

THE VOCATION OF RESPONSIBILITY
A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF A MODERN IDEA

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ABSTRACT

A curious ethical concept emerged during the European Protestant Reformation. One's "calling" to serve humanity responsibly became connected to the promise of accumulating material rewards. This notion of "vocation" was not new, however, as it originated in the Old and New biblical Testaments. This study traces the ethic of "the calling to responsibility" by examining explicit and implied references to "vocation" in the primary texts of five major continental philosophers. To begin, I show how Fichte's ascetic concept of vocation required unity with a total and holistic transcendental power. When Kierkegaard reconsidered this idealistic notion of vocation, he lamented the disappearance of the single individual. His notion of vocation is explicitly religious and incorporates a concept of "conversion" that emphasizes a response to the temporal suffering of others. Nietzsche's ethical concept of responsibility is directly related to his original notions of truth and *persona* as a multiplicity of forces. For Nietzsche, being "called" to serve others requires freedom from resentment and learning to love complacently. Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's ethical concepts show up in Lévinas' and Derrida's postmodern ethics. I close by showing how Lévinas' emphasis on "the other" and Derrida's examination of "pure giving" display how the ancient and modern concept of "vocation" can be articulated in original ways for the sake of a postmodern ethics of responsibility. This study is significant, since there is a continuing need to reexamine what it means to volunteer service and alleviate the suffering of all human beings in what is increasingly becoming a depersonalized and technologized postmodern world.