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SINGULARITY, VIOLENCE AND UNIVERSALITY IN DERRIDA'S ETHICS: DECONSTRUCTION'S STRUGGLE WITH DECISIONISM

ABSTRACT
The starting point of the paper is Derrida's early discussion of Lévinas, focusing on the suggestion that violence is paradoxically magnified in Lévinas's attempt to articulate ethics as first philosophy within a metaphysics ostensibly free of violence. The next step is an examination of Derrida's thoughts on Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida's comments on names and violence in Lévi-Strauss establish that ethics emerges through a distinction between the "good" interior and the "bad" exterior. Derrida's subsequent remarks on Rousseau bring up his view of pity as a pre-social morality and the emergence of a social world that enacts violence upon the fullness of nature and the spontaneity of pity within a system of organized, competitive egotism. In his engagement with Celan, Derrida explores a poetics that conveys the sense of a particular, singular self as essential to ethics—defining itself in its separation yet inevitably caught up in universality. This theme develops into an examination of mass slaughter around the Hebrew Bible story of the "shibboleth", highlighting the violent consequences of exclusionary conceptions of identity. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida discusses the relationship between Paganism, Platonism, and Christianity through Patočka's perspective, then returns to Judaism via Kierkegaard's discussion of Abraham and Isaac. Derrida's reflections on secrecy, the sacred, ethical paradox, the violence of ethical absolutism, and the aporetic nature of ethical decisions converge around a discussion of political decisionism in Schmitt and the broader ethical significance of decisionism, as it also appears in Benjamin.

KEYWORDS
Derrida, deconstruction, decisionism, Lévinas, Celan, Patočka, Kierkegaard, Benjamin, ethics, violence

Introduction

Derrida famously suggests that "deconstruction is justice" in *Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'* (in *Acts of Religion,* Derrida 2002**:** 243). This phrase in isolation might lead us to overlook the degree to which Derrida sees violence as irreducible in law and social institutions. Few, if any, close readers

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of Derrida have overlooked the account of irreducible violence in his thought, but it is important to focus on how far ethics is entangled with the irreducibility of violence and the always self-undermining struggle with violence. Justice must be caught up in metaphysical violence against law, if we pursue the famous phrase to its full extent. The accompanying argument in *Force of Law*, drawing on a discussion of Pascal and Montaigne, establishes the primacy of justice in deconstruction, because justice is the ideal necessarily different from law as interpretation and institutional violence. At least one commentator, Richard Vernon in *Pascalian Ethics* (2010) responds to this discussion with the argument that Derrida, along with Lévinas, is a Pascalian moralist, which is a strong claim, but is certainly suggestive of a useful genealogy. Law is constructible and deconstructible but justice is undeconstructible. Derrida adds the suggestion that "Deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstrutibility of justice from the deconstructibility of law" (Derrida 2002: 243). Justice is then the opposite of law in an interplay of differences, but is also the source of the difference, or it is the difference, since it is deconstruction. Justice has primacy even if it may never appear, and its primacy is inseparable from this non-appearance. Glendinning has a Wittgensteinian response to this in *Derrida and the Philosophy of Law and Justice* (2016), which is worthy of consideration, but Derrida does have arguments with regard to institutions and practice, which challenge a quietist version of late Wittgenstein.

There are some definite echoes of Derrida's long 1963 essay on Lévinas *Violence and Metaphysics* (in Derrida 2001). This is an encounter with the violence still necessary in the attempt at the most purely ethical philosophy. As will be discussed below, *Force of Law* is the occasion of a discussion of Benjamin and Schmitt on decisionism. The argument below will proceed from Lévinas to Benjamin and Schmitt via Celan, Patočka, and Kierkegaard, in order to explore some fundamentals of Derrida's ethics.

Lévinas and the Ethics of Ethics

The themes of morality include the possibility of individuality and this is the center of morality: the positive possibility of moral agency, along with the tension between individual agency and communal rules. The existence of a community and the existence of moral agency themselves pose immediate challenges to the possibility of systematic morality. In *Writing and Difference* (2001), Derrida explores this significantly in relation to Judaism, whether the ethics as first philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas or the poetics of Edmund Jabès. These encounters with Judaism and ethics have various echoes in later texts and it is important to follow some of this up in order to grasp Derrida's general ethical development. An extended discussion of these issues can be found in Martin Srajek's *In the Margins of Deconstruction* (1998). The arguments in *Writing and Difference* apply to the ethical issues raised in *Of Grammatology* (1997a) Part II. This is mostly a detailed discussion of Rousseau which is not followed up by much later discussion, but it does set out a starting point for

Derrida's ethics in parallel to the essays on Judaism, metaphysics and poetics in *Writing and Difference*.

Derrida sets up Lévinas' criticisms of Heideggerian ontology as a wasteland in the desert where Being and phenomenality are abandoned, a place that Lévinas claims can be beyond Heideggerian ontology (2001, 101). The Judaic ethics of Jabès is an experience of the desert, as is Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac in *Fear and Trembling* which Derrida comes to discuss in *The Gift of Death* (1995). This role of the desert in Judaism implicitly harmonizes and contrasts with the wilderness in which Rousseau conceives of the origin of language, social ethics and political power, discussed by Derrida in Part II of *Of Grammatology*.

In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), Lévinas takes the face as necessary in the relation of the same to the Other, since the Other transcends the same. The same can only experience the other as face. This face to face is not a purely peaceful relation, since it is where we can experience conflict as well as peace in the relation with the other as face which cannot be eliminated from experience (ibid.: 78–81). Derrida's general view in *Violence and Metaphysics* of Lévinas' attempt to offer the ethics of the face as ethical and non-violent in contrast to the ontology of Heidegger, is that it only confirms the place of violence since peace is dependent on the ethics of the face. If this vanishes there is violence, in which case ethics is complicit in violence since the presence or absence of violence is dependent on the face. Derrida explains this in *Violence and Metaphysics* in terms of an economy in which God must be complicit with war, since the peace of God depends on the difference between the face and a finite world without a face. Without the face there would be no violence, since there would be no experience of the other which necessarily contains the possibility of conflict (2001: 133). Lévinas cannot escape from the thought that history is violence and metaphysics is an economy of violence, since it must be a violence against violence, the violence of metaphysical transcendence, experienced as the face, against violence. In Derrida's argument, the implication is that Lévinas is correct to conceive of the Other as always present, but mistaken in conceiving of this as a kind of primal peace. Metaphysical transcendence has a movement and this movement is history, with violence inherent to it (ibid.: 146).

Derrida discusses Lévinas as offering an ethics of ethics, which is ethics without law, "[m]oreover, is this Ethics of Ethics beyond all laws? Is it not the Law of laws? A coherence which breaks down the coherence of the discourse against coherence—the infinite concept, hidden within the protest against the concept" (ibid.: 138). The desire for non-violence makes the discussion of ethics as beyond law inevitable (foreshadowing *Force of Law*, which is discussed further below).

Derrida's 1996 text on Lévinas, *A Word of Welcome* (in *Adieu* 1999) continues this discussion after three decades in terms of another deconstructive moment deep in the origin of ethics, that is in the tension between: an original promise to the Other in the second person relation between "I and you", the "face to face" (1999: 34); and the third person nature of justice. This leaves an ethics which has tried to escape from Heideggerian ontology in a metaphysics of the Other, but is maybe still entangled in it:

> the proceedings that open both ethics and justice are in the process of committing quasi-transcendental or originary, indeed, pre-originary, perjury. One might even call it ontological, once ethics is joined to everything that exceeds and betrays it (ontology, precisely, synchrony, totality, the State, the political, etc.). (Derrida 1999: 34)

Derrida argues that if we follow through fully on Lévinas' own argument that the ethics of ethics is inevitably a perjury, breaching the primary oath to the Other in the face-to-face, as the third person inevitably enters into justice, of the ethics of ethics, even contaminating the original promise.

> [E]ven if Levinas never puts it this way, justice commits perjury as easily as it breathes; it betrays the 'primordial word of honor' and swears [jurer] only to perjure, to swear falsely [parjurer], swear off [abjurer] or swear at [injurier]. It is no doubt in facing this ineluctability that Levinas imagines the sigh of the just: 'What do I have to do with justice?' (Derrida 1999: 34)

Lévinas as caught up in a form of decisionism, an arbitrariness in ethics in the decision of the one who is deciding, "the impossibility of controlling, deciding, or determining a limit, the impossibility of situating, by means of criteria, norms, or rules, a tenable threshold" (Derrida 1999: 35). The possibility is established of allowing the worst when the understanding justice, or ethics, is based on betrayal and arbitrary choice with regard to falling on the side of the original promise or third-party justice. The suggestion is not simply that the choice is between a category of the original oath or the category of third-party justice, but that all claim to justice and ethics is deeply contaminated so that there is no barrier to the most horrifying of decisions, to decisions that unleash horror.

Ethical Beginnings in Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau

Of Grammatology, like *Writing and Difference* originally published in 1967, has an ethical dimension, particularly apparent in Part II "Nature, Culture, Writing", emerging around discussions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's speculations on the origin of language and Claude Lévi-Strauss's reports on the language of the Nambikwara people of the Brazilian Amazon, in the state of Mato Grosso, during the 1930s. That is the discussion in *Tristes tropiques,* which has a distinctive place as a poetic subjective reflection on anthropology by somebody claiming to put it on a more scientific basis as "structural anthropology". Though Lévi-Strauss was a great figure in the formation of anthropology as a discipline with empirical methods and some claim to scientific status, here as in the 1966 paper collected in *Writing and Difference*, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida plays on the speculative, poetic and metaphysical elements of his writing, alluding to continuities with Rousseau. The metaphysical elements revolve around a logocentrism going back to Plato in which meaning is present in the *logos* at its most pure.

This appears in the philosophy of Descartes around assumptions of the transparency of consciousness, the infallibility of reason, the certainty of clear and distinct ideas, and the necessary existence of God. Husserl's phenomenology can be considered a self-declared last great attempt to follow Cartesian methods, so a major chapter in the history of logocentrism which influences many, including Lévi-Strauss.

Derrida discerns deeply Cartesian assumptions in Lévi-Strauss' melancholic nostalgic reflections on the apparently pure world of the Nambikwara, and backs this up with his own summary of Cartesian assumptions in the history of metaphysics (Derrida 1997a: 98). What Derrida suggests is that Lévi-Strauss brings these preconceptions to bear on his encounter with a language in the most "primitive" state of existence. Where the Nambikwara self-understanding begins and ends, where Lévi-Strauss' interpretation begins and ends as pure reportage and as interpretation, are themselves indeterminate issues, certainly on the basis of evidence purely internal to Lévi-Strauss' writing from the 1950s about anthropological work of the 1930s. These thoughts of Lévi-Strauss must then apply to assumptions about ethics, about deep assumptions that evil is external and good is internal, for the individual and for the community, which seek solidity of identity in inside/outside binaries. The external evil, as in the Cartesian evil spirit, is necessary to defining the goodness of the interior, so ideas of moral community are both deeply embedded but inherently ambiguous. This is in Lévi-Strauss, but for Derrida it also demonstrates something that is very common to ethics, as it exists in communal practice and as articulated in philosophy. The implicit metaphysics of Lévi-Strauss' anthropology bring out something about the logocentric-metaphysical assumptions embodied in widespread practice and articulated in a very wide range of reflection on the world, on the sacred, and on ethics. The violence Lévi-Strauss refers to, in the elements and beginnings of this process, is deeply significant for Derrida's own ethical reflections.

Derrida reaches a key point in "The Violence of the Letter" about one-sixth of the way through in his reading of Lévi-Strauss on the Nambikwara, where he refers to three levels of violence, with regard to names (1997a: 112). On the first level, the Nambikwara have a given name, a proper name, whose use is sometimes forbidden in order to provide some kind of protection from the outsider. The proper name is from Derrida's point of view already a loss of the proper, since the name comes from a system of signs external to the bearer. So, in some sense, for Derrida, our most proper name is forbidden and unknowable, preceding all naming. The second level of violence comes out of the protective concealment of the name which is already a moral institution, though a moral institution that denies its origin. The third violence is the outbreak of all the possibilities of war and evil, that break the moral institution of the second violence, instituted by the second violence.

"The Violence of the Letter" finishes with thoughts on two poles of morality built up from reflections on ethics and language in Lévi-Strauss and Rousseau (1997a: 139–140): the Rousseauesque assumption of social authenticity,

including a deep tension between idealization of the living word and the ethic of speech as the delusion of presence mastered. What Derrida sees in Lévi-Strauss on "primitive" peoples is in some degree the continuation of themes in Rousseau, regarding a kind of fullness of being and innocence of conscience in nature. According to Rousseau, the negativity of evil will always be a supplementary form, as evil is exterior to nature, to what is by nature innocent and good, so evil supervenes upon nature. The evil supplements possible only because of the lack of full being and innocence. They are always absent as soon as reflection upon them is possible and certainly when language appears (1997a: 145).

As Derrida points out in his examination of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* in relation to the *Discourse on Inequality*, and a number of other texts, pity has a natural status as virtue, undermined by community. Its natural identity is undermined by imagination and loss of self-identity. Pity is undermined by sexual desire, by the desire that a man has for a particular woman, so that the universality of the city is undermined by the strength of a particular desire, Political virtue rests on there being community which can gather and hear the speech of any individual. Social division, including aristocracy, leads to less natural language as less natural force is used in speech. There is natural law in the heart which is supplemented by the laws created in a society. Natural pity is then the foundation of social laws, but is also displaced by them, certainly by the ways in which laws refer to universals, and not to particulars. The natural pity for individuals is eroded by the laws formed in society which apply to all. On the other hand, the particularity of desire undermines a universal aspect of natural pity. A man's desire for a particular woman, in contrast to the indiscriminate coupling Rousseau attributes to natural humans in the *Second Discourse*, in the social world undermines natural pity which is something before and separate from any particular connection. The *Second Discourse* suggests a link between competition for partners in the dancing of the earliest human communities and the general formation of societies based on status.

Derrida's extensive investigation of pity and social law in Rousseau, gives us another aspect in which the institution of morality is formed, with a shift from any kind of natural sense of individuality and morality. The articulation of the natural morality and identity itself is its repression in the formation of morality as a social institution. The Nambikwara apparently begin 'in nature' with a secret name, but Lévi-Strauss turns the proper name, consistently with his more theoretical general writing, into something that names an enemy. The proper name of someone is given to Lévi-Strauss by very young girls apparently using his presence to enable some kind of spite, a 'war of proper names' with someone they don't like. So, in Derrida's account, Lévi-Strauss preserves the innocence of a 'primitive' people (even if Lévi-Strauss at one level has reservations about assuming the Nambikwara to be 'primitive'), by attributing the war of a proper names to the presence of an outsider, that is himself. There is in Lévi-Strauss some assumption of an innocent primitive state, which has a kind of pre-morality. There is no moral law, but there is no evil. It seems from

Derrida's reading that this pre-morality only exists in the context of the second and third violence, so has no reality as a complete social world. The minimal primal moral moment is a topic of fascination for Derrida, as what is always already entangled in violence and evil.

In this concern with the moment at which morality and evil emerge, Derrida acknowledges the role of pity and natural law in Rousseau (1997a: 173–174). There is a natural sense of pity, according to Rousseau, preceding theories of good and evil, and certainly preceding the kind of alienation within the self which arises when differential social status enables *amour propre*. Derrida is very insistent that 'natural pity' in Rousseau involves imagination. A purely physical experience of pity would be destructive to the body. The stage of the formation of communities is one in which pity becomes more imaginative and then more universal. So, at this point a natural morality becomes rationalized. Derrida refers to the role that jealousy has in Rousseau, initially primarily to do with male jealousy in regard to desired women (1997a: 175), which breaks up the universality of pity (1997a: 190). So, the formation of society both universalizes and breaks up pity, except maybe as a residue. Derrida refers only in passing to the rise of *amour propre* in opposition to *amour de soi*, presuming that *amour de soi* is consistent with pity. Derrida's discussion of the ethical aspects of Rousseau's thought on the origins of language and early social development provide another perspective on the tensions and paradoxes inherent in ethics. Pity is natural but imaginative in Rousseau. It is the original ethical impulse, but is submerged in the violence of the separation of social humanity from natural humanity, lingering on but never fully expressed. These tensions are violent in a conceptual sense and can always become violent in the more physical sense, where the jealousy inherent in human community defines relations between communities; and pity is definitively submerged by annihilationist impulses directed against the external community, negating and threatening the purity and power of the first community in what is defined as an external evil to be eliminated.

Poetics, Violence and Judaism in Celan

An interest in Jewish law and individuality, apparent in *Writing and Difference* through the essays on Jabès ("Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" and "Ellipsis") and the long essay on Lévinas ("Violence and Metaphysics"), is carried on through discussion of the poetry of Paul Celan, gathered in *Sovereignties in Question* (2005). Here, however, I will examine only Derrida's long essay "Shibboleth", presented as a conference paper in 1984 and published as a book, *Shibboleth pour Paul Celan*. Two themes are particularly significant in "Shibboleth": singularity and universality; linguistic difference and communal annihilation.

Derrida partly discusses the 1955 poem "Shibboleth", along with others from Celan, in terms of a poetics of the singularity of subjectivity and experience, and poetry as a way of giving form to this inward freedom. The singular turn

of this phrase, "He as an I", will support the whole logic of individuation, of the "sign of individuation" that each poem constitutes. The poem is "the language of an individual which has taken on form" (Derrida 1997a: 5). The "He as an I" echoes Derrida's focus on the relation between "I-thou" and "ille" in Lévinas (Derrida 2001: 131). The shift from personal to neutral terms is a force in the writing of both and refers to what Derrida identifies as the difference between law and justice in *Force of Law* (2002), which will be discussed below. This is the difference between endless interpretations of finite laws and justice as absolute. The subjectivity of lyric poetry, the singularity of aesthetic experience as the most inward and free form of experience, can only be intelligible, can only have an existence, where the 'I' is more than subjectivity, where it communicates from the third-person point of view. The poem is, in this context, an account of the struggle to relate singular subjectivity with the universality of communication.

Derrida highlights the importance of dates in Celan's poem and his poetry in general. The poem refers to the month of February and other more indirect ways of locating memories in time, which has equivalents in other poems by Celan: "Instead of walling up the poem and reducing it to the sign of singularity, a date gives it its chance, the chance to speak to the other!" (Derrida 2005: 8). The essay starts with reference to circumcision, and the theme of the date is interwoven with this discussion, so that the discussion of dates has a Judaic context, though it is then just as much the case that Judaism is given a universalizing context. The theme of the universalization of the "I" in the third person has a counterpoint in the universalization of Judaism. The latter topic itself raises many issues about the place of Judaism in the world that go beyond the scope of this paper, but it should at least be noted that they are there.

The dating of the poem is not just an issue of giving the poem a unique identifying date but is also the way that dates gather in memory. The poem universalizes subjectivity but also gathers external world references into a unique event, which is an expression of individual singularity.

> Concentration gathers a multiplicity of dates around the same anamnestic centre, "all our dates" coming to conjoin or constellate at once, in a single place: in truth in a single poem, in *the only one,* in the poem that is each time, we have seen, alone, the only the, solitary and singular. (Derrida 2005: 10)

The dating can be very allusive, as in the phrase "*no pasarán*" [they shall not pass] which appears in the poem "Shibboleth" and is associated with the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. For Derrida, the dates, whether particular days in history or events that unfold over years, are significant in Celan and give a sense of political resistance or struggle to his poetry, as the dates are those which are meaningful in the history of progressive causes and struggles. Clearly, the Holocaust underlies these aspects, and many other aspects of Celan's poetry. Much of his poetry offers a dispersed and fragmented encounter with horror and struggle in history that implicitly revolves around

the Holocaust, both placing this historical event at the center as a particularly overwhelming evil and dispersing it as an example of the persistent horror of history. In Derrida's thought, the persistence of evil and horror can be seen as consequences of the violence he identifies with the emergence of ethics and which finds something like an ultimate culmination in the Holocaust.

Derrida deals with the persistence of annihilationist horror through Celan's indirect invocation of the ancient Hebrew story of the *Shibboleth*, which can be found in Judges 12 of the Hebrew Bible and is a story of ethnic slaughter on the grounds of difference within an ethnic community, which divides itself against itself. The Israelite Ephraimites slaughter the Israelite men of Gilead when they cannot say "shibboleth" correctly according to Ephraimite linguistic practices. The result is the death of forty-two thousand. There is a resort to a kind of violence between Jewish tribes, which may have been written to indicate the weakness of ancient Israel under the rule of judges with limited power over tribes; even if the judges are inspired by God, they do not succeed in ruling or legislating over a unified, peaceful polity pleasing to God (Redfield 2021). Derrida, in his discussion of Celan (and Kierkegaard), seems to miss the chance to bring in Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter in Judges 11, that is, Jephthah the Gileadite who promises the Lord to make a human sacrifice if he can defeat the children of Ammon. The Judges 12 story follows on from this sacrifice, as it is Jephthah who leads the Ephraimites in the slaughter of the Gileadites. This slaughter is a reaction to an attack by the Gileadites, who are angered with Jephthah as he did not include them in his war with the Ammonites. It is significant that the story of the *shibboleth* carries on a story of family sacrifice and ethnic destruction. The story of Jephthah and his daughter is a disturbing sequel to the story of Abraham and Isaac, which seems to promise the end of human sacrifice. The commentaries of Kierkegaard and Derrida on Abraham and Isaac, discussed below, can be seen in this context. In this context, there is a recurring dilemma of the relation of oaths to God and moral duties (along with affective ties) to children. The horrifying moral aporia never ends as a secret of ethics and religion

For Derrida, the story of the *shibboleth* names an event of annihilationist horror, which is also an event of difference in language. The Gileadite violence is imposed through a test of pronunciation of the word "*shibboleth*", in which they detect the Ephraimites when they fail to pronounce 'shi', turning it into 'si' (Derrida 2005: 26). Derrida argues that this is a difference without differences, a pure marker which marks a secret of the Gileadites, as a marker of their identity, but a secret with no content, a secret with no secret (Derrida 2005: 26). This argument in some significant ways carries on from his 1968 essay "Différance", collected in *Margins of Philosophy* (1982) and the cryptomimesis of his discussion of the cryptonomic psychoanalysis of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in "Fors" (1977), and so can be seen as part of the deep themes of Derida's writing. For the purposes of the present paper, most significantly it shares themes with Derrida's thoughts about Jan Patočka and Søren Kierkegaard in *The Gift of Death* (2008).

Patočka on Ecstasy and Ethics

Derrida's discussion of Patočka in the first two chapters of *The Gift of Death* (1995) focuses on Essay 5 in *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (2011), 'Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?'. The main concern of this paper is with Chapter 1 in *The Gift of Death*, 'Secrets of European Responsibility' which is closer to the central concern of this paper than Chapter 2.

Derrida builds on the role of the Pagan orgy in Patočka in an emphasis on secrecy, which proves a counterpoint to Derrida's concerned with singularity as the secret name in Lévi-Strauss, the poetics of the individual in Celan, and the secret of the *shibboleth* in Celan. There is a deep tension in Patočka between the demonic and the responsible, which also refers to an opposition between secrecy and freedom. The secrecy refers to sacred rites, while the demonic also refers more broadly to confusion between the animal, the human, and the divine. This is an issue whenever humans fail to take themselves as responsible in the sense Patočka develops. Responsibility belongs with religion and a self which has freedom (Derrida 1995: 2). Religion, which Patočka only considers from the Christian point of view, depends on an overcoming of the demonic. Derrida points out an ambiguity here, in which religion may eliminate the demonic or merely bring it under domination (ibid.). Patočka's view of religion as responsibility is the story of the formation of a subject as a relation of the self with itself, a singularity and individuality which has freedom. This exists in relation to others, with a goodness expressed in the gift of death (ibid.: 3). Derrida sees a gift of death here, because the Christian message refers to a life oriented towards salvation through 'selfless goodness' (ibid.: 5) after death. He sees a kind of moralized view of history, which is a specifically Christian and European history, around a history of responsibility which is being forgotten (ibid.: 4). This view of history rests on 'an abyss that resists totaling summary. Separating orgiastic mystery from Christian mystery this abyss also announces the origin of responsibility' (ibid.). The consequence of the abyss and the forgetting of responsibility is the forgetting of historicity itself (ibid.). Derrida here is presumably drawn towards an ambiguity around 'mystery' as both demonic rather than Christian, but also existing within Christianity.

Derrida identifies two problems for Patočka: responsibility cannot be part of history without undermining the idea of responsibility by making it something historically conditioned; historicity must be open and undecided, without totality, as it contains responsibility, which is necessary to Christian spirituality (ibid.: 5). Derrida adds that 'the paradox here plays on *two heterogeneous types of secret* (ibid.: 6)': the secret of historicity (presumably the paradox just outlined); the secret of the demonic-pagan orgy which historical responsibility should overcome (ibid.). There is also another sense of the secret here, which is the Christian mystery, 'the dread, fear and trembling of the Christian in the experience of the sacrificial gift' (ibid.), anticipating the discussion of Kierkegaard later in *The Gift of Death*. The individual feels an interior force in Christian spirituality, in which singularity is confirmed by the terrifying power of God.

For Derrida, this brings up another transition, opposition and tension, which is the movement from the Platonist 'ethico-political self (ibid.: 7), which is necessary in the overcoming of Paganism, but also has to be overcome itself in Christianity. In Derrida's analysis the Paganism cannot be excluded from Platonism or Christianity and the Platonism cannot be excluded from Christianity, as these relations of domination and opposition also preserve. Patočka creates a new mystery in the transition from Pagan mystery to Platonic ascent of the soul to observe the Good: what Patočka refers to as a '"new mystery of the soul"' (ibid.: 8) and an '"interior dialogue of the soul"' (ibid.). Eros and death both enter into this mystery and a particular importance is given to Socrates on death in the *Phaedo* (ibid.: 12). Derrida brings in Heidegger as the philosopher who is concerned with death and with the issue of care, which arises in Socrates' posture towards death in *Phaedo* (ibid.: 13).

Derrida also gives acknowledges a sociological perspective in references to Émile Durkheim on the sacred (in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1995 [1912]) as they appear in Patočka, which indirectly invoke Nietzsche in the repetition of the pagan sacred in history, giving the example of the French Revolution. The deconstructive interplay of Heideggerian and Nietzschean perspectives is implicitly acknowledged, in the discussions of the philosophy of the soul and of the sociology of the sacred.

Derrida's position, combining these perspectives, is that the secret, which is a fundamental term for Christian spirituality, is necessarily close to the Pagan sacred, and so the demonic orgy is preserved in Christianity, as it is in Plato. Derrida gives the example of the allegory of the cave as a trace of demonic orgies tied to the depths of the Earth. The demonic orgy is part of the original sacred as an escape from daily routines and labor in experiences of ecstasy, of sensory experiences, and moments of consciousness which escape from everydayness. The Eleusinian mysteries, which Plato may be hinting at when he refers to the cave in the famous allegory, are an example deeply embedded in the Athens of Socrates and Plato, as well as the tragedians and the comic dramatists.

Patočka uses Durkheim in his discussion of the sacred across human societies and history. Drawing on the anthropology of the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries, including the work of his nephew Marcel Mauss, Durkheim refers to the sacred as the ecstatic experiences of the earliest human communities, repeated in later forms of religious experience. There is some important background to Lévi-Strauss in Durkheim and Mauss, though this is not the place to explore the connections and the implications for the reading of Lévi-Strauss. Patočka draws on the persistence of the sacred, in Durkheim, to emphasize what he sees as the dangers of a present fall into the orgiastic (Derrida 1995: 22). Derrida also discusses the dangers of Platonism for Patočka in the priority Plato gives to knowledge, in Patočka's reading. The presence of this tendency, however repressed, in Christianity means it may subordinate knowledge to theology based on nature, leading to a naturalistic world view (ibid.: 24). Responsibility is then caught in the aporia between its primacy over knowledge and the need to use knowledge in responsibility (ibid.: 24). Derrida

detects here a general aporia about the relation between theoretical and practical philosophy, which is maybe something we should bring into the reading of Derrida on the relation between ethics and ontology (ibid.: 25). Derrida also refers to the tendency of Patočka's position to create and aporia for freedom and the decision (ibid). Implicit in Derrida's account is the possibility that we are brought to the brink of unmotivated decisions, a kind of violence, within ethical responsibility.

What Derrida focuses on in his reading is that the freedom of responsibility allows for differences of opinion about the central claims of Christianity, so that heresy arises, creating new secrets of repressed thought (ibid.: 26). Derrida brings in Kierkegaard here: 'experiences that are paradoxical in the strong sense that Kierkegaard gives to the word' (ibid.). Derrida does not expand on this thought, but it can be taken as a foreshadowing of his discussion of Kierkegaard in the later chapters of *The Gift of Death*, placing Abraham's dilemma in the context of philosophical aporia.

Secrets, Fictions and Ethical Singularity in Kierkegaard

The first line of chapter three of *The Gift of Death* (1995: 53) establishes a link between Patočka and Kierkegaard through the phrase *mysterious tremendum* which Patočka uses in *Heretical Essays* (2011: 106) to highlight the inscrutable relation of the human to the absolute highest being. Derrida brings this into connection with the trembling in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and brings the *mysterious* into connection with secrets in Kierkegaard, particularly Abraham's secret when commanded to sacrifice Issac. Derrida emphasizes the physiological aspects of trembling and its status as something that comes at the limits of knowledge (1995: 55). It is both the gift of love and the gift of death (ibid.: 54-55), all derived from the gap between the finite individual and the infinity which the individual faces.

While Derrida's examination of Patočka focuses on the relation between Platonism and Christianity, the examination of Kierkegaard enters into the relation between Judaism and Christianity. The idea of Christianity and European tradition emerging from the interplay of Greek and Jewish influences is already an issue in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. Derrida's reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in chapters three and four of *The Gift of Death* is inevitably part of his engagement with Judaism, in religion and ethics, given that it is a way of approaching the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Genesis* 22. That is the story of how God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, but provides a ram as a substitute at the moment when Abraham raises his knife at the place of sacrifice.

What Derrida emphasizes most directly in his comments on the Christian side of Kierkegaard's reading is simply the phrase 'fear and trembling', used by Paul on couple of occasions in the Epistles of the *New Testament*. Derrida refers to Philippians 2:12 and 13, with regard to the fear and trembling of finding salvation, and the origin of our will in God. He does not refer to Paul First

Corinthians 1 to 5, though that seems to reinforce the import of fear and trembling. These passages build up a Pauline teaching of Christianity as devoted to the power of God, individual responsibility for salvation, the fear and trembling which comes from the individual search for salvation, along with the awareness of Crucifixion and the power of God. The second passage does not obviously exist in tension with the first tension, though it does emphasis the Crucifixion.

The secret is fundamental to Derrida's understanding of Judaism, as discussed above with regard to Celan. He sees it as preserved in Christianity, which is emphasized by the attention given to Kierkegaard as a reader of Genesis 22. Derrida is concerned with how story telling in Genesis is repeated and transformed by Kierkegaard, with the implication that narrative and fiction, involving at least some poetic use of language, is an inevitable part of the origin of ethics and a full investigation of this origin. Additionally, Derrida writes about how Abraham's secret relates to stories about the nature of secrets in Kierkegaard, which are among other things an aspect of his literary and rhetorical approach to writing philosophy or theology. There is a deep concern with fictionality and interaction of voices in Kierkegaard's writing including his writing on Isaac and Abraham. As Derrida points out, this can be seen in the pseudonymous nature of *Fear and Trembling* (ibid.: 58). The book claims to be by Johannes de Silentio bringing up the issues of secrets as well as the general concern with fictionality. Abraham's secret is of course that he does not speak of the sacrifice commanded by God to anyone, including Isaac himself. The question here for Derrida (and Kierkegaard) is not just that Abraham kept a secret on this occasion, but that the relation between the individual and God is in its nature a secret, including the possibility of a command to violate ethics, a command which is likely to create the trembling of faith, as defined by Christian writers since Paul.

In Derrida's account, not speaking throws us back on our individuality, as it is language in which we go outside our singularity into the universal world of communication (ibid.: 60). He picks up on the discussion of Patočka with regard to the theme of the responsibility of the individual. Responsibility is divided in Kierkegaard's account of Abraham's dilemma between ethical responsibility and the responsibility to God, which requires abandoning ethical responsibility (ibid.: 61). In this case, responsibility rests on an aporia. Following Kierkegaard's understanding of the difference between the ethical and the religious, Derrida describes this as the paradox of general or universal (ethical) and absolute (religious) responsibility (ibid.). Derrida emphasizes that for Kierkegaard the contradiction within responsibility becomes actual in the instant of action, when the act is in contradiction with Abraham's feelings (ibid.: 65). There is a significant shift from the abstract contradiction to the lived passion of the contradiction, which is act versus feeling rather than absolute versus universal. There must be a moment of decision for Kierkegaard which is the moment of action.

Derrida here brings his own consistent exploration of aporia, paradox, and contradiction into relation with Kierkegaardian passion, emphasizing an aspect

of his own philosophy, certainly beyond the intellectual trickery and game playing that Derrida's harshest critics attribute to him. Derrida refers to the instant of decision which is madness in Kierkegaard, but as in the epigram to 'Cogito and the History of Madness' (Derrida 2001: 36), three decades before ,he fails to provide the reference, as Geoffrey Bennington notes in 'A Moment of Madness: Kierkegaard's Derrida' (2011). This omission seems surprising since the phrase (Kierkegaard 1985: 52) comes from the section on 'Offence at the Paradox' in *Philosophical Fragments*, a section and a book which are focused on paradox. Nevertheless, the place of paradox and the inevitability of the decision that lacks a rational normative basis in Derrida's ethical thought is clear enough.

Deconstruction and Decisionism at the Origins of Ethics

The possibility of decisionism hangs persistently over Derrida's ethics. That is not to say he is much concerned with the word, but his work does engage with the ethical aspects of what emerged in Carl Schmitt as a political and legal doctrine. The decisionist aspect of ethical, legal and political though precedes Schmitt and is independent of Schmitt, as Derrida's ethical writings implicitly show, even if he did not use the label 'decisionism' and does not appear to have been much concerned with Schmitt before the 1990s. Even then, he treats Schmitt as a political and legal thinker, without going directly into any ethical implications, which is anyway the general approach of Schmitt commentators.

In the broad sense of decisionism used here, it is a way of thinking in which ethical, legal and political decisions are in the last resort superior to rules and laws, are necessary for there to be rules and laws. Decisions which cannot be reduced to rules or laws and are necessarily to some degree unmotivated and arbitrary. They appear as an act of violence against the abstract university of legality and the rule bound social world. If the foundations of ethics, laws and politics are contradictory, paradoxical and aporetic then some element of decisionism is unavoidable in these spheres, since a decision cannot be arrived at through deduction from norms. What underlies and accompanies decisionism in this sense, as can be seen in Schmitt, is the friend-enemy conception discussed in *The Concept of the Political* or more broadly a view of political relations as inherently antagonistic to an annihilationist degree, if we follow what Schmitt has to say about this polarity. The annihilationism has a basis beyond political decisionism, entering into Schmitt's discussions of *nomos* and law (*The Nomos of the Earth* 2003 [1950]), despite his tendency to argue that decisionism and the multiplication of friend-enemy distinctions was the product of the liberal destruction of natural law and the historically corporate nature of political communities. Schmitt provides a label for a necessary part of the origin of all norms. Decisionism is not just a 'fascist' theory. Its National Socialist, fascist and broadly authoritarian expressions in Schmitt, depending on which text and which moment in history are at issue, are themselves expressions of something much deeper and inescapable. It has a liberal equivalent in Max Weber, writing towards the end of his life, as Schmitt started writing his

most famous texts, in 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics' (1994 [1919]); and a Marxist equivalent in Benjamin's 'Toward the Critique of Violence' (2021 [1921]). Schmitt greatly appreciated Benjamin's lecture and wrote to him to explain this. Passages in Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962[1927]) on Being-towards-death and historical decisions (e.g. § 72, H 387, ibid.: 438), share these broadly speaking decisonistic assumptions.

Weimar Germany was particularly rich in this kind of thought, but something decisionistic has always structured ethics, as well as legal and political thought, so that the writings of the 1920s began to make the implicit explicit. Patočka's *Heretical Essays* allude to the persistent role of decisionism. The word decisionism (*decisionismus* in Czech. Patočka 1975: 87) appears once in this text (2011, 98), in the fifth essay which Derrida on in chapter of *The Gift of Death*. It is only once, but the significance is clear for a deconstructive view of ethics and it is not surprising that an examination of Patočka should be followed by a discussion of *Fear and Trembling* as a significant example of 'decisionism' in ethics, in this case a pure action intervening in the aporia of two senses of individual responsibility. Schmitt himself develops his decisionistic view of politics partly with reference to Kierkegaard, but in relation to Kierkegaard's philosophical fiction *Repetition* (1983) rather than *Fear and Trembling* (1983). The definition of the source of sovereignty, aligned with the friend-enemy distinction in *The Concept of the Political*,[*Der Begriff des Politischen* 1932, based on a 1927 journal article], is already explained with regard to the state of exception several years earlier in *Political Theology* [*Politische Theologie* 1922] 1985: 15), where Kierkegaard is referred to as a Protestant theologian, and with reference to Kierkegaard's philosophical fiction *Repetition* (Kierkegaard 1985: 227). In Kierkegaard, repetition is the opposite of Platonic recollection, a way in which we can live forward in life through repetition of transcending states, which can happen in romantic love, but most significantly in a life of religious faith. In Schmitt, this transcending moment is the point in politics where an exception arises, and the sovereign is revealed in this moment of decision.

Derrida reacted directly to Schmitt, as a political thinker, in *The Politics of Friendship* (1997 [1994]), particularly in chapter 5. Preceding that book, Schmitt does have a significant if brief appearance in the 'Force of Law' ([1990] in Derrida 2002) in relation to a lengthy discussion of Benjamin's 'Toward the Critique of Violence'. As Derrida points out, Schmitt sent Benjamin a letter of congratulation (ibid.: 259), setting up some unease about Benjamin's version of revolutionary political decisionism and the more broadly decisionist attitude to ethics and law that underlies it. The unease also comes from 'Toward the Critique of Violence' as a text concerned with Judaic ethics, taking divine violence as superior to mythic violence. It takes its defining example of violence as divine from Hebrew scripture, that is the divine fire and opening of the earth which destroys the Korah rebellion against Moses, killing the families of the rebels as well as the rebels themselves (Numbers 16: 1-41). According to Benjamin, this is sacrifice in the service of the living, and should be placed in the context of the impossibility of always following the Sixth Commandment

('Thou shalt not kill'). That is, the ancient Israelites and all people now thinking about justice, are faced with the necessity of respecting a profound principle while recognizing when it has to be honored in the breach in the service of life.

Derrida recoils from this form of decisionism mingling a form of revolutionary leftism, very influenced by Georges Sorel, as well as recent revolutionary upheavals. Sorel's thought is highly ambiguous in the political legacy of *Reflections on Violence* (1999 [1908]), which influenced the revolutionary right as well as the revolutionary left, and elevates a version of decisionism, in the commitment to the mobilizing myth as an end in itself. There is a connection with Durkheim's *The Elements of Religious Life*, and his earlier writings, with regard to an interest in, and even longing for, the return of moments of sacred communal action.

Benjamin's account of divine violence shows an inclination to favor theological-ethical justification for the divine destruction of a group, regardless of individual responsibility. Derrida is evidently disturbed by this despite, or maybe because, of his sympathetic interest in Marx (1994). Presumably it is the peaceful gradualist constitutionalist interpretations of Marx that Derrida finds most sympathetic, what has sometimes been labelled Revisionism or Kantianism in debates about Marxism, and which may appear to some to be in practice indistinguishable from egalitarian liberalism. All celebratory expressions of decisionism, as a political or ethical-religious end in itself, are disturbing for Derrida; and even more disturbing because some kind of decisionism is an unavoidable part of there being ethics of any kind.

Derrida finds that Benjamin's thoughts on the paradoxes of "justice", always caught between natural law and positive law, make 'justice' a name of deconstruction, while also finding something deeply disturbing about divine violence as an expression of Judaic justice and ethics. It is appropriate that Benjamin's articulation of justice as deconstruction, should also articulate the inevitability of decisionism, and the more extreme ways, in which decisionism may then become a totalizing end for action belonging to the action itself. Benjamin is a precursor to Derrida in his deconstructive moments, but also a revealer of how close the deconstructive moment is to the decisionistic moment. The decisionistic moment in isolation becomes the source of ethics or politics as annihilating horror.

The Passion of Jacques Derrida

The discussion of Benjamin in *Force of Law* brings out the importance to Derrida of recognizing that deconstruction must verge on decisionism, so might become tainted by the annihilating horror of unrestrained decisionism. This is a deep intellectual issue for Derrida and more. He writes frequently on the passions, agonies, and transcendent hope associated with ethics. This becomes most clearly tied up with Derrida's own identity when it touches on Judaism. There is a concern in Derrida with how ethics can become a moralism of this kind and how this can be found in a Jewish tradition which Derrida

finds valuable in general, and certainly in relation to his own sense of identity as someone of Sephardic Jewish origin. Derrida's interest in Judaism as religion and ethics is apparent across many texts. "Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German" ([1989, 1991] in Derrida 2002) confirms the link Derrida makes between Judaism and law, which is a theme of texts going back to *Writing and Difference.* The personal aspect of this is particularly apparent in "Abraham, the Other" (2007a) and is hinted at already in the last essay of *Writing and Difference* (1978), "Ellipsis", which ends (2007a: 300) with a quotation from Jabès attributed to Reb Derissa, that is, a name similar to Derrida preceded by an honorific used for observant religious Jews. There is a play with identities here, certainly not a direct statement about Derrida, but since Derrida emphasized existential passion as essential to Kierkegaard's account of ethical-religious paradox, it should be noted that there is a strong element of existential passion in Derrida's account of Judaism and the ethical discussions that always connect with Judaism, directly or through the context of Derrida's writing, which is sometimes playful (as is Kierkegaard's) but always significant. Ethical idealism may become annihilating decisionism, so deconstruction must be an engaged struggle against this horror, whether in philosophical tradition or in the religious scripture, the laws, the interpretations, and the poetics of Judaism.

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Bari Stoker

Singularnost, nasilje i univerzalnost u Deridinoj etici: borba dekonstrukcije s decizionizmom

Apstrakt

Polazna tačka ovog rada jeste Deridina rana rasprava o Levinasu, s fokusom na sugestiju da se nasilje paradoksalno uvećava u Levinasovom pokušaju da artikuliše etiku kao prvu filozofiju unutar metafizike koja je navodno oslobođena nasilja. Sledeći korak predstavlja ispitivanje Deridinih razmišljanja o Levi-Strosu i Rusou u *O gramatologiji*. Deridini komentari o imenima i nasilju kod Levi-Strosa ukazuju na to da se etika pojavljuje kroz distinkciju između "dobrog" unutrašnjeg i "lošeg" spoljašnjeg. Deridini kasniji komentari o Rusou razmatraju njegovo shvatanje sažaljenja kao pred-socijalnog morala i pojavu društvenog sveta koji vrši nasilje nad punoćom prirode i spontanošću sažaljenja unutar sistema organizovanog, kompetitivnog egoizma. U svom angažmanu s Selanom, Derida istražuje poetiku koja prenosi

osećaj singularnog sopstva kao suštinskog za etiku—definišući se u svojoj odvojenosti, ali neizbežno uhvaćenog u univerzalnost. Ova tema se razvija u analizu masovnog pokolja kroz priču iz hebrejske Biblije o "šiboletu", ističući nasilne posledice isključujućih koncepcija identiteta. U *Dar smrti*, Derida razmatra odnos između paganizma, platonizma i hrišćanstva kroz Patočkine perspektive, a zatim se vraća judaizmu putem Kjerkegorove rasprave o Avramu i Isaku. Deridina promišljanja o tajnosti, svetom, etičkom paradoksu, nasilju etičkog apsolutizma i aporijskoj prirodi etičkih odluka konvergiraju oko rasprave o političkom decizionizmu kod Šmita i širem etičkom značaju decizionizma, kako se takođe pojavljuje kod Benjamina.

Ključne reči: Derida, dekonstrukcija, decizionizam, Levinas, Selan, Patočka, Kjerkegor, Benjamin, etika, nasilje