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The Promise of Europe

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The Promise of Europe

ROZEMUND ULJÉE

The social and political problems of and in Europe call for a sustained philosophical engagement because the relationship between philosophy and Europe is intricate, profound, and complex. First, unlike other socio-political geographical entities, Europe has always defined itself from the perspective of the constitutive specificity of its philosophical principles: the freedom of the Ancient Greek cities as opposed to the supposedly despotic Asian regimes is a fitting example. In turn, for many philosophers throughout history, the idea of Europe, as philosophical identity, ideal, and project, has at all times touched on the very essence of philosophy. For example, in his dissertation, Derrida, commenting on Husserl's account of "spiritual Europe," wrote that Europe is not simply the cradle of philosophy, but "Europe is itself born from the idea of Philosophy."¹

According to Husserl, philosophy has been viewed as the pursuit of a universal science in the service of a rational and autonomous humanity. Europe had been designated as the particular place where the universal aspirations of philosophy can take place. But it is not only the father of the phenomenological movement who conceives of the relationship between Europe and philosophy in this manner; Hegel, Kant, and Patočka also think Europe in terms of its equivalence with a civilization consisting of a rational community. Although very different in inspiration and content, these thinkers share a view of European community as a rational community whose subjects are universal. With their conception of reason, they decide who should be accepted within the borders of their community and who must be rejected as less rational or even irrational.

From this it follows that the borders of Europe not only are conceived in the geographical sense; they function as a philosophical concept in that they delineate the self-assigned domain of universal reason and those who are outside of this domain. In other words, they determine the borders of what is considered, in Husserlian terms, the borders between a “spiritual community” and those who remain different from it.²

Philosophically, it has been argued that the conflation of Europe with universal reason has reached its limits. Thinkers such as Agamben, Nancy, Derrida, and Esposito have successfully shown how the traditional way of thinking about universality is particularistic in the sense that this view holds that universality belongs to Europe, which is a particular entity; it has also been condemned as an imperialist, Eurocentric, and colonialist way of thinking.³ Particularistic ways of thought, on the other hand, are confronted by challenges of their own. They can be accused of a failure to adequately respond to problems that threaten the world in its entirety; the climate crisis is a good example.⁴

The difficult interplay between universalism and particularism opens the question whether Europe as a philosophical idea is exhausted or if there are elements of it that remain worthy of thought in a philosophical sense. In this chapter, I seek to show, with reference to Derrida, that beyond and despite its disqualified version of universalism, Europe still holds a promise for philosophy. As such, the aims of this chapter are twofold. The historical aim is to trace the philosophical self-understanding of Europe as representative of universality throughout its history. Its philosophical aim consists in showing how Derrida’s notion of the promise, and the temporal structure that it introduces, guarantees that Europe’s traditional self-understanding can no longer be thought in teleological terms. In other words, temporality shows that Europe does not work as a transcendental schema that regulates our historical experience of meaning. Instead, as I seek to make clear, Derrida’s account of the promise, and the temporal structure that belongs to it, shows that with each and every decision, we give shape to what Europe is and ought to be, inventing it anew each time.

In order to satisfy these aims, this chapter consists of three steps: the first step shows how the philosophical self-understanding of Europe throughout history can be conceived as working toward a universal idea of itself that was already present in it from its beginning. I seek to demonstrate how the defining feature of Europe’s philosophical self-understanding has always been its *arché-eschatological-teleological* structure.

The second step concerns a discussion of Derrida's understanding of Europe in its relationship to alterity as he presents it in *The Other Heading*. In this work, Derrida conceives of Europe's exemplary position with regard to universality as paradoxical and thus as already revealing its relation to its (self-)difference. I show that Derrida's interpretation of Europe's exemplarity allows for a nonteleological reading of history. In the third and final step, I make the point that due to this nonlinear reading of history, we must view Europe as holding a promise. The temporality that is introduced by the promise reveals that the promise radically differs from the classical telos in the sense that what we consider to be and to belong to Europe is something that must be decided upon each time.

Europe's Traditional Self-Understanding: Universality as Its Telos

Europe, in Emmanuel Levinas's words, is intricately connected to the ideal of a condition of "peace, freedom and well-being" for all humanity "on the basis of a light that a universal knowledge projected onto the world."⁵ Here, philosophy is viewed as the pursuit of a universal science in the service of a responsible and autonomous humanity. As Levinas remarks, philosophy consists of nothing but "universal science, science of the world as a whole, of the universal unity of all being."⁶ The source of this conception of philosophy, with universality at its heart, is located within Greek thought. The idea of Europe cannot be interpreted without reference to its Greek and Christian paradigm. Or, as Levinas notes, "Europe is the Bible and the Greeks."⁷ Both Plato and Aristotle present an account of the human being as capable of liberating itself from the grasp of mythology by questioning. This liberation is interpreted as the movement of reason itself, and the entirety of humanity can be understood as the movement toward self-realisation. Or, in Aristotelian terms, the entelechy of reason contains the actualization of the potentiality of the human being. This actualization simultaneously means becoming rational, and thus free. The intimate relation between freedom and reason is exemplified in Plato, who found that freedom is attained by following the demands of reason, and not those of desire.

The influence of Greek thought within the history of Europe cannot be underestimated; many, if not all eras within European history have remained within it in the sense that they share a vision of humanity

as a process towards self-realisation understood in terms of freedom and the universal character of reason itself. The Christian paradigm is not only an inheritance and continuation of its Greek predecessor, but also a transformation of it.⁸ Two aspects deserve to be mentioned within the context of this chapter. The first concerns the Christian view of time. As Hannah Arendt points out in *On Revolution*, Christian thought introduces the theme of a “new beginning.”⁹ Whereas the ancient Greek conception of time is cyclical (“empires would rise and fall”), the Christian conception of time manages to break through it because the birth of Christ was a “new beginning,” and a unique, unrepeatable event. Arendt, referring to Augustine, finds that such an event interrupted “the normal course of secular history.”¹⁰ Furthermore, and this is the second aspect that deserves to be mentioned, within the Christian paradigm, the human being is defined as a being that is created in the image of God. As Simon Glendinning points out, the origin of man is found in the fall from Eden, and its task is to seek redemption. Both views, Greek and Christian, hold that the human being is grasped as the full actualization of reason. Within the Greek schema, the movement of reason is interpreted as teleological: the necessary development of natural characteristics moves towards a definite end, which is the case for the human being as well as for other parts of nature. Within Christian theology, the promise of redemption for the human being means that an eschatological horizon is added to the Greek telos.

Hegel can be viewed as the ultimate representative of this teleological-eschatological schema since he regards history as the progressive unfolding of truth. For Hegel, truth consists of the movement of reason, which is the history of philosophy itself. This history is progressive, moving into the direction of the universal. He writes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development.”¹¹ This shows that, for Hegel, the history of humanity consists in the unfolding of the human being as rational, conscious, and free. History, for Hegel, consists of the movement of reason realizing itself. Yet, it is not only Hegel who underlines the link between history and freedom. Husserl also defines the philosophical idea that is present in its history in terms of an “immanent teleology,” which manifests “an epoch of humanity that from now on will and can live only in the free fashioning of its being and its historical life out of rational ideas and infinite tasks.”¹² Husserl finds that within “European humanity,” there is an “innate entelechy

that thoroughly controls the changes in the European image,” which gives it “the sense of a development in the direction of an ideal image of life and of being, as moving toward an eternal pole.”¹³ We could say thus, with Glendinning’s words, that the European philosophical tradition presents a view of history as the “emancipation and de-alienation of rational subjectivity in time.”¹⁴ Within this view, a double movement can be discerned: on the one hand, it is the end that determines the trajectory that humanity must travel; it is a looking back. On the other hand, what is considered the end has already been identified from the beginning, as it lies latently within it, waiting for it to be realized. As Derrida and Glendinning write, we can conceive of the movement of historical thought not only as *teleological-eschatological*, but also as *arché-teleological*.¹⁵

According to Hegel, and within the broader philosophical tradition, it is true that world history has always been viewed as not merely a European history but also as universal history.¹⁶

Considered from a Hegelian perspective, the world in its entirety cannot be thought outside the movement of reason. World history as the movement of Spirit manifests itself not only in terms of historical time, but also in terms of space. Therefore, geography belongs to the development of Spirit and constitutes the “infrastructure of [political] history.”¹⁷ This point of view allows Hegel to claim that geographical conditions are decisive for the possibility of a people to become properly historical: world history prefers a moderate climate.¹⁸ Consequently, although history as the progressive movement of reason is universal, Europe takes a special place within it because it is only within the European (for Hegel, Germanic) state that freedom can find its most adequate historical form in the sense that the human being can become free as such. Thus, although it is true that the movement of historical thought is conceived in universal terms, Europe is the place that is considered most universal.

Nietzsche, too, remarks on the special position of Europe with regard to the history of humanity. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he compares Europe with Asia, stating that Europe is that “protruding little peninsula,” that “desperately wants (over and against Asia) to stand for the ‘progress of humanity.’”¹⁹ The phrase suggests that the geographical shape of Europe shows that it attempts to detach itself from the Asian continent, moving beyond its very own limits, on its way toward the “progress of humanity.” Nietzsche’s words emphasize that Europe conceives of itself as

a historical movement of self-transcendence. Describing Europe in this way is representative for the history of philosophy in the sense that this history has not viewed Europe as a concept but has conceived of it as an idea. What is the difference? Whereas a concept refers to something unified, in which its essence is fully determined, and thus exhausted, an idea cannot be viewed in this way. As Rodolphe Gasché clarifies in his essay “Is Europe an Idea in the Kantian Sense?”: “As *eidōs*, the idea confronts all things that derive from and participate in it with the form of the thing itself, the *ontos on*, that is, an ideality more perfect than the one that things themselves can accomplish.”²⁰ Gasché adds that, within the context of Europe, its idea of itself means that it opens up its own determinateness and has the possibility of moving beyond it in a self-critical manner. It is no surprise then that Husserl famously called Europe “an idea in the Kantian sense.”²¹

However lofty these grand visions of Europe might sound, at present, it is all too clear that Europe’s self-understanding as exemplary, rational, and universal is dated. Levinas’s words are still most fitting in this context: “[Europe is] a slaughter bench of fratricidal struggles, political or bloody, of imperialism, scorn and exploitation of the human being . . . ; ruthless doctrines and cruelty of fascism and national socialism, right down to the supreme paradox of the defence of Man and his rights being perverted into Stalinism. Hence the challenge to the centrality of Europe and its culture. A worn-out Europe!”²² It is not a bold claim to state that at this very moment we are witnessing the exhaustion of a determined and linear concept of history as the realization of the European ideal. Or, in other words, the classical discourse of modernity is exhausted; Europe’s different crises (it being challenged by nationalism, climate crises, refugees, and so forth) reveal that its traditional self-understanding does not suffice any longer; reality has proven to be far more problematic than Europe’s idea of itself has allowed for. Derrida comments on the crisis that Europe finds itself in and remarks that it is possible to speak of crisis “whenever the capital of infinity and universality finds itself in danger, when the *eidōs*, limits, ends, confines, the finitude of Europe, emerges.”²³ It is in this sense that we can understand the crisis of Europe as one of its spirit.

Derrida: Europe and Its Difference

It has become painfully clear that Europe can no longer be conceived as the place where the idea of universal reason can be properly realized.

In order to understand Derrida's idea of the promise that Europe still holds, let us first take a closer look at his perspective on Europe as he presents it in *The Other Heading*. Here, he offers a reading of Europe and its history that problematizes the aim for universality in the philosophical tradition by appealing to the argument that the constitution of Europe in terms of its exemplarity of universality is always and already in relation to difference. My point with regard to this is that Derrida's interpretation of the exemplarity of Europe allows for a non-teleological reading of history. Here, European history is not understood as reason realizing itself but as always already interrupted, open to the promise that the future holds and that we are responsible for.

The occasion for *The Other Heading* was brought about by the unification of Europe, as well as events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. By commenting on texts by Marx, Husserl, and Valéry, Derrida not only investigates the classical definition of Europe but also shapes the contours of the promise of a new Europe and a corresponding European identity, which simultaneously serves as an invitation to rethink the notion of identity itself:

Hope, fear and trembling are commensurate with the signs that are coming to us from everywhere in Europe, where, precisely in the name of identity, be it cultural or not, the worst violences, those that we recognize all too well without yet having thought them through, the crimes of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, religious or nationalist fanaticism, are being unleashed, mixed up, mixed up with each other, but also, and there is nothing fortuitous in this, mixed in with the breath, with the respiration, with the very "spirit" of the promise.²⁴

The task of redefining Europe, and thus the search for this "spirit of the promise," demands that a nuanced path must be taken, because we are called, as Derrida remarks, to move away from binary language with regards to Europe and its history. Instead, we should attempt to go "beyond the old, tiresome, worn-out and wearisome opposition between Eurocentrism and anti-Eurocentrism."²⁵ Derrida seeks to do so through an analysis of the exemplarity of Europe. This analysis opens Europe's historical discourse to alterity and thus provides the key to thinking the philosophical heritage of Europe both in terms of its universality and in terms of its relation to difference.

Derrida famously discussed the special position that Europe has assigned to itself within the history of philosophy. In a lecture that he gave to UNESCO in Paris in 1991, he remarks that although the philosophical tradition treats reason as universal, Europe is the place where the universality of reason can unfold itself in its most proper manner.²⁶ Within world history, what would call itself European humanity belongs to a culture with “this special mission”²⁷ of being the Enlightened ones, the advance guard of humanity on the way to its proper end. As such, the particularity of Europe is inseparable from its relation to the universal, or its exemplarity is its universality. Hence, the discourse of world history “has become the tradition of European modernity.”²⁸ The discourse on the history of Europe presupposes an identifiable heading, a telos, “toward which the movement, the memory, the promise, and the identity, dreams of gathering itself.”²⁹ Like Nietzsche, Derrida also notes that the telos of Europe is exemplified in the geographical shape of the continent. He elaborates on the relation between the physical geography of Europe and its (what Husserl called) spiritual geography, by noting how Europe has always recognized itself as a cape or a headland and thus as the advanced extreme of the Eurasian continent.³⁰ The geographical extreme of the “cap” is mirrored in Europe’s spiritual self-understanding as an advanced point, as being the spiritual heading in the sense of being an infinite (and thus universal) idea, “as the memory of itself that gathers and accumulates itself, capitalizes upon itself, in and for itself.”³¹ It is in this sense that Europe has viewed itself as the *heading* for world civilization. Derrida writes the following:

The idea of an advanced point of *exemplarity* is the *idea of the European idea*, its *eidos*, at once as *arché*—the idea of beginning but also of commanding (the *cap* as the head, the place of capitalizing memory and of decision, once again, the captain)—and as *telos*, the idea of the end of a limit that accomplishes, or that puts an end to the whole point of the achievement, right there at the point of completion. The advanced point is at once beginning and end, it is divided as beginning and end; it is the place from which or in view of which everything takes place.³²

Europe has determined and cultivated itself from the finality of the advanced point and remained at home with itself, by identifying itself

with itself. It “thus identifies its own cultural identity, in the being-for-itself of what is most proper to it, in its own difference as difference with itself, difference to itself that remains with itself close to itself.”³³ In this sense Derrida agrees with the interpretation of Europe as an example or the exemplary. He notes that, correspondingly, European identity presents itself in terms of “the *irreplaceable inscription* of the universal in the singular, the *unique testimony* to the human essence and to what is proper to man.”³⁴

To think Europe in terms of the “good” or proper example of universality, as has been done by the European philosophical tradition, shows the double function of exemplarity. On the one hand, an example can be thought of in terms of a sample among others, in order to affirm a general series, or multitude, of which it is a particular instance. In this sense, Europe has thought of itself as an example of one, among different, continents that are all within history and stand in relation to it. On the other hand, however, the example raises the question why exactly a particular sample has been destined as an example. Or, in other words, what is it that makes the sample exemplary? The question can be answered by stating that the selected example has a “teleological advantage” in the sense that it is the *proper* example. Europe, in this context, is exemplary because this is the place where universality can properly unfold itself since here universality is manifested as the telos of its history. Consequently, as Hegel already indicated, it is only Europe that can be properly world historical. The empirical types of non-European societies, then, are only more or less historical; at the lower level, they tend toward nonhistoricity.³⁵

Thus, Europe functions as the good example because of its claim to universality. Simultaneously, however, the exemplarity of Europe is a necessary sample, without which the discourse of universality would be meaningless. Because what would be left of this discourse of it were not mirrored in real life instantiations? In other words, Europe is not merely an example of one continent among others because the very logic of the example exemplifies Europe itself. According to this logic, the sample cannot be thought as merely being a sample of the whole (universality, in this case) since the whole, or, universality, cannot be what it is without the sample(s) that belong to it. As such, the example is that which interrupts the whole, calling the totality of universality, which has given Europe its exemplarity, into question. The point here is not merely, or only, to question or dismantle Europe’s claim to universality but to show

that Europe, as the example of universality, must be considered in all its ambiguity. The example is ambiguous because it shows that the relation between the particular and the universal is always already paradoxical: the one thing cannot refer to the other without undermining itself.

With regard to Europe, the ambiguity inherent to exemplarity allows Derrida to show in what sense European identity already deidentifies itself. To clarify this further, he refers to the example from Valéry, who stated that “French are men of universality.” In other words, they are special, or singular, because they are universal. But this paradox is not reserved for Valéry only; it was Husserl who said that since the European is committed to universal reason, he is also the “functionary of mankind.”³⁶ Derrida calls this “a paradox of the paradox,” which, as such, reveals a deidentification of the capital itself, which has “begun to open up itself unto the other shore of another heading, even if it is an opposed heading . . . , begun to make out, to see coming, to hear or understand as well, the other of the heading in general.”³⁷ In Derrida’s words, it reveals that it is only possible to speak of culture, of history, of identity, in terms of its self-difference to itself. Self-difference, that which differs and diverges from itself and of itself, would also be the difference, at once internal and irreducible to the “at home with itself.” “This can be said, inversely or reciprocally, of all identity or all identification: there is no self-relation, no relation to oneself, no identification with oneself, without culture, but a culture of oneself *as a culture of the other*, a culture of the double genitive and of the *difference to oneself*.”³⁸ This means that a culture never has a single origin and cannot be understood from in itself or as itself, but can only define, and view itself in relation in what and to what it is not. Therefore, the radical implication of Derrida’s analysis of exemplarity is the disruption of sameness, and thus the impossibility of a full and complete self-identification.

There are two important implications of this disruption with regard to Europe. The first concerns Europe’s discourse regarding its own historical movement. The central insight of *The Other Heading* concerns Derrida’s reading of exemplarity. It reveals to and within the historical discourse on Europe is that history in general, and European history in particular, also presuppose that the heading or telos not be *given*, that it not be identifiable in advance. Although Derrida does not offer a comprehensive reading of history in *The Other Heading*, it does become clear that movement of history does not merely follow a previously established trajectory, like the Hegelian spirit. Instead, history must be conceived as openness to what remains different from it. The second implication of

this disruption is the opening of an aporetic politics of responsibility. It means, in other words, that Europe's difference in and with itself means that we are caught in a "double bind" for which we are responsible.³⁹ More precisely, inheriting the history of Europe means inheriting the double bind that consists of the question whether being faithful to the heritage of Europe means a cultivation of the self-difference that is constitutive of identity itself or whether one should limit oneself to an identity and the telos that belongs to it, in which this difference remains gathered. For Derrida, the double bind places us in a paradoxical position: on the one hand, it is necessary to affirm the historical philosophical discourse, and thus the modern idea of Europe as universal and exemplary, and make ourselves the guardians of it. This responsibility is not the result of a choice; "it imposes itself upon us."⁴⁰ On the other hand, we must be aware that what is proper to both culture and history is not to be identical to itself, and therefore, an awareness of this means an awareness of Europe as not being a closed identity. Because this is the case, Derrida calls for caution: one must be suspicious of *both* repetitive memory *and* the completely *other* of the absolutely new. One must negotiate between these two standpoints, and this is what responsibility consists in.

Negotiation, as responsibility, amounts to "the experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia from which one may invent the only possible invention, the impossible invention."⁴¹ The aporia or abyss, the between, does not refer to an absence of rules but points to the necessity of a leap at the moment of ethical or political decision. In this way, "it would seem that European cultural identity, like identity or identification in general, if it must be equal to itself and to the other, up to the measure of its own immeasurable difference 'with itself,' belongs, therefore, must belong, to this experience and experiment of the impossible."⁴² This is so because the inheritance of the history and memory of Europe cannot be thought without Europe's relation to what is other than it. The question, for Derrida, then becomes: How can Europe be an identity that is an identity, yet is not closed to what it is not? This is the aporia from which the only responsible politics is possible.

Europe, as Promised

So far, it has become clear that Derrida's reading of exemplarity offers a new perspective on Europe's historical discourse on universality. Thinking

the relationship between universality and exemplarity in this manner allows him to present (1) an alternative understanding of history in terms of an openness that is and remains different from the teleological movement of reason; (2) an aporetic politics of responsibility that states that we are responsible for the double bind between the affirmation of Europe's historical philosophical discourse and an awareness of alterity. The alternative understanding of history and the aporetic responsibility show that it is first of all no longer possible to think of Europe in terms of a telos of universality that regulates or structures our historical present. We are called instead to think of Europe in terms of the promise it holds. As I seek to make clear, it is only from the perspective of temporality that a proper distinction between telos and promise appears. The distinct temporal structure of the promise shows that what Europe might become must be invented anew each time with each decision that our responsibility calls for.

Before moving on to a discussion of Derrida's account of the promise, some remarks on Europe's classical discourse on universality are needed. It is important to note that within the discourse on universality, Europe is certainly not conceived as a totality: its trajectory toward its ideal as universal means precisely an opening up and breaking away from any self-enclosed meaning. Or, to phrase it differently, Europe is not a concept in which its aspirations are exhausted. As Nietzsche's words clarify, its historical movement consists in going beyond itself and is thus transcendence, and thereby it is necessarily the breaking up of totality. This is also what Husserl's interpretation of Europe as an "idea in the Kantian sense" confirms. Gasché presents an excellent discussion of the Kantian idea. He offers a nuanced and extensive reading of Kant, after which he concludes that an idea in the Kantian sense is an idea of "unity and maximum of perfection"; it can only be progressively reached, but nevertheless, it plays "a capital, regulative role in the domain of knowledge in spite of its indeterminacy."⁴³ Thus, even in the case of the ideal not being reached, or the telos not (yet) having realized itself, Europe is still an idea in this manner because its ideal of universality is what regulates our historical present, in the sense that this present is viewed and experienced as a moment of a progressive movement of reason. Thus, even though the Kantian nature of freedom infinitely defers the realization of the telos, the movement of reason is on its way towards it. In this sense, Europe's telos that it has imagined for itself serves as a transcendental condition of history and allows it to be interpreted in

terms of its trajectory toward it. Or, phrased differently, Europe's classical discourse can be viewed in terms of a temporal idealism that holds that the interpretation of its historical present is conditioned by its telos.

Let us now turn to Derrida's account of responsibility and the promise it holds for Europe. For Derrida, responsibility within the context of Europe means that we must "respond to the call of European memory, to recall what has been promised under the name of Europe, to re-identify Europe."⁴⁴ Although Derrida mentions the promise in *The Other Heading*, he does not elaborate on its temporal structure in this text. In other places, however, he does. In *Memoires for Paul de Man*, Derrida offers an illuminating discussion of the promise in terms of his friendship to Paul de Man. He speaks of the promise here as always excessive and as a commitment beyond expectation or anticipation.⁴⁵ Generally speaking, this commitment can be viewed in terms of a response to the other and a response to the future. It is a response to the other in the sense that it consists of a pledge or affirmation of something to someone. The promise is a response to the future because it is not exhausted by its specific content. This is the case, because the promise also carries a performative meaning. A promise promises to be kept; the one who makes a promise makes a commitment to the future. This commitment is a kind of pledge to the future, which, however, carries a radical uncertainty. The person who makes a promise cannot be sure whether she can actually fulfill it, deliberately or not. Moreover, it is impossible to know what it is that one promises or whether someone is still the same person who made the promise that was supposed to be kept. Thus, in the present, the promise responds to the future. In *Rogues*, Derrida speaks of the promise in terms of "the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now."⁴⁶ However, the future that is signified with the promise is not the future that will one day become present. Why is this the case? A promise cannot become present; if a promise is fulfilled, and thus fully realized, it effaces itself and thus ceases to be a promise. A future present is a present that can be foreseen and predicted and thereby no longer possible in an absolute sense. Instead, with the promise, Derrida calls us to think a future that cannot be anticipated or programmed and will never become present but will always remain promised. As such, the promise invites us to reconsider possibility since it moves away from what was already possible, and therefore is no longer possible *as possible*, to a future so distant that it keeps open possibility in a more absolute sense. In this manner, the promise shows that the radically unknowable

future is necessarily involved in what we take to be presence and also renders it impossible. As such, the promise carries an aporetic structure and thereby reveals the excessive nature of time, and thus history. More precisely, the promise shows what Derrida, in *Spectres of Marx*, calls the “disjointure” of time itself. (“The time is out of joint” is Hamlet’s phrase that Derrida refers to.)⁴⁷ The promise reveals that a pure or complete presence of meaning is radically impossible because the present is always already open to what is yet to arrive.

With regard to Europe, the promise and its corresponding temporality thus show that what we render ‘universal’ is possible because it always already carries its own impossibility. Accordingly, the response to and responsibility for a future that remains promised show that it is impossible to speak of European history in terms of the gradual realization of an idea. Instead, as Derrida shows, the fact that identity itself can only be thought as always already in relation to alterity means that history is always already interrupted, opened to the promise that the future holds. Because is history not precisely the challenging of any given meaning? Thus, the “future of the future” that the promise announces shows that history cannot be saturated because history itself resists it.⁴⁸ It means not only that a final eschaton or telos would be impossible, as it would name a situation in which nothing could occur, but also that the temporal structure that the promise introduces, and that we are responsible for, conditions history itself. Levinas’s words on Nietzsche are fitting in this context: “The future and the most far-off things [are] the rule for all the present days.”⁴⁹

Derrida’s gesture of opening the thinking of presence up to its very future through his understanding of responsibility for a promise means that he reinterprets the traditional discourse on Europe. In the traditional discourse, Europe’s idea of itself serves as its telos in the sense that it is the ground or condition that gives shape to the historical present and thus serves as its transcendental condition. However, the promise rather operates as a quasi transcendental in the sense that it can no longer be understood as an idea that regulates history. This means, to formulate it in negative terms, that the promise conditions history but does not operate as a transcendental condition.⁵⁰ As such, the promise should most surely not be understood in terms of a substitute for the Greek telos. It is not the fulfillment of a promise at the end of the road that shapes the contours of our history and historical present. This is so because the promise reveals a fractured temporality in which transcendental condi-

tioning is no longer an option. There are three interconnected reasons why the temporal structure of the promise forbids it from operating as a transcendental condition for European history. These reasons simultaneously show that what Europe is must be invented time and time again. The first is the impossibility of the realisation of a promise. As noted, to fulfill a promise means to efface its structure in the sense that a fulfilled promise is no longer a promise; a promise can only consist in terms of its appellation to the future that has not arrived yet. But this impossibility of fulfillment does not come from a lack of reason, knowledge, or power of a subject who makes a promise. Instead, the promise is established in relation to an alterity that remains outside the domain of knowledge or power that the promise responds to. Thus, the relationship to alterity that is addressed in the promise cannot be timed, structured, or programmed in advance. The interruption of what might be appear should be awaited and should be anticipated *as* the unforeseeable, the *unanticipatable*, the nonmasterable, nonidentifiable, in short, “as that of which one does not yet have a memory.”⁵¹ Europe does not consist in a purpose already determined from the beginning, and there is no telos that can be actualized through the application of a program.

The second reason why the temporal structure of the promise forbids it from operating as a transcendental condition is that the promise is a response and thus a responsibility. As noted, the thinking of alterity means that we are caught in a double bind for which we are responsible in the sense that we must affirm Europe’s historical discourse, but that it is also necessary to be aware of the fact that Europe is not a closed entity, and must be viewed in terms of its (self-)difference. For Derrida, Europe can be our future only if we attest to its historical inheritance in terms of its universality and if we take responsibility for its memory, but it also means that we must find a new relation to it. As such, we could say that history must be preserved as a problem.

Responsibility consists in the negotiation between these competing demands of the historical inheritance and Europe in relation to its (self-)difference. Decisions are a negotiation of these demands, and as such, we must calculate. On the one hand, we should make use of all memory, knowledge, and analysis we can muster in order to inform our responsible decisions, but at the same time, knowledge and memory are, in their generality, not sufficient for a decision. Because a decision, for it to be a decision, and not an application, is always singular. Therefore, the structure of a decision is aporetic in the sense that responsible decisions must take

“a leap of faith” and are what Derrida calls, echoing Kierkegaard, “a madness.”⁵² If this leap were not there, “we could simply unfold knowledge into a program or course of action. Nothing could make us more irresponsible; nothing could be more totalitarian.”⁵³ To decide is to be confronted by the radical impossibility of decision, yet to do the impossible nevertheless. Because this is so, responsibility is not in the domain of what is possible, and therefore it is outside the domain where an idea can be realized or a program can be executed. With regard to Europe, it means that, with each and every impossible decision that our responsibility calls for each time, we decide what Europe is and must become.

The third reason is that responsibility means that one must act with urgency. As noted, Derrida urges us to understand responsibility in terms of a response to the disjointure of time (and history). Because of the urgency with which alterity announces itself, because I am called to respond here and now, responsibility is outside of the domain where a telos can be articulated or realized. With regard to Europe, the realization of the idea it has of itself is thus not the application or execution of previously invented steps formulated in the domain of reason but must be performed with absolute urgency, at present.

The European historical philosophical discourse has viewed Europe as on its way to universality. Or, in other words, Europe’s conception of itself has traditionally been arché-teleo-eschatological. The main feature of this conception of Europe consists in the view that reason is universal, yet Europe is exemplary in the history of reason in the sense that it is within Europe that universality can unfold to its proper end. The movement of unfolding, of which Hegel’s thought can be viewed as representative, holds that the end is always already in view from the beginning and that the beginning is viewed from its end. It means that, in Derrida’s words, “Europe has a refined taste for finality” because it views itself “on the horizon, that is to say, from its end.” (Derrida refers to the Greek meaning of horizon here, of which the English translation is “limit”).⁵⁴ I have attempted to demonstrate that Derrida’s reading of exemplarity offers an opening to think Europe in and as relation to its (self-)difference. Thinking Europe in this manner offers an interpretation of Europe no longer in terms of its telos, but as a promise. Europe as a promise reveals that it must be invented anew with each decision our responsibility calls for. I have tried to show that it is, however, only from the perspective of temporality that the difference between telos and promise becomes explicit. Whereas a telos operates as a transcendental

condition, the temporal structure of the promise forbids this possibility. It does so because of three interconnected reasons: first, the promise responds to an alterity that, because of its futural character, is outside the domain of knowledge and power; second, responsibility for a promise is not in the domain of the possible and thus outside of the field where a program can be rolled out; third, responsibility for a promise is a disjuncture of time, which means that one must act with urgency, at present. This does not mean we should refute old-fashioned universalism but that we should take it over as our heritage, while finding a novel relation to it, continuously testing it against what the present requires of us.

Notes

1. Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, 155.
2. Husserl, "Vienna Lecture," 275.
3. Allen's *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Foundations of Critical Theory* is a good example.
4. With regards to the climate crisis, Dipesh Chakrabarty eloquently investigates how this crisis can appeal "to our sense of universals while challenging . . . our capacity for historical understanding." "Climate Change: Four Theses," 201.
5. Levinas, Emmanuel 1999. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 132.
6. Husserl, "Vienna Lecture," 276.
7. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 132. Husserl as well, refers to the "ancient Greek spirit." See "Vienna Lecture," 3.
8. Glendinning, "European Philosophical History and Faith in God a Posteriori," 66. Glendinning also refers to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* here, in which he writes that a European world began to emerge when the "great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics" made its way into "the narrower epoch of Christian creationism." See *Of Grammatology*, 13.
9. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 29.
10. Arendt, 29.
11. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 11.
12. Husserl, "Vienna Lecture," 274.
13. Husserl, 275.
14. Glendinning, "European Philosophical History," 71.
15. Glendinning, 71. Although the difference with Glendinning here is that he uses the term in a specific sense: to refer to Man's relation to the divine in terms of an a posteriori conception of God, something that is outside the scope

of this chapter. My point in using the terms is that the movement of historical thought consists of the interplay between beginning and end. Derrida also refers to the “archeo-teleological program” of Europe. See *The Other Heading*, 27.

16. Husserl, “Vienna Lecture,” 275.

17. Thomas Mertens, “Hegel and the End of Europe,” 50.

18. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der Philosophische Wissenschaften*, par. 393, 58.

Husserl, too, presents a “vision of humanity in its totality,” and not a view that “remains confined to a specific tribe or region.” See “Vienna Lecture,” 4.

19. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 65.

20. Gasché, “Is Europe an Idea in the Kantian Sense?,” 33.

21. Husserl, *Ideas*, 397.

22. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 132.

23. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 31.

24. Derrida, 6.

25. Derrida, 6.

26. Derrida, “The Right to Philosophy from the Cosmopolitical Point of View,” 8.

27. Derrida, 8.

28. Derrida, 8.

29. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 25.

30. See also *The Other Heading*, 14. Here, Derrida points out that Cap, from the Latin caput, capitis refers to head. Or “the ‘extremity of the extreme’ the last, the final moment, the *telos*, (ordered by the man in charge).”

31. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 24.

32. Derrida, 24–25. Derrida refers to Valéry here, who wrote about Europe in terms of it being the “brain of a vast body” (the body being Asia).

33. Derrida, 25.

34. Derrida, 73.

35. This is Patočka’s view for example. See: *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, xvii (preface).

36. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 17.

37. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 76.

38. Derrida, 10.

39. Derrida, 29.

40. Derrida, 28.

41. Derrida, 41.

42. Derrida, 45.

43. Gasché, “Is Europe an Idea in the Kantian Sense?,” 53.

44. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 76.

45. Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, 47, 93.

46. Derrida, *Rogues*, 86.

47. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 61.
48. Rivelaygue's words are helpful here. He points out that in Judaism there is one word for both truth and fidelity. He writes that "truth is the fidelity to the alliance and to the promise; the truth does not designate a uni-totality, but a relation to history as to that what is promised, that which cannot be realized by man alone nor without man." Rivelaygue, *Lecons de métaphysique Allemande*, 288.
49. Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 93.
50. Derrida, "Force of Law," 257.
51. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 45.
52. Bennington, "A Moment of Madness: Derrida's Kierkegaard," *Oxford Literary Review*, 103.
53. Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," 21.
54. Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 28.

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