophy in the public arena. In Derrida's formulation, Patočka's text advocates political and historical action "according to the logic of a messianic eschatology that is nevertheless indissociable from phenomenology" (28).

When Derrida takes up the question of responsibility in dialogue with Patočka, it does not seem to be in a mode of "deconstruction" which his previous studies adopted toward Plato, Saussure, Rousseau, Husserl and others. Pervading this book is a relation of intimate and respectful dialogue with Patočka — and later also Lévinas and Kierkegaard — as he meticulously creeps toward formulating his "obscure proverb" (97) for responsibility *"Tout autre est tout autre"* which the translator renders as "Every other (one) is every (bit) other." When Derrida criticizes Patočka — for underestimating the

pervasiveness of the critique of masks in favour of authenticity throughout the history of philosophy (36), and for not considering the possible importance of sexual difference in analyzing death (45) — we seem to be in the presence of philosophical dialogue of a more traditional sort. The radical other, or outside, that previously "motivated," or worked in, deconstruction seems to have come inside, as it were, to inhere in the singularity of each one that is the secret of European responsibility.

Patočka delineates European history through the Platonic attempt to surpass Greek orgiastic mystery religion through a separation of the individual ego from its prior fusion with the community and the later Christian attempt to surpass the Neoplatonic ego through the notion of a gift from God, unachievable through a humanly motivated *ascesis* toward the light, that reaches from the divine toward humanity. There are thus three main epochs of the West, for Patočka, in which death takes on a different meaning — at first more individualized, then, in a manner that weaves together freedom and responsibility and "comes from a gift received from the other, from the one who, in absolute transcendence, sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible" (40).[2] What is important for Derrida in this characterization of European responsibility is Patočka's "more Nietzschean than Husserlian or Heideggerian" (19) sense of the incorporation of prior epochs within later ones such that they remain unsurpassed and problematic within the later, highest form. "Platonic mystery thus *incorporates* orgiastic mystery and Christian mystery *represses* Platonic mystery" (9).[3] We have thus yet to learn the gift of death.

Derrida's reflections begin to take leave of Patočka at this point. While section one is devoted to Patočka, section two (the shortest, and where his two criticisms of Patočka are located) carefully winds in the theme of the death of the other that is not in Patočka — or, to be more accurate (since Patočka certainly speaks of sacrifice) — is not the main orientation of Patočka's reflection on responsibility. The influence of Lévinas begins to take over when Derrida claims that "it is because the *other* is mortal that my responsibility is singular and 'inalienable'" (46). He renews his meditation on the word "adieu" and problematizes the Christian reference of Patočka's work by arguing that the reference to a revelatory event is not crucial in this context.[4] Section three interprets the sacrifice of Isaac as "what one might just dare to call the common treasure, the terrifying secret of the *mysterium tremendum* that is a property of all three so-called religions of the book" (64). The fourth and final section proposes his "obscure proverb" *tout autre est tout autre* and, significantly, ends with a short passage on Nietzsche. It would be too simple to say that Derrida begins with Patočka's conception of responsibility as authenticity in the face of one's own death, a traditional theme in philosophy from Plato to Heidegger (36), and winds gradually

toward a conception which is oriented to the other (and thus indebted to Lévinas) so that one can hear the echoes of a Jewish response to Christian claims to define European ethics — both because Derrida is very careful to avoid such an oversimplifying polarization and because to phrase it that way would threaten to evacuate the space of this "common treasure" and thus of a philosophical-religious speech that could explore it. But it is interesting, after all, that while Derrida says "God" throughout the text, at one point only, in the context of describing God as "wholly other" and as "found everywhere there is something of the wholly other" (78), he instead says "Jahweh."

Responsibility is thus tied to the singularity of death and, through sacrifice, to the mortality of the other. In this sense, death does not communicate; anything or anyone else cannot replace it. Derrida's claim, expressed in his own voice distinct from reference to his interlocutors in this text, is that "dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised, or transmitted. ... Death would be this possibility of *giving and taking* [*donner-prendre*] that actually exempts itself from the same realm of possibility that it institutes, namely, from *giving and taking*. But to say that is far from contradicting the fact that it is only on the basis of death, and in its name, that *giving* and *taking* become possible" (44). There are thus two utterly distinct registers: one of the ordinary exchange of mutual obligation and indebtedness, another of the exorbitant claim of responsibility that goes beyond, even undermines and sacrifices, the ethical or political generality. The call of responsibility will always go beyond what the community can understand; the community always threatens to make one irresponsible, though the community-to-come will be made possible by this call (74).

The fourth section begins by connecting the story of Abraham and Isaac to the daily institutionalized injustice that structures our current world. The father willing to sacrifice his own son would be a scandal to any civilized community. But such a civilized community, ours in fact, "because of the structure of the laws of the market that society has instituted and controls, because of the mechanisms of external debt and other similar inequities, that same "society" *puts to* death or (but failing to help someone in distress accounts for only a minor difference) *allows* to die of hunger and disease tens of millions of children (those neighbours or fellow humans that ethics or the discourse of rights of man refer to) without any moral or legal tribunal ever being considered competent to judge such a sacrifice, the sacrifice of others to avoid being sacrificed oneself" (86). He earlier has considered and rejected the claim that one is responsible in the first place to those to whom one is near. "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 hyper-ethical sacrifice), as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment" (71). If the nearness of some versus the others is not

a claim on responsibility, but rather a moment of the ethic-political generality that tends toward complacency, then the face of any other, even another that I will never see, shakes to its foundation the joy within my own house. Derrida's exorbitant notion of responsibility is frightening, for it undermines any sense in which the face of my child might have a greater claim on my responsibility than another. Of course, that my child is more precious to me than others is unavoidable, even a necessary aspect of human love, but Derrida seeks to separate this necessary connection to singularities from justification, from anything that might tie it to the story of European responsibility.

This book thus continues Derrida's messianism, his search for justice always beyond the rule of law or of familiar "responsibilities" by undermining any ground from which one might distinguish near from far. One's own particularity through which one is tied to singularities is torn by deconstruction away from justice. In ceasing to be a self-defence, or restitution of my own, deconstruction becomes a messianic justice, a rigorous logic which, in undermining the claims of my own, restitutes the claims of those who are not heard or seen, and demands that we see and hear them. As Derrida has written elsewhere, justice is not subject to deconstruction because deconstruction *is* justice.[5] It cannot operate without "justifying the principle of a radical and indeterminable infinite" which has "yet another essential affinity between it and a certain messianic spirit."[6] I'm not sure if one should understand political messianism as significantly different than utopianism, but it seems to me that the danger of utopianism is one of the tragic lessons of our century. By leaping over the partial here and now for the remote and complete goal, utopianism has proven too likely to sacrifice present, imperfect human beings as means to ultimate ends. Derrida insists on the separation of messianic eschatology from any teleology,[7] which perhaps utopianism needs, but it seems to me that to equalize responsibilities to all others not only seems to subtract from justice the necessary particularity of my connection to these others more than those, it also seems to come dangerously close to sacrificing the present on the altar of the future. Derrida has clarified the necessarily revolutionary character of messianic hope as "open, waiting for the event*as* justice" and as "waiting without horizon of expectation."[8] Insofar as this messianism is a waiting without teleology, it may escape the danger of utopianism but surely it could only do this by separating itself from the political action that might attempt to practice the hope. I'm not sure whether Derrida is speaking here of a hope that one may protect and pass on but which would be distorted by entering directly into the practical world, or if he is attempting to clarify the secret impetus to political action. The former case escapes utopianism, but surely also revolution, since it comes down on the side of waiting without political effect whereas the latter one courts exactly

the danger of revolutionary overthrow in impatience with "merely" partial redressing of injustice. To my mind, if there is any hope of bringing these two necessary registers of human hope together, it cannot be by leaping over the particularities of my own life that tie me to other singularities but by in some way linking them to the larger hope that inheres in them. The face of my child links me to the faces of all other children. Surely, my attempt to be a good father connects me to the pain of the mothers and fathers who see their children die of hunger in Somalia, or anywhere. It is not wrong, nor even unjustifiable, that I eat; it is wrong that others do not do so also — though one day there may only be enough bread for one of us and responsibility will be most tested then. I cannot speak with any authority on what messianism is, but it seems to me that the hope of humanity cannot be divorced from what is near and dear in the way that Derrida wants to, and in that sense it appears as though he courts the danger of political utopianism.

The call of responsibility away from the settled community is borne in the interiority of the subjectivity constructed when God looks at me such that I cannot look back. This asymmetry between finite mortal and infinite gift is the basis of guilt (51, 94). "God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior" (108).[9] This radical other who looks but is not seen refers justice to all "others." "God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere that there is something of the wholly other" (78). Thus, Derrida recalls the Judeo-Christian tradition not as contingent history but follows Patočka in regarding it as essential to justice in our time. The final pages turn to Nietzsche's genealogy of Christian responsibility that finds the origin of God in the reciprocal exchange between debtor and creditor. Nietzsche attempts to integrate even that which cannot be exchanged, grace, which he calls "the privilege of the strongest, better still, their super-law" (*Genealogy of Morals*, quoted 114) and which Derrida calls a hyperbolic repression, a sacrificial *hubris*, that "takes this economy to its excess in the sacrifice of Christ for love of the debtor" (114). But he finds another secret within "belief" as that which confers an infinite status on God and which Derrida locates not outside exchange but suspended in the very relation between exchanges. He imagines Nietzsche as asked by his own text how one could "believe" this history of interiority and responsibility. His last sentence remarks cryptically that "Nietzsche must indeed believe he knows what believing means, unless he means it is all make-believe" (115). The book thus ends by suggesting, without explaining, that Nietzsche does not have the last word on the history of Christianity, nor, one could surmise, on the interpretation of European responsibility as *ressentiment*, insofar as he himself is within the history of belief that not only forms the object of his critique but which makes it possible. By this route, Derrida's text returns to the history of European responsibility that it attempts

to discuss and carry forward. Probably that is why this text is not a deconstruction, nor aims at one. It is oriented to what motivates deconstruction, what links it to justice and the messianic, and thus to deconstruction as an episode of the call of responsibility. Is his attempt to find its secret hidden between what is exchanged rather than outside the relation a gift from deconstruction, from Judaism, from the "common treasure," or from some hitherto unknown place? There are five blank pages after the final word.

Notes

1 For an account of Patočka's life and philosophy, see Erazim Kohak, "Jan Patočka: A Philosophical Biography" in *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

2 Derrida points out that Patočka's conception of Christianity is not orthodox, that it conceives of Christianity as a yet unaccomplished task because of the weight of the unsurpassed legacy on which it has built (6, 28, 48-9).

3 Derrida builds one of the strange claims that seem to me characteristic of the "all or nothing" stance of deconstruction on this persistence of the prior in the supposedly surpassed. "The Platonic philosopher is in *no better a position than an animal* to "look at" death in the face and so assume that authenticity of existence ..." (20, emphasis added). That the Platonist has not definitively overcome orgiastic religion doesn't imply that nothing has been achieved. It rather indicates the opposite, surely. The statement seems to deny any sort of advance by Platonism because the advance is not as complete or as unequivocal as Platonism would have it. It compares a finite advance, because it was initially claimed to be infinite, to an infinite standard and thereby finds it indistinguishable from nothing. It seems to me that this is why, though this "deconstructive" claim is in the book, the book is not a deconstruction. Responsibility is not nothing, even though it is still to come.

4 Derrida spoke about Lévinas's writing on the French word "adieu" in his funeral oration for Lévinas on 28 December 1995. It is reprinted as "Adieu" in *Critical Inquiry* 23, Autumn 1996.

5 Jacques Derrida, "The Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority'" in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carleson (eds.) *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) *passim*, but especially p. 15, and Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 28, 59, 90.

6 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* p. 90.
7 *Ibid.*
8 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
9 Strangely, Derrida feels it necessary to point out to his readers that God is not someone up in the sky (108). This shift of register in the text is striking. It makes on wonder who Derrida's readers are, or who he thinks they are.

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Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics
JEAN GRONDIN
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, 256 p.

As a brief overview of the historical influences of philosophical hermeneutics Grondin's book is first-rate. Evidence of extensive research in various areas of hermeneutics (especially theological hermeneutics) is supplemented by a vast sixty-page bibliography, complete with its own index.

There are two main themes at play in this book, and they cause more tension than harmony. First, Grondin's task is "to introduce readers to the philosophical dimension of hermeneutics" (xv), in which lies its claim to universality. This claim is not that of absolute certainty but of the "philosophical task" (ix) of re-tracing the "inner word" (xv) of expression. Hermeneutics is explained as the reverse of expression: whereas expression "makes what is contained within knowable from without," hermeneutics "tries to penetrate an uttered expression to see the spirit contained within it" (21). It is in this spirit, as the attempt to express experience, that the universal dimension of hermeneutics lies.

Grondin uses the various ways in which philosophers have conceived of the universality of hermeneutics in order to trace its history. To summarize briefly, Augustine is noted for countering the view that the meaning of Scripture is merely 'allegorical' by claiming that the words themselves bear their 'spiritual' meaning. Understanding is always possible insofar as "[t]he word truly perceived — that is, according to its inner tendency — is already spirit" (41). Schleiermacher developed Augustine's theory to account for the author's intention. His 'psychological' hermeneutics (which was to supplement 'grammatical' or contextual hermeneutics) suggests that interpretation is an endless task, since we can never fully grasp the author's intention; "From the outset, then, the interpreter must be on guard against possible misunderstanding," promoting "an ever deeper interpretation" (70,

71). Universality now consists not in the working out of an inner word known beforehand by God, but in the endless task of reconstructing the author's intention.

Dilthey, in turn, uses Schleiermacher's psychological hermeneutics to overcome the distance between an interpreter and an historical expression. His claim is that since we share the same quest for bringing experience to expression, we share an ability to understand expressions in terms of our own historical context (85-88). Universality comes now to be attributed to the historian's access to the meaning of an historical object. Finally, Heidegger and Gadamer transform the shared historical background of Dilthey's science into an ontological structure underlying all human behaviour (Chapters 5 and 6). The inner word becomes the universal concern of *Dasein* to bring its being, and thereby its world, into meaning, while interpretation becomes the unfolding of the context of understanding. The finitude belonging to every interpretation by virtue of its historicality is shown to be a problem only as long as truth is assumed to be absolute. But now the universality of hermeneutics comes to be located in the very task of expressing being within language, which is stimulated by the very finitude that thwarts exhaustive expression (11, Chapter 6).

So far, Grondin has not presented anything new. What is novel in his book is the second theme; that is, the non-linear development of hermeneutics. Grondin claims that "we need to avoid presenting the history of hermeneutics as a teleological process" (3), as other writers on hermeneutics have done. Grondin develops this thesis in two ways. First, Grondin calls into question certain lines of development that are traditionally attributed to the history of hermeneutics. Grondin demonstrates, for example, that Stoic and Medieval sources that are usually employed to ground hermeneutics are limited in scope. Augustine and Luther are shown to have no comprehensive view of hermeneutics, and Luther's student, Flacius, to have been responsible for most of the contributions generally attributed to Luther (Chapter 1). The contributions made by Schleiermacher are similarly revealed as more the result of work done by Lucke and Dilthey than by Schleiermacher himself (67). Grondin further argues that Dilthey never really gave up his search for an absolute grounding of history in psychology (88-89), and Heidegger's contributions are described as having been overshadowed by his interest in the meaning of Being (92, 103-4). According to Grondin, then, the idea of a comprehensive hermeneutics is quite recent — as recent as the writings of Gadamer! (The thesis sounds like Thomas Hobbes' comment that civil philosophy is "no older ... than my own book."[1])

The other way that Grondin develops his non-linear history of hermeneutics is by presenting a period of obvious development that has been virtually ignored by its heirs. In Chapter 2 Grondin discusses the grandiose

hermeneutical theories developed by Dannhauer, Chladenius and Meier, all of whose work remained in the shadow of the Enlightenment. Despite the apparent Modernistic tone to much of their writings, they are very close to Romantic hermeneutics and, yet, they appear to have been largely unknown to Schleiermacher and Dilthey. All of this, according to Grondin, suggests the lack of linearity in the history of hermeneutics.

The non-linear thesis, on its own, is interesting enough. Grondin presents a lot of material in a compact and digestible volume. But one begins to wonder what the actual point of his analysis really is. If he wants merely to expand on and enrich the current discussion of the history of hermeneutics, then he has made a substantial contribution indeed. But the tone of the beginning of the book is much stronger, suggesting a radical re-reading of hermeneutics. If the latter is Grondin's intention, then his position is weak in at least two serious respects. First, it is hard to see how a strong non-linear thesis can be made commensurable with Grondin's description of the universality of hermeneutics; a description that seems itself to be an appropriation of a more or less linear history. Second, it seems highly unlikely that any of the authors who allegedly 'misread' history would claim to be doing anything more than what Grondin himself is doing; namely, re-tracing their own historically bound interpretive context. I do not see, then, how Grondin's non-linear thesis is capable of accomplishing the bold task that he has claimed for it. Further, I do not see Grondin's book as the best introduction to the philosophical *problem* of hermeneutics. So much time is spent on developing the non-linear thesis that only about four pages remain devoted to each of the discussions of the relations between philosophical hermeneutics and, respectively, positivism, ideology critique, and post-modernism. The brevity of this chapter of Grondin's book leaves one wondering what all the fuss has been about.

To get an answer to this question, one must look at some of those 'other' books that suggest linearity in the history of hermeneutics. But perhaps one lesson to be learned from Grondin is that the relation between philosophy and history is complex, and perhaps not adequately dealt with in the format usually employed by other texts. The greatest value of this book, then, perhaps lies not in its historical accuracy or the way in which it penetrates into the recent philosophical debate, but rather its untiring unfolding of the historical dimension of hermeneutics, and in its attempt to formulate this unfolding as a philosophical problem in its own right. His success in both regards ensures that Grondin's book will occupy a major position in the very history of hermeneutics that it has adopted as its theme.

Notes

1 Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Philosophy: The First Section, concerning Body*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. W. Molesworth, vol. I (London, 1839) Ep. Ded., ix.

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***Knowing Other-wise**: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality*
JAMES H. OLTHUIS, Editor
New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, 268p.

This collection of essays is designed to find a place for ethical talk in postmodern philosophy. As we wander through these essays, what we find is a plea for ethical discussions to once again become the 'mother tongue' for ontological and epistemological dialogues. Each of these essays makes a case for ethics and either shows how ontology *without* ethics is devastating or how ontology *presupposes* an ethics in the first place. While the authors all agree on the primacy of ethics, they disagree about whether the study of ontology actually presupposes or simply requires an ethical analysis.

The central theme in this book — namely, the idea that ontology and epistemology without ethics is dangerous — is developed against the rational ideal of the Enlightenment, where reason violently silences all marginal others. This oppressive ideal, already critiqued by Derrida, Foucault and Lévinas, continues to be a threat against the possibility of communication with the other. The demand for ethics found in this collection, founded upon a recognition of how the ethics of rationality has failed us, takes up Lévinas' question, "Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality".[1] How it is possible to talk about the other, how we *ought* to talk about the other, and finally, how the talk of the other is inescapable (since the other is always irreducibly brought to our attention as our limit) are some of the weighty questions developed in this book.

Knowing Other-Wise looks to "...understand what the renewed contemporary interest in spirituality means for philosophy" (20). This spiritual reawakening marks a reaffirmation of a self that stands despite the fashionable deconstruction and dissembling of subjectivity. Leaving the Cartesian self in its ashes, we are able to find another *different* self, since "...the fact that the modern self of absolute agency is an illusion does not demonstrate that there is no such entity as a self...there is still room for an agent self...a gifted/called self, gifted with agency and called to co-agency by

an *Other*" (239). The self and the other, found through their intersection and limits, re-emerge not from reason but, rather, from an awareness of responsibility and mutual affection. The impulse towards the other is not a product of a rational and controlled agent. Instead, the movement towards the other is already undertaken every step of the way, as we see in our limits the face of the other as a powerful force beyond our control. The force and claim that the other has over us ushers in the recognition that addressing and encountering the other is our existential condition.[2] In short, these authors show that it makes good sense to talk "...of a core self of continuity, coherence, and agency" (246).[3]

But how are we *really* to address this other? After acknowledging that we cannot escape the other, our authors have tried to see how it is possible, and in what manner, we may speak *of* and *for* the other. A few of these authors are very aware of the problem of how, if the other transcends reason, we can ever be in touch with that which transcends and cannot be contained within reason.[4] This problem reaches its climax when we ask whether speaking of the other is *even possible* and, if so, in what manner we ought to do this. This dilemma also gets translated into the question of how we may speak of *god*; for, as Olthuis puts it, "...postmodern voices are declaring that the death of God finds its completion only in the death of the self" (236). How can we speak of that which both transcends language and is also, at every linguistic frame and turn, necessarily limited by our words? Can we speak *at all* of the other or of god? Is speaking necessarily a violence against the other? But what of remaining silent? Is silence already a speaking? If we speak *of* god do we then claim to speak *for* god? (229) Can we ever avoid speaking *violently*? In recommending silence have we not already spoken of the other; isn't it already too late? Smith develops this last question in, what I consider to be, one of the better essays in this collection. I say 'better' not because he comes up with a 'better solution' but because he is tackling a 'better' question; that is, one that seems like it should be on the tip of everyone's tongue when trying to work ethics in and out of postmodernism. In short, 'better' here means more relevant, urgent and pertinent.

Given the fact that we cannot help but have already spoken, our authors suggest that we must try to occupy some middle ground where we avoid speaking violently but also avoid *not* speaking. But why *must* we try to occupy this middle ground? What reason, what justification, can be given? Even in our appeal to reasons and justifications are we again not reverting back to foundationalism?[5] I would like to see these questions addressed explicitly by each author. I feel as though the dinner buffet had been swept away just after I found something tasty. Sadly, I must admit that I am not convinced that we *ought* to try to occupy this 'middle ground' or that this is something we can *will* or *try* to do at all. Is the *willing* and *trying* to do what

is 'right' not again just another masked crusader of Reason riding high on its illusion of being steered by a prevailing and conquering subject? Not only do I find myself deeply desiring a good motive for seeking such a 'middle ground', I further find myself wondering whether any 'middle ground' is possible given that all language necessarily cuts, limits, and excludes.

The possibility of ethics goes hand in hand with the very *demand* for an ethics. This demand, piercing to the heart of each piece of work in this collection is, itself, a little unstable. Whereas for Lévinas this demand would "...already be a manifestation of 'the ethical relation'"[6], it is not clear what position our authors would take in this matter. While ethics is shown to be *necessary* it is not *always* obvious that the ethical relation is either *original and/or unavoidable*. With or without Lévinas' help, it is still apparent that our authors have not addressed Robert Bernasconi's serious objection precisely against such a demand.[7]

As we question the possibility of ethics or, more specifically, the possibility of occupying a 'middle ground' in language, we only find a description of what this 'middle ground' would look like. Smith describes it as 'good story-telling' where good news is announced (218).[8] These 'good' stories are not '*the story*' for, in recognizing that 'certainty' is an illusion, we come to see our story as only one of many (229). These 'good' stories are stories of healing that are told well. In telling a good story *well* we are revealing and attesting to what meant good news for us (229-30).

So now my question becomes: how can we tell a *good* story from the others? What makes a good story *good?* Is it *good* because it is *delivered* as such or is it *good* because it is *received* as such? It seems as though the goodness consists of a bit of both. What troubles me here is how the good story, told well, may be understood *as good* in light of some appeal to an 'intention' of the subject who delivers the story. I'm not sure that we have to wind back to such an appeal but we certainly run the risk of doing so in this book when we find that the good story, told well, relies upon the speaker's ability and desire to only speak to others about what he/she believes to be beneficial.

But still, I ask, why prefer this 'good story-telling' to something else? Certainly there can be nothing in the world itself that is more 'properly' *revealed* through good story-telling. In response, I suppose our authors might say that we tell good stories in *response* to a *call* that we receive as a gift.[9] Could we not equally say that there is a *call* to tell *bad* stories?

It is by no means a failing on the part of our authors that these questions emerge, for they already develop from the destruction of foundationalism. Nonetheless, I do not feel at all satisfied that the authors in this collection thoroughly addressed these questions. Despite this, I find that this book acted as an effective agent towards crystallizing some of the more pertinent

questions we need to ask in our attempt to find ethics a voice in the postmodern discourse. This book's strength lies in the way that it presents itself as an impulsive plea; the reader can't help but get the feeling that *something must be done*. We find such a passionate urge in Olthuis' insightful remarks: "...if one tarries silent on the threshold because metaphysical claims to certainty and warrants for power are illusions to be overcome, have we really overcome them?" (243). I find myself provoked by this book to ask difficult and unanswered questions, inspired to look for answers to these questions, and all the while moved with an all important "urge to connect" (248). And is this not, after all, what we are looking for in a *good* book?

Notes

1 Tamara Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainsley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Lévinas" in *The Provocation of Lévinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (London: Routledge, 1988) p. 176.

2 This is essentially what H. Hart argues in the first paper in this collection entitled "Conceptual Understanding and Knowing Other-Wise", pp. 19-53.

3 Kuipers' essay explores to what extent we can find, in Derrida and Rorty, talk about selves as agents who respond to others.

4 Indeed, H. Hart asks this very question on page 34.

5 Olthuis' immediate solution to this is to think of grounding as beyond logical grounding, where "experiences of empathy, trust, and belonging, for example, are everyday sources of existential grounding" (p. 244). Unfortunately, not much time is spent developing this idea of grounding and, therefore, it fails to answer some of our more difficult 'why' questions.

6 Robert Bernasconi, "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics" in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 135.

7 Bernasconi argues that "the demand that deconstruction provide an ethics betrays not only traditional presuppositions about the possibility of generating ethical systems, but also a miscomprehension about the nature of deconstruction, confusing it for one philosophy among others. Hence in the face of the demand for an ethics, deconstruction can reply...that *the ethical relation is impossible and 'the impossible has already occurred' at this very moment*" (ibid., p. 135).

8 Olthuis, in his own words, gets the same point across with his talk about 'good connections'. See, pp. 247-48.
9 See, for instance, pp. 244-49.

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The Stories We Are: an Essay on Self-Creation
WILLIAM LOWELL RANDALL
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, 400 p.

The hermeneutical conception of the self as embedded within a temporal and narrative structure has been variously defended in recent years by the likes of Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, David Carr, Anthony Kerby, and Mark Johnson among others, and has established its credentials as one of the pre-eminent contemporary philosophies of the self.[1] According to this view, the human subject is a profoundly social being the identity of which is constituted in terms of a life history with a beginning-middle-end structure and plotlines the function of which is to hold together and thus render coherent the scattered events and experiences that make up a life. As a hermeneutical theory, the narrative account of the self has most often placed some emphasis upon the social, and in particular the linguistic, dimension of selfhood. Human understanding and identity are likewise situated within finite perspectives of language and culture, raising questions about human autonomy in general, and in particular — in discussing the self — about the possibility of authentic self-creation. Whether the self may be conceived both as embedded within linguistic and other social practices, as constituted within particular horizons of understanding, and yet capable in significant measure of freely constituting itself is a question of considerable importance to the hermeneutical account, and one which William Lowell Randall persuasively answers in the affirmative in *The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation.*

"This is a book," Randall writes, "about not only *having* a story but *being* a story as well," and "about self-creation through self-storying." (p. 4) The concept of self-creation is articulated in hermeneutical terms as a creative reinterpretation of one's personal history within particular narrative structures, or stories as he prefers to call them. The self is capable of serving in the roles of protagonist, narrator, and coauthor alike with respect to the story that it itself is, and is by no means to be viewed merely as a product of social forces. Self-creation, self-actualization, and autonomy are conceived by this author as quasi-aesthetic notions all referring to the capacity for imaginatively refashioning experience through its reintegration within self-chosen plotlines.

The self, according to Randall, is continually involved in its own reconstitution through a variety of means and within the realms of the material (or the bodily), the behavioral (the realm of voluntary action), and the hermeneutical (the stories within which self-understanding is fashioned, including within the practice of psychotherapy, itself conceived by Randall as "the re-storying of experience" [p. 247]). The self is fashioned and refashioned in all of these mutually affecting realms and is best understood not as a determinate substance but as involved in a continual process of reconstitution.

While mindful of the limits of human choice, Randall places some emphasis upon the capacity for self-narration in the fashioning of identity, a capacity described by that author as aesthetic — even poetic — yet which runs no risk of deteriorating into frivolity. As Randall expresses it, the self does

> not arbitrarily design its plot from beginning to end; I seldom consciously decide what sort of character to construct myself into. Yet neither do I merely narrate my life. My authority with respect to the story of my life lies somewhere between the two. That is, I do 'make' the events of my life 'happen,' at least in [a] limited sense.... Furthermore, even in just *narrating* the events of my life. I am involved in 'making them up'; events never speak for themselves. (p. 228)

Events become humanly significant experiences only within acts of narrative recounting. They are strung together into coherent sequences by means of stories which compose a self-understanding. Without constructing itself *ex nihilo*, the self possesses a range of interpretive options from which to fashion an identity, a range that is undoubtedly limited yet sufficiently broad to allow space for significant self-authorship.

Randall argues that the capacity for autonomous self-creation is too often underestimated and squandered by persons eager to deflect responsibility, allowing others thereby to become the principal authors of one's existence. To authority figures of various kinds we often concede the task of determining the narrative forms in which we shall live and have our being. The characters and plot lines in terms of which self-understanding is fashioned properly belong within the sphere of personal choice, and when autonomously fashioned represent no small achievement in human life. The romantic ideal of authenticity is plainly operative within Randall's account, yet it is an authenticity which does not presuppose metaphysical essentialism, with its positing of a "true self" at the core of human nature. Rather, what is presupposed is the possibility of the self being a principal contributor to its

own constitution through acts of creative interpretation — interpretations that if not true in a sense connoting accuracy are nonetheless truthful, empirically adequate, coherent, and believable.

The Stories We Are is a book that I would recommend rather highly. Its principal aim is to explore the possibility and nature of self-creation on a hermeneutical or narrative account of the self and is, in my view, largely successful in doing so. While readers will likely find the book excessive in length owing to frequent repetition, Randall's treatment of the self is easily accessible to a general audience and does not limit itself to any single academic discipline or subdiscipline. As well as being of interest to philosophers and other humanists, the book is no less relevant to psychologists and social scientists generally. One criticism I would offer of Randall's account is that while it ably develops the hermeneutic and aesthetic dimensions of selfhood, the pragmatic dimension which he recognizes as being a principal realm in which self-refashioning occurs is a topic that calls for greater thematization than it receives in this account. The self becomes what it is no less in the realm of (present) action and deliberation (concerning future action) than in the realm of narration (concerning in the first instance past experience). A narrative account of the self would benefit from placing the pragmatic together with the hermeneutic as mutually illuminating and reinforcing dimensions of selfhood, a suggestion with which I suspect Randall would not be unsympathetic.

Notes

1   See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Kerby, *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), and Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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The Self after Postmodernity
CALVIN O. SCHRAG
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997, 155p.

Originally presented as the 1995 *Gilbert Ryle Lectures* at Trent University, Calvin O. Schrag's *The Self after Postmodernity* is a lucid treatise on an

extremely complex and diverse subject. What is most remarkable about the project is the breadth of its scope given the 148 pages that comprise its length. Schrag is on familiar ground most of the time and consistently showcases his ability to summarize and delimit the multiple facets of the debates surrounding the topic of identity.

From the dawn of philosophical modernism (Descartes) to our present day, Schrag traces the history of the conceptions of selfhood up to the stalemate with which we are confronted today. On the one hand, Schrag observes, there is the modernist conception of a self as unified and self-identical. On the other hand, however, there is what he calls the 'postmodern counteractant' which, by "celebrating plurality, incompleteness and difference...leaves us with a subject too thin to bear the responsibilities of its narratival involvements" (27-8). Schrag articulates the pitfalls in subscribing to either school of thought and then proceeds to salvage a concept of subjectivity by prescribing several 'correctives' to the positions tendered by both Cartesian thinking and current postmodern strains of thought found in Foucault and Lyotard.

By deconstructing some bogus dualisms and dichotomies (mind/body, fact/value, absolutism/relativism), Schrag is able to bypass the aforementioned stalemate in order to arrive at a conception of the self which is neither dependent on unity, totality and self-identity nor simply the result of a fragmentation deprived of the power of agency. Narrative is a key term for Schrag. While the conventional sense of this word refers to a style of discourse, its stronger sense denotes an ontological claim; Schrag argues: "To be a self is to be able to render an account of oneself, to be able to tell the story of one's life" (26). The self should be considered as a 'who of discourse' rather than as a 'thing'. While "admittedly fragile, subject to forgetfulness and semantic ambiguities," the who of discourse, in the act of narrating, achieves a "unity and species of self-identity...through a transversal extending over and lying across the multiple forms of speech and language games *without coincidence with any one of them*" (33, my italics).

Transversality is another key term for Schrag. Borrowing from Sartre, Deleuze, and Guattari, who all use the concept of transversality for different purposes, Schrag describes selves as always in the *process* of unification, "moving beyond the constraints of universality versus particularity and identity versus difference" (133). While being 'context-conditioned', the self is not 'context-determined' (a distinction, Schrag claims, that is frequently overlooked by the Relativists). Such a self, Schrag maintains, experiences a 'transcendence' that is not dependent upon a foundationalist universality. Appealing to Kierkegaard's concept of the 'Absolute Paradox', Schrag sidesteps the 'grandiose metaphysical project' of Hegel to forge a notion of the subject as transcending "the immanent culture-spheres of science,

morality, art, and [he argues for the existence of a fourth] religion, but still efficacious within them" (121). `

Schrag moves from a notion of the self in discourse to a conception of the self in its community via an intermediary step of establishing the self 'in action', where an embodied self always already finds itself involved in embodied communicative practices:

> The self-identity achieved through the emplotment of the who of discourse blends with the bodily self-identity achieved through the enactments of the who in action. It is in this wider perspective that self-identity appears in the guise of *self-constancy* and *existential continuity* (62).

Schrag distances himself from Habermas by refusing to acknowledge rationality as a universalizing norm while, at the same time, chastising both Deleuze and Foucault for valorizing desire and power (respectively) at the expense of a "*praxis*-oriented reason" (56-7). Charting his course between Habermas and the postmodernists, Schrag skirts many a Scylla and steers clear of many a Charybdis (he has a penchant for Greek mythological metaphors), and embarks on an odyssey leading him beyond *a priori* theorizing to a critique of the self as it appears in its community. By inverting the Cartesian doctrine of the other as other-for-me and by also allowing the other to make a prior claim on the subjectivity of the self perceiving the other, Schrag articulates a concept of the self as always already implicated in a "dynamic economy of being-with others" (84). In such a community, ethical responsibility falls on the shoulders of subjects who make decisions based on the communicative practices in which they participate daily. Schrag invokes William James' notion of the genuine option to prove his point that *a priori* normative systems play no meaningful role in determining the self's ethical responsibility.

The *Self after Postmodernity* is an innovative attempt to reconstitute the notion of human agency after the wave of postmodernist thought that, in its extremes, eradicated the notion of subjectivity. As Schrag cleverly remarks, perhaps, like rumors of Mark Twain's demise, the reports of the death of the subject might also be premature. Couched at times in the discourse of economic exchange, Schrag's argument offers a caveat to intellectual consumers. In trying to sell his own position, he warns of those 'trafficking in theory construction', and questions the 'practical cash value' of conceptual constructions that have been 'sold' as genuine problems but remain inadequate in the realm of *praxis*.

Although Schrag's characterization of postmodernity is at times too uniform and undifferentiated, his resurrection of a 'self' out of a "discourse

without speakers...and action without actors" (61) is a welcome enterprise. Readers interested in theorizing about a self in the wake of postmodern philosophy will find this book to be worth its price.

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Postmodern Platos
CATHERINE H. ZUCKERT
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 351p.

Catharine Zuckert's *Postmodern Platos*, despite the valuable service it actually performs, leaves the reader thinking of what might, and should, have been. The title of the text brings to mind what would have been an extremely welcome and valuable addition to Continental scholarship. What could provide a better point of contact for the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida than the text (and problem) of Socrates/Plato? Moreover, what could provide a better method of introduction to postmodern thought than a systematic look at each thinker's relationship and attitude toward the philosopher most familiar to beginning students of philosophy?

The title of this book, however, is somewhat misleading. The book does unfold as a systematic, chronological exposition of the vital and original 'returns' to Plato offered by the thinkers mentioned above. To a large degree these sections rise above the empty caricatures we have come to expect in such general 'po-mo' texts. One is struck with wonder and confusion, however, at the figure who is the central focus in this book of postmodern Platonic studies — the late Leo Strauss.

While the Straussian legacy may not readily call to mind the term 'postmodern' for many readers, the real value (and joy) of Zuckert's book lies in the startlingly convincing case she makes for Strauss' inclusion within the postmodern scene. Zuckert goes to great lengths (and a full one-third of the text) to dispel the myths that surround Strauss' thought and highlights his comfort in the postmodern field of play.

Zuckert argues that Strauss, similar to Heidegger, recognized that the insights of historicism constituted a crisis for modernity. Ultimately, however, Strauss was able to accept none of the 'solutions' offered by Nietzsche, Heidegger or Gadamer. Like Nietzsche, Strauss turned to the Greeks and found a striving for nobility and something higher than any modern, moral or political quest for equality sought through mere comfortable self-preservation. This recognition of the noble in Greek culture — particularly as depicted in the figure of Socrates — led Strauss to study the medieval Jewish philosopher

Maimonides and his Islamic teacher al Farabi. Through them, he elaborated a vision of ancient philosophy, as well as a general analysis of philosophy and politics, that was decidedly un-(one might say post-)modern. Strauss turned to Plato and found that he, like Socrates before him, endeavoured to

> make the opinions of his contemporaries more reasonable by showing them that they did not know what they thought they did — that modern science made a return to antiquity — philosophical or religious — impossible, that human life is essentially historical, that ordinary human beings now know more than the most brilliant minds of the past. We have to engage in historical studies [...] in order to free ourselves from the historical prejudices of our age (pp. 127-8).

Zuckert also argues that Strauss locates in antiquity a fundamental schism and tension at the foundation of the Western tradition. Through his readings of his medieval teachers, Strauss argues that, contrary to the dominant Christian ('modern') tradition, reason and revelation exist in a fundamental discord. Reason does not, and cannot, either prove or disprove revelatory truths. The two neither complement, nor absolutely a\oppose each other; reason and revelation both exist in and create the distinctions between the philosophical, ethical, and political fields. Thus, the Western tradition consists of a series of dichotomies (poetry/philosophy, ancient/modern, practical/theoretical, etc.) that irreducibly divide human knowledge.

In the face of such a division, Strauss argues that any totalizing, universal knowledge is impossible. Thus, any modern attempts at reconciliation or synthesis are fundamentally misguided. It is difficult to see how, for example, any modern positivist or historicist philosopher could claim to offer any absolute political or moral knowledge (positively or negatively), when it is not, and cannot be,

> clear whether we should organize our common life in order to enable a few human beings to achieve the highest possibilities, with the knowledge that it only be at most a few [...] or whether we ought to lower our sights and secure the best possible conditions of life for most [...] It is not clear whether human life is essentially and necessarily tragic, because human desires can never be completely and lastingly fulfilled, or whether there is a form of human life truly worth living (p. 260).

In other words, philosophy will always have a future in criticizing its current expressions and attempts at synthesis through analysing its foundations and history.

This barely scratches the surface of the dense, well-documented, and tightly argued hundred-or-so pages that comprise the focus of Zuckert's book. These provide a real service to those of us who merely heard rumours, or perhaps ventured as far as *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and wrote Strauss off, as many have done to Gadamer and Derrida.

Zuckert's text, however, purports to be a survey and analysis of the various returns to Plato made in postmodernity. While it is certainly true that Strauss is examined in relation to these other thinkers, her marked bias towards Strauss' work is obvious throughout her reading of the others, occasionally manifesting itself in empty caricatures of these thinkers. Ultimately, her defence of Strauss becomes an unfair and occasionally embarrassing attack upon the other postmoderns which, in turn, detracts from what otherwise might have been an extremely valuable text. I cite only the most painful examples:

> Rather than urge his readers to 'think' as they had never thought before, with wonder and thankfulness at the world they had been 'given', Nietzsche encouraged them to transform it entirely. He thus denied, in effect, that the given had any value. Rather than overcome the nihilism he argued was inherent in the Western tradition, Nietzsche himself thus carried it out to completion (p. 271). Rather than return 'to the things' like Husserl, Derrida explicitly chose to write on previously written texts. (For Derrida, there really isn't anything else) (p. 263).

Despite these flaws, Zuckert's book clearly and compellingly dispels the myths and caricatures surrounding the prematurely abandoned work of Leo Strauss. She reminds us that, in the age of postmodernity, his return to the ancients may be of more importance and value than ever. Her marked bias in favour of Strauss' work, however, manifests itself in limp, straw-man characterizations of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida, unfortunately hindering what could have been an excellent addition to postmodern scholarship. One can only hope that one day such a volume will be written.

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