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AGAINST ETHICS

*Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation
with Constant Reference to
Deconstruction*

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington and Indianapolis

1993

Against Ethics

LOSING A GOOD NAME

I have for some time now entertained certain opinions that I have been reluctant to make public. But I have at length concluded that the time has come to air my views, clearly and without apology, and to suffer whatever consequences come my way.

I am against ethics.

Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.

But, surely, there is enough immorality in the world, enough unethical conduct in public and private life, without the philosophers coming out against ethics! Would it not be a better and more salutary undertaking, and certainly more in the public interest, to defend ethics against its detractors instead of implicating oneself in damaging its good name?

Against ethics? Does not the ground open up before us? Does one not shudder from the thought? Is one not visited by the worst fear and trembling?¹

I confess to certain misgivings. I have up to now always tried to strike a more respectable pose. Having consorted in the past chiefly with mystics² and saints,³ I have always made it my business to defend ethics, a more ordinary ethics, an ethics of *Gelassenheit* and letting be, an ethics of dissemination, a veritable postmodern ethics.⁴ I have always protested that if I traffic with anarchy, it is with a very responsible anarchy.⁵ Who, after all, wants to be found wanting in the matter of ethics? Who wants to risk having no ethics, or questioning its good name? I am, I have been—until now, when I found my nerve (or lost my senses)—quite intimidated by the word “ethics.” Its discursive prestige has been too much for me. When I saw it coming down the street, I always greeted it with my very best smile, tipped my hat and bowed in the most courteous way, offering it my warmest salutations. That halcyon time is over now. I will no longer be able to perpetrate this ruse. My neighbors will soon know that I am registered in the opposing party.

Still, unlike Abraham, I am no hero,⁶ no fearless explorer of unknown lands, no swaggering venturer on uncharted seas. I think of myself rather as rowing a small boat some distance behind, sticking close to the shores in case a storm blows up, in waters where great and mighty vessels have first shown the way. Up ahead, at the front of the fleet, I see the great Heidegger, a master of thinking, an admirable admiral of bottomless seas and groundless grounds, giving us our “heading” (*ang*) and setting our course, giving European philosophy the direction it has taken today.⁷ It

was Heidegger who first put this idea in my head and, if I am charged with impropriety, I will shamelessly blame a great deal on him while pleading for mercy for myself. It was Heidegger who first filled my mind with these impious thoughts about ethics, who first tempted me to consider the idea that we do not need ethics, that there is something to be said for getting beyond ethics, or even taking a stand against ethics:

... Along with "logic" and "physics," "ethics" appeared for the first time in the school of Plato. These disciplines arose at a time when thinking was becoming "philosophy," philosophy, *episteme* (science), and science itself a matter for schools and academic pursuits. In the course of a philosophy so understood, science waxed and thinking waned. Thinkers prior to this period knew neither a "logic" nor an "ethics" nor "physics." Yet their thinking was neither illogical nor immoral. . . . The tragedies of Sophocles—provided such a comparison is at all permissible—preserve the *ethos* in their sagas more primordially than Aristotle's lectures on "ethics."⁸

In Heidegger, this disturbing of ethics is all very beautiful and even oddly reassuring. The task of stepping back from ethics or metaphysics, of overcoming metaphysics or ethics, is undertaken in the name of something more primordial and originary (*ursprünglicher*), something that happened once, long ago, in a time of radiant splendor, a brief but magnificent time, as opposed to the present time of need.⁹ For Heidegger, to be against ethics is just as much to be for something more primordial, a more originary ethics, so that one can show one is not being immoral or illogical. That would make it easier to save one's reputation and salvage one's good name.

But the time has also come for me to confess something else, to make a clean breast of everything that has been going on inside me.

I am also against "originary ethics."

I confess to having lost all contact with the First Beginning and everything Originary. I have given up hope of catching a glimpse of the last god's passing by in this end-time when the first gods have flown.¹⁰ I do not expect to be on hand for the Other Beginning, which can be granted if and only if one can maintain communications with the First Beginning. I have in short been abandoned, become a part of and a party to the very *Seinsverlassenheit* against which Heidegger has at length warned us all. Though I wait daily by my phone, though I keep my ear close to the ground, I cannot, for the life of me, hear the call of Being. I have been forsaken.¹¹ (I think that Being has discovered I am American and that I use a computer. I suspect an informer.)

So I am denied the Heideggerian saving leap, the leap beyond ethics and metaphysics, to the Saving Event, to a Sophocles beyond Aristotle, a Thinking beyond ethics. By the same token, it would be shameful of me to turn to the Aristotelians for help. They will turn me out as well, and with every right, I who have chosen to speak against ethics and who have contributed modestly to numerous campaigns to overcome metaphysics.

What I have in mind by saying that I am against ethics is, unhappily, not a matter of unconcealing something more originary than ethics. It is a little more like confessing that the ground on which I stand tends to shift, that something that hitherto seemed to me firm and fixed is given to drift. My situation is to be compared to a man who discovers that the ground he hitherto took to be a *terra firma* is in fact an island adrift in a vast sea, so that even if he stands absolutely firm he is in fact constantly in motion. Add to this the thought that the sea is endless, the sky starless, and the island's drift aimless, and you gain some measure of the level of my consternation.

What I have to offer my readers is not a deep *Wiederholung*, a retrieval of something More Primordial, and this by way of having purchased myself a seat on the great Greco-Germanic shuttle that runs the Truth of Being back and forth between the great Beginnings. I have turned in my Greco-Euro-pass. I have chosen to speak instead of a *déconstruction*, in the French, a Romance language, in which it is openly confessed one cannot think, so that if, at some later time, it should be decided that one wants to think, one would have to switch to German.¹² My project is more Thoughtless and Latinate, conducted in good English, with the help of Romance tongues—but it is not, I trust, too romantic. On the contrary, it is part of my present heretical state of mind to think that the Big Story, the *grand récit*, of Being's bends and turns, the *Seinsroman* of the great Beginnings, which assure us of Something Saving, is where romanticism makes its nest.

It would, as Derrida says, be a very "congenial"¹³ undertaking to rally to the defense of ethics so that we could assure everyone of the good name of deconstruction, particularly those detractors of deconstruction, the "officials of anti-deconstruction," who protest loudly their love of the Good and the True and who thank God daily in their temple that they are not like the deconstructionists. For the names of "ethics," "morality," and "responsibility" are "fine names," and we regret losing them. But however congenial a task, the "remoralization of deconstruction" is too easy, too hasty a project. One needs to avoid generating

a consensual euphoria or, worse, a community of complacent deconstructionists, reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished (or, more heroically still, yet to be accomplished).

From a deconstructive point of view, declining the good name of ethics is an operation aimed at appreciating that tenuous and delicate situation of judgment which is addressed by the name "undecidability." Unhappily, "undecidability" has gotten a bad name, a very notorious one, proof positive for the officials of anti-deconstruction that deconstruction must be irresponsible, must itself be very bad.¹⁴

A deconstruction is thus a less nostalgic, less reassuring undertaking than ethics or Originary Ethics, one in which sound principles or Saving

Events do not at all figure. On the contrary, to speak of being against ethics and of deconstructing ethics is to own up to the lack of safety by which judging is everywhere beset. The thing that concerns me, and that I name under the not very protective cover of deconstruction, is the loss of the assurance, the lack of the safe passage, that ethics has always promised. Ethics makes safe. It throws a net of safety under the judgments we are forced to make, the daily, hourly decisions that make up the texture of our lives. Ethics lays the foundations for principles that force people to be good; it clarifies concepts, secures judgments, provides firm guardrails along the slippery slopes of factual life. It provides principles and criteria and adjudicates hard cases. Ethics is altogether wholesome, constructive work, which is why it enjoys a good name.

The deconstruction of ethics, on the other hand, cuts this net. Or rather, since deconstruction is not some stealthy, cunning agent of disruption, is not an agent at all, is in a sense nothing at all, it is much more accurate to say that a deconstructive analysis shows that the net is already torn, is "always already" split, all along and from the start. The deconstruction of ethics is ethics' own doing, ethics' own undoing, right before our eyes. It is something that happens to ethics and in ethics, something going on in ethics, with or without Jacques Derrida. In any possible deconstruction of ethics, one would be simply passing the word along that one is rather more on one's own than one likes to think, than ethics would have us think.

Deconstruction shows how a film of undecidability creeps quietly over the clarity of decisions, on cat-soft paws, clouding judgment just ever so much, so that we cannot quite make out the figures all around us. But do not be mistaken. Deconstruction offers no excuse not to act. Deconstruction does not put up a stop sign that brings action to a halt, to the full stop of indecision; rather, it installs a flashing yellow light, warning drivers who must in any case get where they are going to proceed with caution, for the way is not safe. Undecidability does not detract from the urgency of decision; it simply underlines the difficulty. Deconstruction takes as its subject matter the task of making one's way along an aporia, along an almost impassable road, where the ground may at any moment shift beneath our feet. Deconstruction issues a warning that the road ahead is still under construction, that there is blasting and the danger of falling rock. Ethics, on the other hand, hands out maps which lead us to believe that the road is finished and there are superhighways all along the way.

The risky thought I have been cultivating, the little bit of heresy that I have been privately nurturing under my little shibboleth "against ethics," is the idea that "obligation" is not safe, that ethics cannot make it safe, that it is not nearly as safe as ethics would have us believe. Life in general, and the life of obligation in particular, is a rather more difficult, risky business than ethics would allow. That is one way to gloss Heidegger's statement above that a Greek tragedy has more to say about the *ethos*—about the difficulty of life¹⁵—than does a philosophical treatise on ethics. That is true.

(But I do not think that Heidegger has quite taken this tragic message to heart; he tends to assimilate tragic Greeks and tragic poets into a pre-given History of Being, a *Seinsroman*, which blunts their tragic tip.)¹⁶

By "obligation" I do not mean anything profound. Like Johannes de Silentio, whom I have taken as a certain mentor, I have no such "prodigious head" for profundity.¹⁷ It is all I can do to get through the days and nights of everydayness; the superficial world is already more than I can handle. Obligation does not mean answering the call of Being, or of the History of Being, or of the History of Spirit, or of the Voice of God. I have, I repeat, lost all communications from On High. My satellite has been knocked out. I have in mind instead a very earthbound signal, a superficial-horizontal communication between one human being and another, a certain line of force that runs along the surface upon which you and I stand: the obligation I have to you (and you to me, but this is different) and the both of "us" to "others." Even the notion of "others" must be spread out and disseminated, so as to include not only other human beings but what is other than human—animals, e.g., or other living things generally, and even the earth itself (which would give Heidegger an entree). I mean the feeling that comes over us when others need our help, when they call out for help, or support, or freedom, or whatever they need, a feeling that grows in strength directly in proportion to the desperateness of the situation of the other. The power of obligation varies directly with the powerlessness of the one who calls for help, which is the power of powerlessness.

To be sure, the oldest and most honorable work of ethics has been to defend and honor obligation, to make obligation safe. But my impious thought is that obligation is not safe and so, in the shameless deconstructionist view I espouse, that it is just in virtue of obligation that ethics comes unstruck. That at least is what I will try to show; that will be a part of the point of the analysis to follow. Obligation, I will hold, is a kind of *skandalon* for ethics, which makes ethics blush, which ethics must reject or expel in order to maintain its good name, for ethics is "philosophy," a certain *episteme*. Ethics contains obligation, but that is its undoing (deconstruction). Ethics harbors within itself what it cannot maintain, what it must expel, expecorate, exclude. Ethics, one might say, cannot contain what it contains.¹⁸

The deconstruction of ethics sets obligation loose from its containment or confinement or, better, lets that being-set-loose be seen, even as it exposes the vulnerability, the frailty and fragility of obligation. It lets obligation be even as it lets it in for trouble, exposing it to disaster.

A DISASTER

I have confessed that my satellite is out, that I receive no heavenly communications, no messages from the starry sky above. I have often recalled with fondness and admiration what Kant has said about ethics and the

stars. Nothing so filled Kant with awe than the starry skies above and the moral law within, the stars being for Kant (and for Aristotle too) obedient to the highest and most surpassing lawfulness, and the Law being for Kant a kind of star to guide us through the swirl of appearances.¹⁹ That is very beautiful. It is further testimony to the unhappy condition into which I have declined that, were I pressed to pursue this metaphor, I myself would have to say that I have for some time now contemplated the unpleasant prospect that life is a disaster. I am not trying to be romantic, to write a new chapter in the history of Being's withdrawal. I mean nothing World-historical or Being-historical. I speak *ad litteram*. To suffer a disaster is to lose one's star (*dis-astrium*), to be cut loose from one's lucky or guiding light. For me, the stars above twinkle in a void, without concern for mere mortals down below. Laying claim to neither the *logos* nor the *nomos* of the stars, I suffer a disastrous, disastrological, deconstructive setback. That is why I have been reluctant to be forthcoming about these matters.

What else does it mean to say that one has lost one's faith in *grands récits*, that one responds with disbelief to sweeping narratives, that one declines fine names like Ethics and Metaphysics, Science and Religion, that one refuses to crown anything with capital letters, that Being, presence, *ousia*, the transcendental signified, History, Man—the list goes on—have all become dreams? Is not this so called postmodern condition²⁰ a disastrous condition? The name of my report on knowledge would have been *La condition désastreuse*. Is that not what a disaster means? That the star-guide stories that take us by the hand through the storms and tempests of factual life have lost their credibility? Not having been commissioned to speak on behalf of the Spirit of the Age or the Destiny of Being, and speaking for myself, I feel forsaken by such starry guides. It is not a question of knowing what to put in their place, but of just getting along without such a place, of conceding that things are just "decentered," "disseminated," "disastered."

I would say that we are in a fix, except that even to say "we" is to get into a still deeper fix. We are in the fix that we cannot say "we."²¹ Still, I would say, obligation happens, the obligation of me to you and of both of us to others. It is all around us, on every side, constantly tugging at our sleeves, calling upon us for a response. In the midst of a disaster.

A FACT AS IT WERE

Obligation happens.

That is where I start, not because it is my *fundamentum inconcussum*, but because I do not know where else to begin. I begin wherever I am,²² in the midst of multiple obligations, in the plural and the lowercase, nothing capitalized or from on high.

Es gibt: there is obligation (Heidegger). *Il arrive*: it happens (Lyotard). Ob-

ligation is a fact, as it were (Kant). Here I am (*me voici*), on the receiving end of an obligation (Levinas).²³

I am not announcing anything world-historical here but simply pointing to a fact (as it were), which surrounds us on every side: Obligations constantly happen, wherever we turn. Innumerable obligations, too many to deal with, sometimes in conflict with one another, often very difficult to sort out, although sometimes clear and pressing. Obligations belong to the most elemental condition of what the young Heidegger called the situation of "factual life," the condition of our "facticity." As soon as we come to be we find ourselves (*sich befinden*) enmeshed in obligations.²⁴ The "ought" is, in fact, one of the most common features of what "is," of what is happening.

To say that obligations "happen" is to say that obligation is not anything I have brought about, not anything I have negotiated, but rather something that happens to me. Obligations do not ask for my consent. Obligation is not like a contract I have signed after having had a chance first to review it carefully and to have consulted my lawyer. It is not anything I have agreed to be a party to. It binds me. It comes over me and binds me. That is why Lyotard calls obligation a "scandal"—to the "I," to "philosophy," to "autonomy."²⁵ Ethics, which is philosophy, would just as soon keep this or any other scandal, any stumbling block to reason and intelligibility, at a safe remove. Ethics wants to keep its good name, to keep its house in order.

It binds me. It, *das Es*, binds me. There is/it gives (*es gibt*) obligation. But *what* binds me? What is the *origin* of obligation? I do not know. I have already owned up to being cut off from origins and beginnings. I am always too late for origins. I never arrive in time. By the time I get to the scene of obligation a crowd has already gathered. I do not know the origin of obligation any more than I know the origin of the work of art. Obligation happens before I reach the scene. *Il arrive*: it happens before I get there, has always already happened, without my even being there at all.

You begin to see the effect of the deconstruction of ethics, the double effect of liberating obligation from ethics, of setting it loose from ethics, or rather of watching it twist free from ethics (since this is not anything anyone is doing). Obligation becomes a fact (as it were), but a shaky one, with emphasis on the *as it were*. For I do not know its origin, its whence or its whither. I am not its judge, its law, its personal doorkeeper, charged with checking its papers, its authorizing, legitimating credentials. I feel its force but I can prove nothing of its provenance. Obligation is a feeling, the feeling of being bound (*ligare, ob-ligare, re-ligare*), an element of my feeling *Befindlichkeit*, but I cannot get on top of it, scale its heights, catch a glimpse of its rising up. It comes at me, comes over me, overtakes me, seizes hold of me. As soon as I come to be I am already in its grasp. I have neither the will nor the means to deny it. When I am obliged I do not know by what dark powers I am held. I only know/feel/find myself caught up, in the midst of obligation, in its snare, in the scandal, in a panic—perhaps even blinded.²⁶ Something demands my response, I know not what (although I have a

few opinions). Something moves me to respond and to feel obligation, but how am I to know what? I do not know the Name of the Origin of the Law. I have been cut off from all such capitals, de-capitalated. For me, decapitation is particularly disastrous, a personal autographic disaster, a disastrous autography, destroying my good name.

All that I know about obligation, all that I can say, is that I am taken hold of from without, seized by something else, something other. *je ne sais quoi*. The otherness of this something other, the heteronomic force of the other, is the dislocating locus or site—I do not say the origin—of obligation. It is the alterity or otherness of the other, the heteronomy, that disrupts me, that is visited upon me, that knocks me out of orbit.

Obligation has a kind of impenetrability and density that I cannot master, that neither my knowledge nor my freedom can surmount, that prevents me from getting on top of it, on the other side of it. Obligation transcends me; it is not one of my transcendental projects. If an obligation is “mine” it is not because it belongs to me but because I belong to it. Obligation is not one more thing I comprehend and want to do, but something that intervenes upon and disrupts the sphere of what the I wants, something that troubles and disturbs the I, that pulls the I out of the circle of the same, as Levinas would say.

I do not know what if any hidden forces I obey when I give heed to this otherness, by what forces I am bound over. Is it the voice or face of God? Or the deep momentum of a network of laws embedded in the “tradition,” of what is handed down to me by the ages?²⁷ Or some still darker law of the unconscious, some blind repressed event that keeps repeating itself on me? Or even some evolutionary survival mechanism aimed at keeping the species going?²⁸ I cannot say. I am always too late for origins, although I will be grateful for any eyewitness reports, which I ask be mailed to me directly, by express mail.

I would like to say that obligation is safe. I would like to defend it, to fend off its enemies and detractors, to build a high wall around it and keep it safe. That would be a very honorable thing to do and it would, I am sure, restore the good name of deconstruction. That is the gesture of “ethics,” but alas, it is a part of my unhappy condition that I am against ethics. Try as I might, I always end up leaving obligation undefended and vulnerable. But it is what I would defend were my luck to change for the better: were my satellite to be put back in repair, were I able to get as far as ethics, which I fear might take many years of preparation and more time than I have available.

A EULOGY TO AN UGLY MAN

Far be it from me to make ethics tremble. I tremble even at the prospect that I will be found guilty of spreading the word that the pants of the great man are split. For that I have already prepared a defense aimed at exoner-

ating me of all responsibility. I follow others. I am following (*je suis*), in fear and trembling, in the wake of others. Of Heidegger, whom I am ready to blame in case of trouble, although he was himself only answering the call of Being. Of Derrida, who put this idea of deconstruction in my head. Of Lyotard, who did not himself have a heart for venturing alone into dangerous seas, but rather “likel[d] to speak under the authority and protection of him whom, under the name of Abraham, the young Hegel attacks with the well-known, truly anti-Semitic bitterness in *The Spirit of Christianity*.”²⁹ And of Johannes de Silentio, who was himself a follower of Abraham (who was himself only following orders).

The result is that it will be very hard to identify the guilty party, to find anyone who is singularly responsible, if we are all rounded up by the police and charged with inciting a riot against ethics.

The first line of defense I have devised if the police come knocking at my door is to blame everything on Abraham. He will mind it the least, being the most used to incomprehensible fates.

That is why I begin by offering a eulogy to Abraham. I want to get on the good side of him who is the paradigm and paradox of obligation and answering calls. Abraham is the father of all of those who dare raise their voice against ethics. The story of Abraham is, however, a slightly elusive tale that admits of numerous tellings.³⁰ Hegel took it to be the story of an ugly man who was alienated from the infinite, and who was unable to make the movement beyond faith to systematic thought. Johannes de Silentio, on the other hand, was convinced that he could never get as far as Abraham, let alone surpass him and raise faith up a notch to the reconciling beauty of knowledge. For de Silentio, this is the story of a daring teleological suspension of ethics, of suspending understanding and hanging ethical knowledge out to dry, of lifting the force of the universal and putting it in *epoché*. For Johannes it is a story not about the suspension of obligation but about the suspension of the fine name of ethics in the name of obligation, about suspending the fine name of universality in the name of the heterogeneity and incommensurability of the singular individual and of going one on one with the Absolute.³¹ I myself am following Johannes de Silentio, trying to turn this story into a little deconstructionist narrative, a *petit récit, en bon Français*, about fragments and incommensurables, about ugly singularities. I am less alarmed over what is ugly than over the power and prestige of what is beautiful.

The story of Abraham poses a scandal for ethics. It belongs to the “sacred scriptures” but it seems to tell quite an unholy tale about how it is permissible to commit murder, provided the right conditions are met. Lyotard has put this scandal—the scandal caused to ethics by the story of Abraham, which is the scandal of obligation—in the form of a dilemma, a cognitive form which ethics, which is philosophy, can appreciate. If I understand an obligation, if it is a universal and intelligible principle, then I have made it mine, one of my projects, something I have appropriated and made my

own, and so not an obligation at all, but another bit of my freedom, another good idea I have and want to pursue. If I do not understand an obligation, then it is arbitrary; and then I am unable to distinguish among obligations, to distinguish, say, the command that Yahweh gave to Abraham ("that Isaac die") from the command issued to the Nazis guards ("that the Jews die").³²

That brings the scandal home—by lining up father Abraham with the most heinous slaughter of the children of Abraham (and of quite a few other children, too). It is from a salutary fear and trembling before such dilemmas as this that we have always wanted to have an ethics, and the exposure to such a dilemma is part of the trouble we purchase, part of the anxiety we assume, with the deconstruction of ethics.

That is why I start, like Johannes de Silentio, with a eulogy to Abraham, an ugly man.³³ Some people become great by expecting what is possible and doing it; it is hard to do and difficult to understand, but possible. Some people, however, become great by struggling with the eternal, which is even more difficult. But one man became great by expecting what is impossible, by struggling with God himself, in virtue of a power that is powerlessness, of a wisdom that is foolishness, of a hope that was madness, and of a love that was hatred to oneself. That man is father Abraham.

Johannes offers a very beautiful eulogy to Abraham, which clearly shows the beauty of Abraham's faith. Is it then not the case that Abraham is very beautiful just in virtue of what Hegel calls his ugliness, in which case to speak of Abraham as an ugly man would be to speak ironically, paradoxically? Is it not the case that beauty and ugliness mean many things, too many to master, and that it is only in virtue of certain beauty that Abraham is ugly to Hegel?³⁴ Does Hegel have an eye only for a certain beauty, while lacking an eye for certain other kinds of beauty? Did Hegel's eagle have an eye too few? Could we not, in another context, one in which we are not making trouble for ethics, make a great deal of the beauty of Abraham, and the beauty of obligation? Would it not be possible to tell very beautiful stories about obligation, to have a kind of poetics of obligation, which would turn on something otherwise than what Hegel calls beauty, and in which it would be impossible to differentiate the aesthetical, the ethical, and the religious; or the beautiful and the sublime? Then it would turn out that obligation does not oblige us to renounce poetics, but to poetize differently.

Still, it is quite a mad call that Abraham hears, quite an incomprehensible command he must obey: to destroy the very seed given to him who was at the same time called upon to plant the seeds of a new generation, and this at a time when he and Sarah had reached, let us say, a venerable age.

"Abraham!" The Lord called.

"Me voici," answered Abraham.

The French is very instructive here. If Abraham had spoken Greek, we would have been forced to translate this into German. As it stands, since Abraham never studied Greek, we are free to employ the French. Besides,

we are not claiming to get as far as "thinking." As to whether there might be some inner spiritual kinship between Hebrew and French, I have no special information. I am content to treat the whole thing as a matter of good luck and not to think about it too much, since I have other things on my mind. The French puts Abraham in the accusative. *Me voici*: here I am, behold (the) me; here you will find me, *me*, in the accusative, the addressee of an address.³⁵ Structurally, one is always on the receiving end of an obligation. Abraham does not try to assume the position of the author, the addressor, the transcendental sender, which in this case—where there is question of a message from On High—would be a very dangerous, pretentious gesture on his part. Abraham does not try to get on top of this command, to penetrate it, to see through it, to mount and surmount the word that comes crashing down on him. He just takes it, in the accusative, receives it, accepts it, stands under it, allows it its opacity and impenetrability. This command is not Abraham's idea but an intervention upon Abraham, something that shatters his circle of self-interest.

Hegel thinks that this makes Abraham very ugly, not just one more ugly Jew, but the patriarch and paradigm of ugly Jews. For Hegel, the Jew is someone who must destroy everything he loves, who rips himself up from his native land and sets himself adrift, wandering, without a *Heimat*. "He was a stranger on the earth, a stranger to the soil and to men alike."³⁶ He took the whole world to be his opposite. Love eluded him but "even the one love he had, his love for his son, even his hope of posterity . . . even this love he once wished to destroy; and his heart was quieted only through the certainty of the feeling that this love was not so strong as to render him unable to slay his beloved son with his own hand."³⁷ If Abraham loves his son, then he must, in accordance with the law of the cut, prove that he is willing to destroy his son, to cut his heart loose from his son, and this just because he loves his son. For the Jews, Hegel says, God is not a truth but a command, not a friend but a master for their servile spirit. Truth is beauty, but "how can they have an inkling of beauty who saw in everything only matter?" not spirit?³⁸ The tragedy of the Jew is not Greek tragedy, for tragedy is what accompanies the fall of "beautiful character." But the Jews are devoid of beauty. They lack the reconciling spirit of love and beauty, the reconciling power of the Spirit itself, which is not Jewish but Greek and Christian (and maybe also a little Prussian and even Hegelian). The Spirit is not Jewish, for the Jew lacks Spirit and lives lifelessly, in alienation, in incisions and circumcisions, dead and ugly.

Hegel, who as we can see is filled with the Spirit of Love, loves ethics very much and he believes that Abraham is a scandal to ethics and to love, that Abraham scandalized the beauty of love with his ugliness. Ethics is *Sittlichkeit*, the concretely embodied sociohistorical ethical life, the outer embodiment of inner law, the living, substantive content of dead and abstract duty. Ethics turns on intelligibility, reconciliation, and beauty. Obligation must be carefully fitted into *Sittlichkeit* so as not to breach the spirit

of harmony and reconciliation. This is done by viewing obligation as the embodiment of the Spirit's own progress on the way to its full unfolding, the embodiment of the Spirit itself in the process of becoming itself. The essence of the Spirit is freedom, which means that in truth there is nothing but Spirit, nothing outside Spirit, nothing to limit freedom, nothing but freedom alone, by itself, close to itself (*bei sich sein*). In terms of *Stillekeit*, obligation is nothing more than freedom freely exercising itself. Nothing comes from without; nothing finally lays freedom low. Nothing is outside freedom to constrain or bind (*binden*) freedom the way Isaac is bound by Abraham and the way Abraham is bound by the Lord's command. Obligation is nothing but the Spirit binding itself, so there is no obligation that cuts into freedom, that imposes itself from without. Were the Hegelian Spirit to say "here I am," it would have to be talking to itself. Ethics is a way for the Spirit to be at home; ethics is *bei sich sein*, Spirit's being close to itself—not a matter of being homeless, uprooted, and adrift like Abraham, who hears other voices, indeed the voice of the Other.³⁹

Obligation, on the other hand, is ugly, Jewish, Abrahamic. It lacks entirely the spirit of Greek beauty and autonomy, of *harmonia* and reconciliation, and the Christian spirit of love (which is exemplified by Hegel's love of the Jews). Obligation is the ugliness of discord and subjection, of being disrupted and disturbed by a call that comes from without. This disposes and alienation will not do at all in ethics, which is philosophy. In philosophy, which is Greek, obligation must always be, in one way or another, something I do to myself, just as, in philosophy, truth is something I have or am of myself. "I, Plato, am the truth." That, as Nietzsche said, is philosophy's opening and paradigmatic gesture. The philosopher is the truth and he speaks the truth by turning within himself. Abraham, however, is slavishly dependent upon instruction from the Other, upon a Master or Teacher. Philosophy runs autonomously, on the level of immanence, while obligation is constantly being shocked from without, transcendently.⁴⁰

Kant's voice too must be added to this eulogy to Abraham, even though Johannes de Silentio has pitted Abraham against a very Kantian version of the Law. But Kant's Categorical Imperative, I maintain, is the closest Abraham ever gets to wearing philosophical robes (almost). In Kant, the Law, the Categorical Imperative, comes over us like the voice of the Lord that overtakes Abraham. The Law humbles us with the majesty of its uncommandable, unconditional command. It strikes us down and leaves us speechless—except to say *ich kann* (which is, take note, in the first person). Kant set sail in the turbulent straits that flow between obligation and ethics, between the Law and autonomy, between Jew and Greek. His "metaphysics of morals" is the work of an *Aufklärer* who also loves father Abraham, who loves the Law more than God.⁴¹

But Kant also wanted to remove the scandal of the Law, to haul away the stumbling block of transcendence and unintelligibility, the shock of hetero-

onomy. Hegel thought that Kant was too servile and Jewish, that Kant too was ugly and lacking in a beautiful, reconciled soul, that he was not enough of a Greek.⁴² But Kant proved to be all too Greek, all too much the *Aufklärer*, to let obligation be, to let it happen. In the end, but only after a very powerful defense of the unconditionally commanding power of the imperative of the Law, Kant washed his hands and turned obligation over to philosophy.

The Law comes to us from on high, like a massive fact, as it were, jutting out through the smooth surface of phenomenal time. The Law is a "cognitive monster," as Lyotard says,⁴³ something that makes a monstrous show (*monstrare*) of itself against the regular succession of the phenomenal world. It admits of no demonstration or deduction but it is itself the monstrous basis of any future practical deductions.

"Thou shalt," says the Law. (*Du sollst*, in German/Jewish, a little like Moses taking dictation from On High *auf Deutsch*.)
"I can," says Kant. (*Ich kann*, in the first person.)

Obligation is a spontaneous causality, a cause without antecedent that breaks in upon the unbroken regularity of phenomenal succession, with a power to move heaven and earth. I have found it necessary to move heaven and earth, Kant says in his best German/Jewish, in order to make room for obligation.⁴⁴ Obligation is a fact, categorically, unconditionally. The law comes from on high, like the stars above. As it were.

But then Kant blinked. The *Aufklärer* recovered his senses. Ethics, which is philosophy, and philosophy, which is Greek,⁴⁵ cannot abide this much alienation and disappropriation, this much *Unheimlichkeit*. The philosopher, who belongs to the true world, must come home.

"Fundamentally the same old sun, but shining through mist and scepticism; the idea grown sublime, pale, northerly, Königsbergian."⁴⁶

The law that reason obeys is reason's own law, so it does not, ultimately, finally, bend its knee to anything "other" (*heteros*) but offers its respects to itself (*autos*), like a man bowing to himself in the mirror. Even when it honors the Other as an end in itself, it does so in virtue of the Law, which is Reason, which is itself, so it respects itself as an end in itself. Reason gives itself its own law—whence the oxymoron "autonomy," whereas *nomos* ought to signify the shock delivered to the *autos* by the *heteros*. Reason is both the author and the subject of the Law, interchangeably both the addressor and the addressee. Kant wants to insert freedom back at the origin of the Law, before the Law, to make freedom older than the Law, the source of the Law. Reason prescribes to itself. Reason is like a man marching on a drilling field all alone, in full uniform, with perfect Prussian military posture, ordering himself around: "About face! To the left, march." While we admire such a man for his ability to stay in step and not to be caught unawares by an unanticipated command, we do not admire him for

his ability to take orders. Kant wants freedom to ratify and legitimate the thing that is supposed to seize freedom and take hold of it. It is as if a man were to seize himself by his own lapels and say to himself, "Now see here. This sort of thing must stop!"

That is why we had to send for a rabbi. It took a philosopher-rabbi to restore the Jewish law, to restore obligation to its original, Abrahamic difficulty, to put the *Aufklärer* back in his place, to deliver the best and most eloquent philosophical eulogy of all to Abraham, who was after all an ugly man. Levinas insisted that the position of the addressee is irreversible, incommutable, that when it comes to prescriptives the pragmatic positions of the addressor and the addressee cannot be exchanged. One is always, necessarily, structurally, on the receiving end of a command, dominated by its transcendence, blinded by its power. That is Lyotard's transcription of Levinas:

And isn't Levinas's exigency the only safeguard against this illusion [Kant's illusion that prescriptives must be like descriptives which authorize the commutability of addressor and addressee], viz. that one can only phrase ethics ethically, that is, as someone obligated. . . . ?⁴⁷

Levinas understood the heteronomic structure of obligation, even as ethics, which is philosophy, can subsist only in the element of autonomy, immanence, and freedom. I, Plato, am the Truth. I, Hegel, am the Spirit. I, Kant, am Reason. "We the people" are the truth and the law. "We" speak in the name of the people, in the name of humankind, in the name of God, in the name of nature.⁴⁸ Levinas performed a great double gesture. He spoke in the name of "ethics" and of philosophy, but what he called ethics, which is philosophy, is everything that philosophy resists, excludes, expels in the hope of preserving its good name. Levinas loves ethics like a rabbi. He loves the Torah more than he loves God.⁴⁹ But everything that Levinas calls ethics and metaphysics—the shock of heteronomy, unfreedom, and transcendence—is what ethics and metaphysics resist. The effect of Levinas's great eulogy to Abraham, of his great *me voici*, is to rock ethics, to shock the immanence and autonomy of philosophy. Even though Levinas thinks that everything is or turns on ethics and that ethics is first philosophy, even though he is very "pious" and loves ethics like a rabbi, and even though, despite his admiration for Derrida's "formidable questioning," he would defend the priority of "ethics before Being," not the "deconstruction" of ethics,⁵¹ despite all this, has not Levinas carried out, in the name of Abraham and his descendants, the greatest deconstruction of ethics since Johannes de Silentio decided to break his silence about the father of faith?

Ethics flourishes in the element of beauty, universality, legitimacy, autonomy, immanence, intelligibility. Ethics abhors the abyss of singularity and ugly incomprehensibility that engulfs Abraham. Obligation is embedded in the density of particularity and transcendence, in a dark groundlessness on which ethics can only gag. Obligation is an ugly, gluey *glas*-like

stuff that clogs the gears of ethical reason and jams its judgment. Ethics is attached to eagle-high principles whose mighty sweep protects the space of ethical life, keeping it safe. But Abraham, caught in the claws of transcendence and singularity, is carried off to our horror in a double bind that defies principled adjudication and which sends a shudder down his spine and ours, which leaves him and us in fear and trembling.

AN IMPIETY

Now I must tell you of my impiety. I am no Abraham, who was a hero, no Levinas, who is too pious, no Kierkegaard, whose point of view is too religious.

Obligation happens. It is a fact, as it were, but it is not a necessary truth. Obligation calls, but its call is finite, a strictly earthbound communication, transpiring here below, not in transcendental space (if there is such a thing.) Obligation calls, and it calls for justice, but the caller in the call is not identifiable, decidable. I cannot make it out. I cannot say that the call is the Voice of God, or of Pure Practical Reason, or of a Social Contract "we" have all signed, or a trace of the Form of the Good stirring in our souls, or the trace of the Most High. I do not deny that these very beautiful hypotheses of ethics would make obligation safe, but my impiety is that I do not believe that obligation is safe.

Johannes de Silentio has stated the case for this impiety very eloquently:

If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeared emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair? If such were the situation, if there were no sacred bond that knit humankind together, if one generation emerged after another like forest foliage, if one generation succeeded another like the singing of birds in the forest, if a generation passed through the world as a ship through the sea, as wind through the desert, an unthinking and unproductive performance, if an eternal oblivion, perpetually hungry, lurked for its prey and there were no power strong enough to wrench that away from it—how empty and devoid of consolation life would be.⁵²

There is a considerable passion in Johannes's description, as if he does not speak of a merely abstract hypothesis that he has devised, but from the bitter fruit of a most painful experience. Might this dark vision be the fear and trembling named in the title of his book? I looked eagerly for the resolution Johannes would offer to this terrible spectre, but his response came to me with the thud of a still more terrible disappointment:

But precisely for that reason it is not so.

Then he goes on to offer his eulogy to Abraham, as if that were the end of it. That is to say, Johannes holds that it is because such a life as he describes would be without consolation that it cannot be so. As if the emptiness and despair described in the passage would constitute too terrible, too unhappy a condition to be endured and thus *on that account* is not true. As if the unhappiness were an obstacle to its truth. Now though I love Johannes de Silentio dearly, though he is an author whom I would dearly love to imitate had I the nerve and the wit, I have to say that this is one of his most disappointing moments. I was reminded immediately of a passage from Nietzsche, who said that happiness is no argument:

No one is likely to consider a doctrine true merely because it makes happy or makes virtuous. . . . Happiness and virtue are no arguments. . . . Something might be true although harmful and dangerous in the highest degree; indeed, it could pertain to the fundamental nature of existence that a complete knowledge of it would destroy one—so that the strength of a spirit could be measured by how much 'truth' it could take, more dearly, to what degree it *needed* it attenuated, veiled, sweetened, blunted, and falsified.⁵³

Nietzsche's words sear the page on which they are printed. I must confess, however much I love him, Nietzsche has, on this point at least, silenced Johannes de Silentio. Indeed, while I was reading what de Silentio wrote about the "wild fermenting power" in which existence is caught up, I had written in the margins of my book "Nietzsche!" My hopes soared that before this fateful paragraph was out I might at last find an answer to Nietzsche, instead of finding Nietzsche's merciless views confirmed still again by the lameness of the rejoinder.

And so I must confess that my impiety is Nietzschean. Nietzsche is for me a very great philosopher of disasters, the most disastrous—in a very precise sense—the most disastrous of all modern writers. His is a philosophy of stars dancing in endless cosmic nights without a care for us care-filled beings below, of stars twinkling in a void indifferent to the fate of us mortals below. I have never recovered from Nietzsche's terrible beginning of *On Truth and Lying in the Extramoral Sense*, a text he wrote at a very early age—what an extraordinary young man he must have been—although the text can be laid alongside a very late text, the final aphorism from the *Will to Power* (with which it compares very favorably in the terror of its vision, if not in the exuberance of its style):

Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of "world history," but nevertheless it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.⁵⁴

Substitute "obligation" for "knowing" in this passage, and you will see what I mean by impiety and by the disaster. We pass our days on the surface of a little star which drifts aimlessly through endless skies, inventing such fictions as we require to make it through the day and to persuade ourselves of our meaning and significance. Until at last, weary of its peculiar little local experiment, the cosmos draws another breath and moves on. Then we disappear without a trace. "Knowledge," "obligation," "justice"—these are so many obsolete inventions of the little animals, now useless vapors dissipating in interstellar space. That is a spectre, a cosmic disaster, that disturbs my sleep nightly, the source of my fear and trembling, the dark curtain that hangs by a thread over all my enterprises.

Lyotard raises the same spectre in the context of a different question. Our sun, he says, is getting older and will explode in 4.5 billion years, a solar catastrophe that will spell the end of our phenomenology and politics. This solar explosion means "[n]egation without remainder. No self to make sense of it. Pure event. Disaster. . . . Matter asks no questions, expects no answers of us. It ignores us. It made us the way it made all bodies—by chance and according to its laws."⁵⁵

So you see how far fallen from Kant I am, how far removed from his faith in stars I have become. Far from filling me with awe, the starry sky above speaks to me of the frailty of our condition and of the indifference of the stars to our fragile mortal fates. Four and a half billion years from now, when our little star has cooled off and congealed, and has dropped back into the sun, when the solar system itself has dissipated, the call of justice will have sunk into oblivion.⁵⁶ You and I, all things, this very moment, this innocent child here who suffers needlessly, these prosperous white upper classes who flourish at the expense of others—that is all so much will to power, so many quanta of force charging and discharging their energy, a veritable monster of energy, decreasing here, increasing there, blessing itself in its sheer innocence.⁵⁷ Or, if you prefer, in the equally terrible hypothesis of Johannes de Silentio, it is all a "wild fermenting power," a "vast never appeased emptiness."

Und nichts außerhalb.

That is Nietzsche's accounting of the disaster, Nietzsche's disasters, supplemented with parallel texts from Lyotard and Johannes de Silentio. You and I stand on the surface of the little star and shout, "racism is unjust." The cosmos yawns and takes another spin. There is no cosmic record of our complaint. The cosmos feels no sorrow and has no heart on which to record our complaint. The stars pay us no heed. "Racism is unjust" is a bit of noise tinkling in the midst of "the great cosmic stupidity,"⁵⁸ a complaint lodged against an indifferent world, under stars twinkling in a void. The call of unjust suffering, of little, ontic, concrete disasters, falls on deaf ears. It is just part of the whole, of an absolutely innocent game that knows only greater or lesser discharges of energy, only self-accumulating and self-destructive forces, but does not know about the call of justice.

The cosmo-stellar view is always spectacular and lends itself to an aesthetic justification of life, which wipes "ethics" away. But if ethics, what then of obligation? Can obligation continue on after the demise of ethics, without the protection that ethics affords? Can obligation survive, does obligation happen, in so merciless a world as this? That is my question, for which I beg the reader's time and patience.

Obligation is what is important about ethics, what ethics contains without being able to contain. I am prepared to make my way without ethics, without the safety net it affords, even to take a stand against ethics. But it is one thing to raise one's voice against ethics, and quite another to speak against obligation. Am I prepared for life without obligation? Even so, what if I am not? What, then?

Obligation happens. There is/it gives obligation.

It gives: without referring to something entitative, the "it" points to a deep anonymity in things, in the world, in the stars as in ourselves. The lifeless body of a once vibrant person is a reduction of that person to an anonymous substratum, to a core of anonymity by which we are all inhabited. The "metaphysical" for Levinas is an attempt to shatter anonymity, to affirm "something" (which is not some thing at all but the Other person) that transcends anonymity, that infinitely surpasses it. I see this metaphysically as prophetic hyperbole, as a great "as if": act *as if*⁵⁹ the Other were an Infinity that surpasses the totality, an infinity "as it were."

But it is also part of my impiety that I do not accept the words of prophets literally, as if the prophets subscribed to a theory of truth as *adequatio*, but hyperbolically, as an excessive expression meant to summon up what is best in us and to effect justice.⁶⁰ Levinas's "infinity" is impossible for me, but it must be recalled that I do not drop things just because they are impossible; some of the most interesting and important things are impossible.

That is the lesson I learn from father Abraham and from the famous gloss that Johannes de Silentio has given this story. Abraham is great in virtue of the fact that he expected not the possible or the eternal but the impossible.⁶¹ In Johannes de Silentio this is coded language: the possible refers to the imaginative or the aesthetic; the eternal means the universal and rational, which is philosophy, which includes ethics. But the impossible is the religious, the *re-figura*, which means the one-on-one bond of the existing individual with the Absolute, the absolute relation to the Absolute. The *re-figura* is the *ob-figura*, the absolute bond, the obligation, but without the shelter afforded by the universal, the rational, the eternal. In short, Johannes de Silentio writes an eulogy to obligation without ethics.

I have taken the paradox of Abraham as my paradigm. He it is, the father of us all, who clears the path of obligation without ethics, of the *re-figura/ob-figura* which makes its way without protection of the universal. That is why Hegel thought him an ugly man, because Abraham ventured into an abyss upon which philosophy does not dare, into a land of un-philosophy, unilluminated by philosophical lights. If that is so, I follow the lead of an

ugly man. I have chosen ugliness as my paradigm. That is not very Greek; it is a little Jewish, or jewgreek, since the Greeks are also the fathers of us all. We are all always already Greek, but Abraham is also our father.

In the best prophetic tradition, in a gesture worthy of Abraham, Levinas's works constitute a memorable contemporary eulogy to Abraham, a great and learned midrash on Abraham's *me voici*. Levinas is also great in virtue of hoping for something impossible, viz., to expunge the anonymity of things, to triumph over the anonymous, to exceed and surpass it infinitely. He wants to say that "flesh" is not merely one of the "elements" of the *il y a*, but the surface of the infinite—not of an abstract infinity but of a concrete infinite, something infinite (*infini*).

There is, I fear, no way to annul the merciless view that a colder look reveals, that the Other is a part of an indifferent, anonymous whole, dissipated in a solar disaster. The Other who claims us "ethically" (in obligation) is not an infinity surpassing totality but a part that defies the totality, that resists totalization, that asserts itself, hyperbolically, in the face of a faceless cosmos. The Other is not infinity but a partiality to which we are unapologetically partial. Were I to rewrite Levinas's book, which so far no one has invited me to do, I would start by renaming it *Totality and Partiality*. In the place of Levinas's infinite excess, I would put infinite partiality—and defiance. The "ethical" for me, if we are to keep this word in virtue of a double writing, which for me would amount to nothing more than retaining the classical way to name obligation, does not name the "metaphysical" but the hyperbolical. It names an act of hyperbolic partiality and defiance.

Obligation is a fact (as it were). As it were. As if it were a fact, an uninterpreted fact of the matter. As if it were a pure fact, of pure reason, or of the whisper of the will of God in our ear, or the traces of the Form of the Good vaguely stirring in us. As if it were like that.

For Johannes de Silentio, the foolishness of the children of God was in the end a good investment that would be returned a hundredfold. The rich young man would get every penny back.⁶² As Johannes said, "Only those who work get bread" is a maxim that does not hold in the world of economics for which it is intended, where it is proved false again and again, but only in the world of the spirit. For although the price of faith is (absurdly) high, one can expect an infinite paycheck, which is the repetition (which, if you desire further reading, is the name of a work by one Constantian Constantius, who bears an interesting similarity to Johannes de Silentio).⁶³

But in this postmodern time of need (and maybe in a possible postmodern Christianity as opposed to Christendom, which is power pure and simple, or a postmodern religion generally), the stakes of foolishness have been raised still higher. It is no longer a matter of being fools for the kingdom of God in which one could eventually expect a good return on one's investment. It is a matter of being fools in a much more distressing sense.