

The Word's Inexhaustibility: Jean-Louis Chrétien's *De la Fatigue*

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Whom do we address with our words? As a matter of spoken conversation, the answer is simple enough. First of all, the one in question is our interlocuter, whether that be a lover, relative, friend, neighbor, acquaintance, coworker, shop employee, even a stranger. Words stage our encounters and exchanges with others, however fleeting or mundane. They are something crucial we hold in common, and thereby crucial to what holds us together. Is it incidental that a falling out leads to no longer speaking? By its very orientation, an utterance (or the fact a word is on our mind, in our heart, or on the tip of our tongue) suggests a straightforward insight into the nature of conversation. In short, our words address the one listening, or, at least, the one to whom we are speaking, even if we are not being heard because the other is *not* listening. To be sure, the one to whom we speak may fail to hear us, a failure of listening originating in some inattention owing potentially to as many reasons as there are circumstances. And sometimes, of course, our words end up being heard by others entirely besides those to whom we were immediately directing them. Nothing essential, however, is changed when we unwittingly or unexpectedly address a group of listeners, a crowd of witnesses, or an eavesdropper. In instances as these, there may be unintended consequences for what we have said, yet what we said remains the same. Nor, for that matter, is anything in principle altered when we consider the situations, in which we are the listener rather than the speaker. Listening as latecomers to something already said by another involves no great mystery. An audio recording of a speech from history, for instance, is just as accessible for us today as it was to those there on the day it was delivered. Whether we are the speaker or hearer, all these examples exhibit the same banal form. Somebody says (or has said) a word, and it is heard. Taken to the extreme, such communication shows it is even the dead who still can speak.

And yet, no matter how customary this fact of life becomes, there is something extraordinary about the dead addressing us with their words. Writing puts this in starkest relief. For if anything, it is the essential *postmortem* potential pregnant within the former that notably distinguishes the written word from the spoken word. The act of inscription transcends time, for the inscribed word indicates a hand whose very gesture was itself always reaching out to posterity—in writing, it often is to some degree unapparent to whom one may be writing, if only because it is never entirely possible to know exactly who may (or may not) read. Take for example a letter directed to a friend. Its destiny lies open. Yes, it bears a determinate recipient, but not all writing is this way, and even in the case of the letter, there are fundamental complications: it could be lost in the mail, inadvertently delivered to somebody else, opened by a snoop or censor, perhaps it ultimately is destined to be shared with those to whom it was not consciously addressed—after all, historians and biographers make routine use of what were meant to be private letters, holding them out for scrutiny and analysis, even when the

correspondents may have never anticipated that their words would be read by anyone else, much less a future public. Even a personal journal is shot through with this possibility hovering over the page.

The question concerning for whom we write, and thus to whom those words in turn are destined to be received, is further complicated when the words at issue are addressed in response to the words of someone dead. The author who issued them can no longer receive a reply. Such is the situation here. The French philosopher and poet Jean-Louis Chrétien has recently died, and so now only his words are with us. The communicative exchange typifying what we find in living conversation or letters has been foreclosed. In addressing the words of the now deceased, doing so stands no chance of responding, as before, to the now departed. Does this mean, however, that he is gone completely? Far from it! Chrétien is dead. Nevertheless, his words live on. And as anyone who has ever read him knows, his words live on because, though they are human words, they embody a unique depth reflective of their author's unceasing attempt to find the words to give voice to what above all was calling them forth, the Word. If there were anything that could hope to mediate between the living and the dead, is it not words such as these, those which were so inspired by the Word? Hence, in addressing what Chrétien's words have had to say to us, it is only proper that our words recognize how, in trying to respond to him despite his absence, they are words which, like his own, do so only insofar as they also respond to the Word. For it is the Word alone that opens a place for us to address one another, and not just when, but especially when, one of the parties is dead. In this way, the Word renders inexhaustible the once living's words, since, by partaking in the Word as they have, the dead's words secure a life beyond the end of the one who wrote or spoke in its name. Finite words proving inexhaustible, because they are able really only to begin speaking to us after the life of the one who wrote them has ceased. In reading these words, we find an author whose works themselves were efforts along a spiritual voyage to God. For their author, that transit has been completed, for he rests with God. As for the words he has left behind in its wake, they continue to work, continuing to speak to others presently engaged in the task of making their own way along the path to the kingdom of heaven. It is an illustrative testimony to the author's rare generous spirit that in encountering his works now, they induce the unmistakable impression he conscientiously wrote intending them to be so. The thought that this is the future his words are promised to fulfill is, quite likely, one Chrétien himself would find congenial!

If much of Chrétien's work orients itself in terms of the recognizably Heideggerian notion of human existence's exhibiting a fundamental structure of call and response, his analysis of our human finitude, in contrast to the existential analytic of *Being and Time*, never shies away from acknowledging how the limits endemic to that condition are experienced most powerfully and meaningfully in the confrontation with what exceeds us. This is an excess capable of taking many forms, and Chrétien explores them each exactly: the immemorial past, the insatiability of a desire that desires to desire, the surfeit of language, the sublimity of nature's beauty. The timeless, the ceaseless, the boundless, and the fullness—illuminating accounts of this excess, of the infinite in its innumerable manifestations, are never in short supply in Chrétien. If for Heidegger, then, *Dasein* is of the world and held out into the nothing (*das Nichts*), for Chrétien, we are *toujours déjà* called to respond to an excess saturating the world, and which calls to us

inexorably from beyond it. Before we can ever undertake the attempt to make sense of the meaning of our own being reflectively, or even embark along the course of our everyday action practically, we find ourselves suitably oriented only because, whether or not we yet recognize it, we have already been called by God. Thus, Chrétien's works can be understood in part as attempts to awaken our attention to the many ways in which this call makes its presence felt all around us.

To consider Chrétien's account of the means by which this call claims us, here our mind may turn immediately to works such as *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, *The Call and the Response*, or *The Ark of Speech*. But unlike these translated works that were published originally in French in the 1990s, perhaps it is another work belonging to the same period, *De la Fatigue*, that can serve as a touchstone for appreciating Chrétien's analysis of how the word of God speaks to us, eliciting our response, and strengthening our voice when, had it been left to itself, it would have otherwise faltered. Appearing two years before 1998's *L'arche de la parole*, *De la Fatigue* makes the case that it is through the experience of fatigue, of all the ways we can be tired, that our finitude is brought to the fore, and where that finitude is ultimately transformed in light of its relation to God. Naturally, such a work will eventually have something to say about the essential role the incarnation of Christ has in doing so. With an eye to it, Chrétien opens the book with what will serve as a contrasting conception of God, namely the Greek idea of God found in Aristotle. This conception of God, formulated both in the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*, inaugurates an ontotheological tradition whose thinking of God culminates with a *causa sui* God who, to take the notorious case in Descartes, is able to will that the sum of two and two not equal four.¹ It is the unmoved mover (ὁ οὐ κινούμενον κινεῖ), the first uncaused cause. But as Chrétien notes, Aristotle also famously views this deity as a supreme contemplative being, as divine *nous*—that is to say, “thought thinking itself.”²

Chrétien's reasons for laying out the Aristotelean conceptions of God and contemplation come increasingly into focus over the work's successive discussions of fatigue's many forms—fatigue is a “polychrome”³ phenomenon, as Chrétien puts it. For as becomes clear, we are, in fact, not dealing here with one single overall conception of fatigue, of which there are many manifestations. There are, rather, Chrétien claims, discrete kinds of fatigue, each epitomizing the worldview of the tradition to which it belongs. In chapters ranging widely across figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Stéphane Mallarmé, Plotinus, Lucretius, Simone Weil, Pierre Janet, Emmanuel Levinas, and Friedrich Nietzsche, what emerges is a history of fatigue, one revealing that the manner in which fatigue is understood differs substantially depending on whether we are considering its Greek conception, Jewish and Christian, or modern nihilistic conception. As Chrétien says, fatigue can be “reduced to three fundamental figures: Greek fatigue, biblical fatigue, [and] nihilist fatigue.”⁴ This tripartite schematism comes with an important caveat, however. For, as Chrétien states, it nevertheless must be emphasized that “each of these three dimensions of fatigue carries with it many tensions and various possibilities of existing. They cannot be thought of as chronologically separate stages.”⁵ The whole history of philosophy down to the present day remains indebted to the language and concepts of ancient Greek philosophy. As for the biblical conception of fatigue, it precedes the Greek view with its Old Testament

prophets. Yet it, too, remains relevant even still today, if for no other reason than the fact that a certain modern sensibility defines itself antagonistically to it, as with Nietzsche.

In outlining its winding career, Chrétien will claim this history to fatigue is at the same time a history of the body, of the competing ways by which human embodiment, and its fundamental relation to death, has been conceived. Indeed, the body, says Chrétien, is capable of adopting a posture oriented toward the whole of being, or being as a whole. In that sense, the body is ontological. An inquiry into the body, thus, is at once an inquiry into being.⁶

To see what exactly Chrétien aims to illuminate concerning these interrelated histories of fatigue, the body, and God, it will do well to start with the Ancients. For Aristotle, whose view on the matter exemplifies the Greek understanding of fatigue, our finitude is discernible in the fatigue felt at the limits of our thinking. As human, we are finite thinkers. By this, the trouble is not that there are things we do not or cannot know, but that even our very thinking remains an activity, a finite one, and to that extent something fundamentally susceptible to tiring. For us, thought is a kind of action, insofar as contemplation itself is work. Human *theoria* is a frail act. As Chrétien says in an early chapter titled “Le Labeur de Penser,” “According to Aristotle, fatigue has intervened at the summit of theoretical life in order to interrupt the continuity [between us and God] and manifest that this life itself is still human.”⁷ Although our thinking is for us still work, and thus eventually tires out, the Greek understanding of fatigue maintains the divine mind differs from ours precisely in that it never fatigues. Our own thinking, which is human and finite, fights against fatigue, and so the contemplative life for us never can persist unabated. Truly divine contemplation, in contrast, is indefatigable. There is no such struggle. Its contemplation is effortless.

Underlying this Greek fatigue’s observation that finite thinking must tire, is the further statement that bodily fatigue, and even the body itself, is linked to effort and deficit.⁸ The inherent weakness and vulnerability of the body marks our humanity, an experiential fact the Platonic tradition has always seen as fundamentally distinguishing us from the divine. According to Plotinus, for instance, as Chrétien observes, “it is not the man who gets tired first, it is because the soul gets tired that it descends to a human body.”⁹ In apparent contrast to this Greek tendency to distort or efface the essential relation between the body and thinking, it might be thought that the phenomenological tradition has always underscored the entwinement between them. We are incarnate beings, and so our acts, including the act of thinking, occurs under the horizon of fatigue. In *Being and Nothingness*, for instance, Sartre recounts the experience of growing tired while reading. It is late at night, and as our concentration wanes from encroaching fatigue, the words on the page wobble. Our vision grows weak, our eyes get heavy, and we yawn as we begin to slouch or slump. Despite being absorbed in the story, we must exercise increasing effort to comprehend the words on the page. Our reading, which had been giving food for thought, slips into an overpowering sleep. Such a common experience might appear decisive to undercut any dualism. With that in mind, consequently Chrétien turns to another episode offered later in the same text, in which Sartre, rather than having abandoned dualism, is trying to reinforce his own form of it. In the work’s fourth and final part titled “Having, Doing, and Being,” Sartre provides a sustained analysis of fatigue in a section called “Freedom: the First Condition of

Action.” As before with the earlier reading case, here again Sartre sketches the example hoping to highlight his distinction between the in-itself (*en-soi*) and for-itself (*pour-soi*).

Lest we had concluded from the reading example that fatigue is something that renders us powerless in its face, Sartre offers a second example designed to show the opposite. How we respond to fatigue, so he suggests, always depends on a freedom ensuring no fatigue, even bodily fatigue, is not wholly involuntary. At the very least, a degree of agency remains essential, since it is up to us to decide the sense that our fatigue receives. Even physical exhaustion, says Sartre, derives its sense in light of a situation, which itself derives its significance on the basis of our own choice of an “original project.” In the chapter “Sartre et les deux marcheurs,” Chrétien turns to Sartre’s account of a countryside excursion, in which two walkers hike a steep climb fighting against fatigue. It is a view of bodily fatigue Chrétien will reject owing to the gnostic nature of freedom on which the description depends. Sartre says, “The way in which I suffer my fatigue is in no way dependent on the chance difficulty of the slope which I am climbing or on the more or less restless night which I have spent; these factors can contribute to constituting my fatigue itself but not to the way in which I suffer it.”¹⁰ In a word, the way in which the fatigue is suffered “is always transcendence,” and hence “a way of choosing myself.”¹¹ To give into fatigue, and thereby to constitute the path as too-difficult-to-traverse, is not only my free choice, but a choice itself presupposing an original project by which the entire hike is understood.¹² Sartre writes,

“Earlier we posed a question: I have yielded to fatigue, we said, and doubtless I *could* have done otherwise but *at what price?* [...] Our analysis, in fact, has just shown us that this act was not *gratuitous*. To be sure, it was not explained by a motive or a cause conceived as the content of a prior state of consciousness, but it had to be interpreted in terms of an original project of which it formed an integral part. Hence it becomes evident that we can not suppose that the act could have been modified without at the same time supposing a fundamental modification of my original choice of myself. This way of yielding to fatigue and of letting myself fall down to the side of the road expresses a certain initial stiffening against my body and the inanimate in-itself. It is placed within the compass of a certain view of the world in which difficulties can appear ‘not worth the trouble of being tolerated’; or, to be exact, since the motive is a pure nonthetic consciousness and consequently an initial project of itself toward an absolute end (a certain aspect of the in-itself-for-itself), it is an apprehension of the world (warmth, distance from the city, uselessness of effort, *etc.*) as the cause of my ceasing to walk. Thus this *possible*—to stop—*theoretically* takes on its meaning only in and through the hierarchy of the possible which I am in terms of the ultimate and initial possible. This does not imply that I must *necessarily* stop but merely that I can refuse to stop only by a radical conversion of my being-in-the-world; that is, by an abrupt metamorphosis of my initial project—i.e., by another choice of myself and of my ends. Moreover this modification is always possible.”¹³

As the surrounding context to this stretch of text makes clear, Sartre imagines the hiker in question as somebody suffering from what the psychoanalytic tradition terms an “inferiority complex.” Due to longstanding feelings of resentment and failure that haunt his way of relating

to others, the walk is not an innocent excursion, but a monumental test of his self-worth, and hence a hostile struggle with his walking companion. And while Sartre himself objects to the psychoanalytic tradition's characterization of the situation, it is not to challenge the claim that this sort of psychological complex is capable of structuring something as basic as how we experience the fatigue of being tired on a walk, but to object to its interpretation of the role it assigns to the inferiority complex itself. According to Sartre, such a view neglects the fact that this self-understanding is itself the result of a more radical self-choosing. At bottom, even the suffering of fatigue on a walk is subject to the sense our freely adopted original project will give it. As Chrétien notes, for Sartre, then, the fatigue at issue is experienced "only against the background of such a project, and thus the choice of the self of the world. And this is where the two walkers separate: for Sartre they cannot therefore excuse their fatigue, but only the meaning they gave it, and which is one with themselves."¹⁴ In assessing the preceding account of bodily suffering, Chrétien for his part finds it to be more of an interpretation than a description of fatigue. There is something overly self-involved about the way in which Sartre's imagined walker experiences his fatigue. As Chrétien says, the description proceeds as if in such a situation we truly give "a lot of attention to what we feel," and, in any case, "as for the defiance of the body and the Gnostic dualism" in the example, "they do not form an object of description here; they secretly enliven the description itself, giving effort a narcissistic and pejorative interpretation that makes it somewhat repulsive."¹⁵ Chrétien's point, in short, is that if the example feels forced, that is in large part because the freedom in terms of which it is framed is pathological. Grossly elevating our power to angelic proportions, it fails to describe a truly "human fatigue."¹⁶

Whether we accept Sartre's contention that it is always up to us to assign our fatigue its significance, it is certainly true that each experience of fatigue has its own tonality. As Chrétien himself says, "To each act its own fatigue."¹⁷ For instance, the fatigue we feel in bodily exercise depends on the specific act. Having tired arms from doing pull-ups, heavy legs while on a long run, or shortness of breath from a hard sprint, are different exhaustions. Exercise is not the only variegated type. As for another bodily fatigue, there is the tiredness we experience before drifting off to sleep, which again is different from the grogginess and disorientation we feel in waking up. Once again, the essential takeaway is that fatigue must be considered from the perspective of the body. "A pure spirit," as Chrétien observes, "disembodied and timeless, could not, it seems, in any way be exposed to fatigue, and could indefinitely sustain its actions without worrying about their maintenance or repetition until they, like ours, have to cease. And there is no human act, even the most joyful and invigorating, that is not under the horizon of fatigue."¹⁸ This clarifying remark regarding the scope of fatigue's horizon is crucial.

To be sure, there is a tendency to construe the experience of fatigue exclusively negatively, yet to do so would be a mistake. Not every bodily fatigue is bad, which is why Chrétien will agree with others such as Descartes and Maurice de Guérin that there are joyous fatigues. Although not every bodily fatigue produces mental weariness, and weariness itself is often not bodily, this does not establish an inviolable distinction between bodily fatigue and weariness of mind or soul. Once again, Chrétien's intention is to combat a dualism that would distort the complexity of fatigue. The key contention is that bodily exhaustion is capable of undergoing a spiritual dimension too. For example, a depression leaving us bed ridden is a

physical exhaustion, to be sure, but it expresses a disgust with being. The body is tired, because we have grown weary with existence itself. And it simply is not possible to separate the two. Not bathing and not brushing one's teeth, or failing to wear clean cloths, are sloppy. But the depressed one, who has become a slob for that reason, exhibits an unkemptness itself standing in direct proportion to his personal revulsion toward existence. In saying "no" to the demands of bodily hygiene, the depressed is saying "no" to existence. Whether through tedium, boredom, disgust, or agony, he is tired of life. The stereotypical existentialist attunement of *ennui*, then, may be more fully understood by what a venerable spiritual tradition has termed *acedia* (ἀκηδία). This listlessness no longer caring about anything, including oneself, is as much spiritual as physical, for its bodily expressions are gestures of disgust and contempt for being. Where Aristotle had said we get tired even by thinking, here at stake it is a deeper dimension of human finitude, of being tired with existing. It is not just that contemplating being tires us out, but that we are tired of both our own existence, and of being in general.

It will not be in either Aristotle or Sartre that Chrétien finds the adequate figure of a fatigue capable of overcoming itself. Such a glimpse, instead, is to be found in the thought of Simone Weil. Unlike Aristotle, notes Chrétien, Weil can write that "'the fatigue of work paralyzes the discursive faculties, but not contemplation.' It obscures and degrades a first attention, but, 'like the second wind' of runners, we need a 'second attention,' and this can arise in fatigue itself and by it."¹⁹ There is, Chrétien is suggesting, natural attention, whose original province is discursive thought, and which inevitably exhausts itself in trying to think anything it does, including the God given to think theoretically. When such contemplation flags, as invariably it must, unlike Aristotle, however, who concludes this is the end of the matter, Weil sketches the conditions under which our thinking and being might be reinvigorated, not simply in a way enabling us to retread the same ground we have already covered, but in a way allowing us to press into entirely new soil. At issue is the grace of a thinking that, having initially reached the limits of its own strength, finds itself carried on by a gust of wind that renders it fit to work by no longer working alone. In this way, Weil's notion of a "second wind" calls to mind Paul Ricœur's "second naivete"—for having experienced what had appeared to be impossibility, our sense of possibility is suddenly transfigured, and everything that had once been cast down is restored.

The notion of a "second attention" for Chrétien consequently entails a corresponding shift in our understanding of the being of God. "For the Greeks," as he observes, "divine indefatigability qualifies the life of God considered in itself, in describing the relation of God to his own action, independently of any relation to us."²⁰ But if Weil's reworking of the depths of attention has shown us anything, it is that, by listening attentively to God, we come to comprehend that we are encountering a God far different from what is described by Aristotle and the Greeks. As the Jewish prophets have all insisted, this is a God who hears us. The biblical God reaches out to us. And if our being leaves us restless without God, and if peace is attainable only if we should strive to hear and obey him, the striving is not in vain, for God is ready to meet us. Here it is not a matter of a self-sufficient God approachable by us only in *theoria*, but one to whom we may surrender our whole being in love, in response to the love which God has first shown us in Jesus Christ. Chrétien writes,

“But divine indefatigability does not have only one meaning: it changes and is radically transformed according to whether the being of the divine, or the being of God, manifests itself otherwise. The indefatigability of Aristotle’s God and that of God according to the Holy Bible are certainly not identical [...]. Thus, to evoke only one aspect of these differences, indefatigability can characterize the divine life in itself, in its relation to oneself, the eternal discipline with which God maintains his own act, or else it can characterize the relationship between God and the world that he maintains without any failing in being. In this last sense, it is not the inaccessible intimacy of God, but on the contrary that of God who is incessantly turned towards us, the unrepentant *yes* of his gifts, another name of providence.”²¹

The “second wind” renewing our thinking and being, hence, transforms us in the encounter with a God always already turned toward us. And thanks to the emergence of the foregoing “second attention,” it is evident that whatever transcendence it involves, the encounter in question requires nothing beyond what the human frame is able to accommodate. The type of self-surpassing here at stake is not a task of elevating ourselves into overmen, but of humbling ourselves to become simple before God. The task is not to struggle pretending to seek a strength we do not have, but to find strength in accepting our weakness for what it is. In short, it is not necessary for us to assume the role of God ourselves, but to conform ourselves to the image of man God has provided for us in the wake of the way in which Christ has already transfigured that human frailty. Expressing a thought that could just as well have been written by Weil herself, Chrétien thus says, “If God became man, there is no need to stop being man to assimilate to God.”²²

This “second attention,” which arrives as a grace, while spiritual in both its origins and orientation, does not cease to turn the one who experiences it toward the world wherein one finds oneself. To attend to God, to listen to the Word, is necessarily to obey what is heard, and while the act of hearing works a revolution within those who hear it, it leads inevitably to working out the situation in terms of the circumstances in which it finds itself here in this world. For this reason, the inner light that illuminates the “inner man” shines outwardly also through what it accomplishes in the life of those who reflect it. Whether this new attention, then, offers an affirmation of existence sufficiently robust to withstand the stinging critique of Nietzsche is the question to which Chrétien turns in *De la Fatigue*’s final chapter.

As prominent a thinker in the history of philosophy as he is, Nietzsche receives relatively little explicit attention in Chrétien’s body of work. Be that as it may, here, anyway, his response to Nietzsche’s accusation that Christianity is itself nihilistic is swift and devastating. For in short order, Chrétien shows how it is the attitude that attempts to live by denying God, rather than the one embracing him, which, to borrow Nietzsche’s own phrase, suffers from a fundamental malaise, a “grand fatigue.”

To begin with, if biblical fatigue is characterized by a “luminosity” consisting in its closeness to God through the act of obedient listening, this is so because the other side of the coin is a “dark fatigue,” in which whoever “lives before God” grows tired of doing so.²³ This spiritual fatigue that can tire of God, it will be recalled, is akin to the *acedia* mentioned earlier.

Yet, as Chrétien observes, it is just as possible for somebody who is against God to tire of him as it is somebody for God. In fact, and in this lies Chrétien's decisive point in response to Nietzsche, rejecting God is itself precisely to tire of him for lack of strength. According to the modern nihilistic spirit that strains to resist the need of God, it is the Christian's continued loyalty to living in submission to God that is said to represent an inability to affirm human existence for what it is, including the sensible world. The flight into the supersensible is characterized as an illusion born of weakness. This, however, misunderstands the believer's orientation to time and the world, says Chrétien. "The Christian," he notes, "is not a man who believes in another world in order to hate this one better, but is first of all a man who believes in events, events that have happened in this world and to this world, and which have opened in him incredible possibilities."²⁴ Far from disparaging the body, time, and materiality, as is the case with Platonism, or even Sartre's gnostic existentialism, biblical fatigue ultimately has the energy to say "yes" to all three. It affirms the whole of existence, starting with our own being that experiences itself through the love of God.

Consequently, here nothing short of a role reversal occurs. As it happens, it is the atheistic perspective accusing Christianity of nihilism that turns out itself to be so. As Chrétien explains it, while the Christian thought of the body is intelligible only from death and resurrection, the modern nihilist fatigue, which experiences death without resurrection, and which precisely arises against Christianity, becomes synonymous with nihilism, for it ultimately exhausts itself having nothing to sustain itself beyond its reactive rejection of the very Christianity that thereby reveals itself to be the ineradicable horizon of meaning.²⁵ Thus, Chrétien can conclude his assessment of Nietzsche's own critique of nihilism by noting, "it is fair to consider, as so many thinkers have, that fatigue is the temptation *par excellence*."²⁶ Despite its claims to the contrary, because its first move is one of rebellion, and hence a "no," Nietzsche's characteristic modern fatigue "is one of discouragement, of disgust, of vanity, of despair, of renouncing our tasks and the very idea of task."²⁷ Without the Word, its own last word is a transitory "no" to everything except its impotent, futile self-assertion.

Turning back to a subject mentioned earlier, we may in conclusion offer a final word. The act of writing, we noted, in principle exposes our words to the gaze of others. Yet, it is not the case that only others see. Everything, including our words, above all is open to God. In his writing, which was an extension of his life, Chrétien manifested his own acute awareness of this presence of God. The results are noble works exemplifying what it is to write *coram Deo*.²⁸ If it is inconceivable that we could ever tire of reading Chrétien, is that not because, in encountering his words, we always hear the Word? Inexhaustibly, the Word echoes through them.

Notes

1 In his own novel Heideggerian assessment of the issues, Jean-Luc Marion situates Descartes's voluntaristic conception of God in relation to the history of ontotheology (Marion calls it "metaphysics") in *On the Ego and on God: Further Cartesian Questions*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), see Part II of that work, especially chapter six, "God, the Styx, and the Fates: The Letters to Mersenne of 1630," 103-115.

- 2 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 12, 1072b.
- 3 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *De la Fatigue* (Paris: Minuit, 1996), 10. All translations mine.
- 4 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 13.
- 5 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 14.
- 6 A standard criticism of Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* decries the conspicuous absence of any discussion of the body. Although it is worth noting that the text never treats the problem of embodiment explicitly, it would be overstated to claim that the work's silence on the issue thereby nullifies its account of our existence. At the same time, the common view among some Heideggerians, on which it is suggested that the analysis of the body is to be dismissed as merely "ontic," is equally misguided. As Chrétien shows, the problem of the body is crucial to the problem of being.
- 7 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 49.
- 8 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 25.
- 9 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 58.
- 10 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library), 481.
- 11 Sartre, 481.
- 12 Sartre, 481.
- 13 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 486.
- 14 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 33-34.
- 15 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 36-37.
- 16 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 37.
- 17 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 9.
- 18 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 10.
- 19 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 92.
- 20 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 75.
- 21 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 12.
- 22 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 162.
- 23 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 92.
- 24 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 150.
- 25 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 151.
- 26 Chrétien, *De la Fatigue*, 161.
- 27 Chrétien, 161.
- 28 Perhaps the clearest example of such a work is *Under the Gaze of the Bible*, trans. John Marson Dunaway (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), in which Chrétien explicitly reflects on the question of what it is to live before God, and also what accordingly it means to write in a way that is attentive to God's presence.

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