

THE NECESSITY OF DISCRIMINATION DISJOINING DERRIDA AND LEVINAS

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There is a transcendental and pre-ethical violence. . . . This transcendental violence, which does not spring from an ethical resolution or freedom, or from a certain way of encountering or exceeding the other, originally institutes the relation. . . .

—Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*¹

During the last fifteen years, a standard way of defending deconstruction has been to endow it with an “ethical motivation.” According to this line of argument, Derrida’s undermining of metaphysical presuppositions and totalizing systems emanates from an ethical concern to respect “the Other.” The most prominent advocates for such a perspective are Robert Bernasconi, Drucilla Cornell, and Simon Critchley, to whom I will return further on, since their readings exemplify the account of deconstruction I take issue with in this essay. What these readings have in common is that they attempt to assimilate Derrida’s thinking of alterity to Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical metaphysics. Consequently, they understand deconstruction in terms of an “aspiration to a non-violent relationship to the Other,” as Cornell puts it in her book *The Philosophy of the Limit* [62]. Such an approach certainly makes sense from within a Levinasian framework, where the Other answers to the Good and recalls us to an originary ethics. “War presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other,” Levinas asserts in his central work *Totality and Infinity* [199/173–74]. As I will argue, however, the idea of a primary peace is incompatible with deconstructive thinking. In Derrida’s work, there is no support for positing the other as primordially Good or for prescribing a non-violent relationship to him or her or it. On the contrary, Derrida’s notion of alterity is inextricable from a notion of constitutive violence. Violence does not supervene upon a peaceful Other but marks the possibility of every relation, as my epigraph makes clear. The epigraph is from Derrida’s early essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” but we shall see how his thinking is continually informed by the notion of a constitutive violence, all the way up to his work on questions of justice, hospitality, and democracy.

A recurrent topos in contemporary discourse is to locate a “turn” toward the ethical in Derrida’s later texts. Such a narrative is misleading not only because it fails to consider that ethical questions have been a major concern for Derrida ever since his first books, but also because it disregards how the “logic” of deconstruction transforms the fundamental axioms that inform the discussion of ethics. The appropriation of Derrida as an “ethical” philosopher rests on the inability to understand his complex logic

1. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (abbreviated as WD) 128/188. Throughout this text, double page references refer to the English translation first, followed by page references to the original edition. In some places, translations have been modified.

of violence and the concomitant failure to assess the critical implications of central deconstructive terms such as “alterity” and “undecidability.”

Specters of Marx is a good place to start, since it is often regarded as the book that initiates the “turn” in Derrida’s thinking, where he explicitly begins to address questions of justice. The supposed turn has either been welcomed as the confirmation of an ethical injunction in deconstruction or dismissed as a complacent utopianism, with Derrida piously invoking a “justice” that has no bearing on the real political challenges of the contemporary world. There are good reasons, however, not to accept these readings, since they misconstrue the way in which Derrida works with ethico-political concepts. It is true that *Specters of Marx* to a large extent is a book on justice. But what Derrida calls justice is not an ethical ideal. On the contrary, Derrida questions the very idea of an ideal state of being, which entails a profound reconfiguration of our inherited assumptions about the goals of ethics and politics.

An important clue is the phrase that reverberates throughout the entire book: *The time is out of joint*. This line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is the leitmotif in *Specters of Marx*. By exploring its resonance we can begin to assess what is at stake in the book. As Derrida points out, Hamlet’s line has often been quoted and translated as a critique of the prevalent state of society. The disjointure of time is then understood in terms of a moral or social decay, in which the founding principles of community have been perverted or gone astray. Such a critique opposes the disjointed time—which keeps losing its course and does not hold together—to a society that is harmoniously synchronized with itself, regardless of whether the synchrony is posited as a lost origin or as a consummated future. The same opposition characterizes the traditional critique of ideology: in contrast to how things are, in contrast to the prevailing injustice and oppression, the demand for justice is raised as a demand concerning how things *ought* to be.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida reconfigures the understanding of what it means that “the time is out of joint.” As many readers have noted, Derrida is firm in his contention that we cannot do away with a notion of emancipation and progress. He repeatedly emphasizes the importance of pursuing political critique, of not shutting one’s eyes to the innumerable victims of global capitalism, and of reaffirming a certain “Marxist” spirit. These points are reinforced through a critique of the neoliberal rhetoric that proclaims the death of Marx and Marxism, represented in *Specters of Marx* by Francis Fukuyama’s book on “The End of History.” Protesting against Fukuyama’s neoevangelism, which celebrates the end of ideologies and emancipatory narratives in the capitalist paradise, Derrida paints a “blackboard picture” of the contemporary world, recalling that “never have violence, inequality, famine and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity” [85/141]. This remark may seem to be nothing but a version of the traditional critique of ideology. Apparently, Derrida maintains that our time is “out of joint” and that we have to combat the disjointure in the name of a better, a more just society. The pivotal difference, however, is that the classical concept of emancipation—like the Marxist form of political critique—is tied to the notion that the ideal condition would be an absolute peace. While the world *de facto* is marked by violence, exclusion, and discrimination, one thus postulates that justice in principle (*de jure*) should put an end to violence.

The challenge of Derrida’s thinking is that he undermines the notion of an ideal justice. For Derrida, the disjointure of time is neither something that supervenes upon a state of being that precedes it, nor something that one can or should finally overcome. Hence, the provocative thesis in *Specters of Marx* is that violence and discrimination are not opposed to justice, but inextricable from its very possibility. Of course, Derrida does not regard violence or discrimination as positive in themselves. Rather, he argues that the machinery of exclusion is at work in the formation of any identity and thus

cannot finally be eliminated. The disjointure of time is the condition for there to be any ethics and politics, as well as any society and life to begin with.

By tracking the notion of a necessary disjointure, we can discern the continuity of Derrida's thinking. Derrida's deconstructive "logic" is always concerned with the impossibility of being *in itself*. I will demonstrate that this logic follows from the implications of temporality and that it entails a thinking of irreducible violence. The temporal can never be in itself, but is always disjointed between being no longer and being not yet.² Derrida pursues this argument in *Margins of Philosophy* by analyzing the treatment of time in the fourth book of Aristotle's *Physics*. Aristotle here points out that there would be no time if there were only one single now [218b]. Rather, there must be at least *two* nows—"an earlier one before and a later one after" [219a]—in order for there to be time. Time is thus defined as succession, where each now is always superseded by another now. In thinking succession, however, Aristotle realizes that it contradicts his concept of identity as *presence in itself*. A self-present, indivisible now could never even begin to give way to another now, since what is indivisible cannot be altered. This observation leads Aristotle to an impasse, since his logic of identity cannot account for the succession that constitutes time. Derrida articulates the problem as follows:

Let us consider the sequence of nows. The preceding now, it is said, must be destroyed by the following now. But, Aristotle then points out, it cannot be destroyed "in itself" (en heautōi), that is, at the moment when it is (now, in act). No more can it be destroyed in an other now (en allōi): for then it would not be destroyed as now, itself; and, as a now which has been, it is . . . inaccessible to the action of the following now. [Margins 57/65]

Hence, as long as one holds on to the idea of an indivisible now—or more succinctly: as long as one holds on to the concept of identity as presence in itself—it is impossible to think succession. The now cannot *first* be present in itself and *then* be affected by its own disappearance, since this would require that the now began to pass away after it had ceased to be. Rather, the now must disappear *in its very event*. The succession of time requires not only that each now is superseded by another now, but that this alteration is at work from the beginning. The purportedly single now is always already divided by the movement of temporalization in which "the dyad [is] the minimum," as Derrida contends [*Margins* 56/65].

The movement of temporalization can thus not be understood in terms of a presence that emerges from a past presence and anticipates being overtaken by a future presence. The "past" cannot refer to what *has been* present, since any past was itself divided from its beginning. Likewise the "future" cannot refer to what *will be* present,

2. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida maintains that "what is ultimately at stake, what is at bottom decisive" is "the concept of time" [63/70]. This concept plays a dual role in the history of metaphysics, which is why it is so decisive for Derrida's deconstruction. On the one hand, time is thought on the basis of the present and in conformity with the logic of identity. This logic prescribes that what is must be identical to itself—that its originary form must be an indivisible unity. The presence of the present is thus the principle of identity from which all modifications of time are derived. The past is understood as what has been present, and the future as what will be present. On the other hand, time is incompatible with presence in itself. Thus, although "the present is that from which we believe we are able to think time" this understanding of time in fact effaces "the inverse necessity: to think the present from time as différance" [Of Grammatology 166/236–37]. It is the proposition that time is différance that I wish to develop. Such a deconstruction cannot consist in constructing another concept of time. Rather, the traditional concept of time as succession provides the resources to deconstruct the logic of identity.

but designates a relentless displacement inherent in everything that happens. Any so-called presence is divided in its very event, and not only in relation to what precedes or succeeds it.

Thus, *time itself* is constitutively out of joint. Or more exactly: time itself is the impossibility of any “itself.” This is not a paradox but follows from analyzing the minimal definition of time. Even the slightest temporal moment must be divided in its becoming: separating before from after, past from future. Without the interval there would be no time, only a presence forever remaining the same. Or as Derrida puts it:

An interval must separate the present from what it is in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present. [Margins 13/13]

The difficult question, then, is how identity is possible without being grounded in the form of presence. How can we speak of identity at all if there is no presence as such, but only incessant division between a past that has never been (present) and a future that will never be (present)? Certainly, the difference of time could not even be marked without a synthesis that relates the past to the future and thus posits an identity over time.

In order to account for the synthesis of time, Derrida works out his notion of “the trace.” Derrida defines the trace in terms of “spacing.” Spacing is shorthand for the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space, which is also the definition of *différance*. My argument is that an elaboration of Derrida’s definition allows for the most rigorous thinking of temporality by accounting for an originary synthesis *without* grounding it in an indivisible presence.³

The synthesis of the trace follows from the constitution of time we have considered. Given that the now can appear only by disappearing, it must be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. This is the *becoming-space of time*. The trace is necessarily spatial, since spatiality is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. Spatiality is thus the condition for synthesis, since it enables the tracing of relations between past and future. However, spatiality can never be in itself; it can never be pure simultaneity. Simultaneity is unthinkable without a temporalization that relates one spatial juncture to another.⁴ This *becoming-time of space* is necessary not only in order for the trace to be related to other traces, but also in order for it to be a trace in the first place. A trace can be read only after its inscription and is thus marked by a relation to the future that temporalizes space. This is crucial for Derrida’s deconstruction of the logic of identity. If the spatialization of time makes the synthesis *possible*, the temporalization of space makes it *impossible* for the synthesis to be grounded in an indivisible presence. The synthesis is always a trace of the past that is left *for the future*. Thus, it can never be in itself, but is essentially exposed to that which may erase it.

To think the trace as the condition for life in general (and Derrida aims to do nothing less) is thus to think a constitutive finitude, which from the very beginning exposes life to death, memory to forgetting, identity to alterity, and so on. Derrida always proceeds from the logic of such a double bind. What I want to emphasize here is that the

3. *I have begun to pursue this argument in the second part of my book Kronofobi: Essäer om tid och ändlighet 138–218. Importantly, Derrida’s notion of originary synthesis revises the very concept of origin. If the synthesis is originary, then there will never have been a simple element or absolute beginning. Thus, Derrida places the “originary” synthesis within quotation marks and emphasizes that it must be understood as “irreducibly non-simple” [Margins 13/13–14].*

4. Cf. Derrida, *Margins* 55/63.

understanding of the trace that informs deconstructive logic is radically different from Levinas's understanding of the trace. Indeed, both Derrida and Levinas appeal to "the trace of the other" as the trace of a past that has never been present. The shared vocabulary has often been adduced as evidence of their proximity, but a closer study of the terms in question will reveal that the analogy is misleading.⁵

The most instructive reading is Levinas's essay "The Trace of the Other," where he elucidates the notion of the trace that is operative in his writings. Levinas's main concern is to establish that "a trace does not effect a relationship with what would be less than being, but obliges with regard to the infinite, the absolutely other" [357]. The absolutely other is here the positive infinity of God, which Levinas describes as analogous to the Good beyond being in Plato and the One in Plotinus. The One is an absolute past because it "has already withdrawn from every relation and every dissimulation" [356]. While absent in the world, the One is nevertheless present as a trace in the ethical encounter with a human face: "it is in the trace of the other that a face shines; what is presented there is absolving itself from my life and visits me as already absolute" [359]. Levinas even goes so far as to venture the following claim: "Only a being that transcends the world can leave a trace" [358].

That the other appears as a trace does not mean, then, that it is dependent on mediation or subjected to the movement of signification. On the contrary, Levinas insists that the other "comes without mediation; he signifies by himself" [351]. The immediacy of the face is not an incidental feature of Levinas's argument but is crucial for his notion of an original "uprightness" in the ethical encounter. As Levinas explains, it is the "absoluteness of the presence of the other, which has justified our interpreting the exceptional uprightness of thou-saying as an epiphany of this absoluteness" [358]. Thus, we should not be surprised when Levinas's description of the absolute presence of the other turns out to be interchangeable with his notion of the absolute past. Levinas himself accounts for the equivalence between the absolute presence of the face and the absolute past of the Absent One: "the supreme presence of a face is inseparable from this supreme and irreversible absence" [356].⁶

Derrida's notion of the trace systematically undermines these Levinasian premises. First, in Derrida the trace of a past that has never been present does not refer to an Absent One. On the contrary, it designates a constitutive spacing that undercuts the very idea of the One. Second, spacing explains why there can be no instance (such as the absolute Other in Levinas's account) that precedes its own "dissimulation." As Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology*, the "presentation of the other as such, that is to say the

5. To be sure, Derrida himself refers to Levinas (along with a number of others: Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, contemporary biology) when he accounts for his choice of the term "trace" in *Of Grammatology*. But as Derrida points out, his implied reference to these discourses does not mean that he endorses them. Moreover, Derrida goes on to explain that his use of the term designates the "arche-phenomenon of 'memory,' which must be thought before the opposition of nature and culture, animality and humanity." The trace is thus inextricable from "différance as temporalization" and from the finitude of life in general. See *Of Grammatology* 70–71/102–04.

6. Cf. the essay "Enigma and Phenomenon" which further reinforces that for Levinas the "absolute past" answers to what traditionally has been designated as absolute presence, namely the One. It is pivotal to note that when Levinas says that the One has never been present he uses the term "presence" as synonymous with a time of disintegration. Exempting the One from disjointed presence thus becomes a way of saving it from the contamination of finitude: "He who has passed beyond has never been a presence. He preceded all presence and exceeded every contemporaneity in a time which is not . . . a disintegration and disappearance of finite beings, but the original antecedence of God relative to a world which cannot accommodate him, the immemorial past which has never presented itself . . . but is the One, which every philosophy would like to express, beyond being" [Basic Philosophical Writings 77].

dissimulation of its ‘as such,’ has always already begun” [47/69]. Third, the spacing of the trace undermines the possibility of anything being *in itself* and accounts for erasure as a necessary risk. Thus, it undercuts Levinas’s theological appropriation of the trace. As Derrida formulates it in *Writing and Difference*: “An unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and uncorruptible substance, a son of God, a sign of parousia and not a seed, that is, a mortal germ” [230/339].

Last but not least, for Derrida the trace is concomitant with the necessity of mediation. This precludes the “immediacy” that grounds Levinas’s notion of “uprightness.” Levinas repeatedly refers to uprightness when he sets out to promote the primacy of ethics. In *Totality and Infinity*, the face-to-face relation figures as the guarantee for a supposedly “straightforward” and “immediate” encounter that is “foreign to all compromise and all contamination,” relying on “the absolute authenticity of the face” and a “primordial word of honour” in relation to which the deceitful powers of rhetoric are denounced as “corrupting.”⁷ Levinas’s other major philosophical work, *Otherwise than Being*, follows the same logic in maintaining an opposition between the “sincerity” of the primordial Saying and its “alienation” in the Said.⁸ This opposition is by no means fortuitous, since the primacy of ethics requires that there *first* was sincerity and peaceful hospitality, *before* these values were compromised by insincerity and violent hostility.

Derrida targets precisely this logic of opposition. As he argues in *Of Grammatology*, metaphysics has always regarded violence as *derivative* of a primary peace. The possibility of violence can thus be accounted for only in terms of a Fall, that is, in terms of a fatal corruption of a pure origin. By deconstructing this figure of thought, Derrida seeks to elucidate why violence is not merely an empirical accident that befalls something that precedes it. Rather, violence stems from an essential impropriety that does not allow anything to be sheltered from death and forgetting.⁹

Consequently, Derrida takes issue with what he calls the “ethico-theoretical decision” of metaphysics, which postulates the simple to be before the complex, the pure before the impure, the sincere before the deceitful, and so on.¹⁰ All divergences from the positively valued term are thus explained away as symptoms of “alienation,” and the desirable is conceived as the return to what supposedly has been lost or corrupted. In contrast, Derrida argues that what makes it *possible* for anything to be at the same time makes it *impossible* for anything to be in itself. The integrity of any “positive”

7. See the chapter “Rhetoric and Injustice” in section 1 of *Totality and Infinity*, as well as the chapter “Reason and the Face” in section 3. See also Derrida’s comments on Levinas’s metaphysics of “expression” and “living speech” [WD 101–03/149–52] and on Levinas’s idea of a pure language without rhetoric [WD 147–48/218–20].

8. See *Otherwise than Being* 143–45, 199/183–85. In order to sustain the distinction between the Saying and the Said, Levinas explicitly relies on the opposition between speech and writing. As Levinas explains, sincerity can emanate only from a spoken language, in the proximity of one-for-the-other, since there is nothing in a piece of writing (or more generally: in language as a system of signs) that can guarantee its sincerity. Thus, Levinas emphasizes that “saying could not be interpreted as sincerity, when one takes a language as a system of signs. One enters into language as a system of signs only out of an already spoken language, which in turn cannot consist in a system of signs” [199/183]. This is an excellent example of the phonocentrism that Derrida has analyzed as one of the most pervasive versions of the metaphysics of presence. As Derrida demonstrates in *Of Grammatology*, the privileging of (idealized) speech over writing derives from the premise that there was good before evil, peace before violence, and so on.

9. See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 156, 162, 164–65, 195/106, 110, 112, 135.

10. For a succinct summary of the traits of the ethico-theoretical decision of metaphysics, see Derrida, *Limited Inc* 93.

term is necessarily compromised and threatened by its “other.” Such constitutive alterity answers to an *essential corruptibility*, which undercuts all ethico-theoretical decisions of how things *ought* to be in an ideal world.¹¹

A key term here is what Derrida calls “undecidability.” With this term he designates the necessary opening toward the coming of the future. The coming of the future is strictly speaking “undecidable,” since it is a relentless displacement that unsettles any definitive assurance or given meaning. One can never know what *will have happened*. Promises may always be turned into threats, friendships into enmities, fidelities into betrayals, and so on.

There is no opposition between undecidability and the making of decisions. On the contrary, Derrida emphasizes that one always acts in relation to what cannot be predicted, that one always is forced to make decisions even though the consequences of these decisions cannot be finally established. Any kind of decision (ethical, political, juridical, and so forth) is more or less violent, but it is nevertheless necessary to make decisions. Once again, I want to stress that violent differentiation by no means should be understood as a Fall, where violence supervenes upon a harmony that precedes it. On the contrary, discrimination has to be regarded as a constitutive condition. Without divisional marks—which is to say: without segregating borders—there would be nothing at all.

In effect, every attempt to organize life in accordance with ethical or political prescriptions will have been marked by a fundamental duplicity. On the one hand, it is necessary to draw boundaries, to demarcate, in order to form any community whatsoever. On the other hand, it is precisely because of these excluding borders that every kind of community is characterized by a more or less palpable instability. What cannot be included opens the threat as well as the chance that the prevalent order may be transformed or subverted.

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida pursues this argument in terms of an originary “spectrality.” A salient connotation concerns phantoms and specters as haunting reminders of the victims of historical violence, of those who have been excluded or extinguished from the formation of a society. The notion of spectrality is not, however, exhausted by these ghosts that question the good conscience of a state, a nation, or an ideology. Rather, Derrida’s aim is to formulate a general “hauntology” (*hantologie*), in contrast to the traditional “ontology” that thinks being in terms of self-identical presence. What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*. And since time—the disjuncture between past and future—is a condition even for the slightest moment, Derrida argues that spectrality is at work in everything that happens. An identity or community can never escape the machinery of exclusion, can never fail to engender ghosts, since it must demarcate itself against a past that cannot be encompassed and a future that cannot be anticipated. Inversely, it will always be threatened by what it cannot integrate in itself—haunted by the negated, the neglected, and the unforeseeable.

Thus, a rigorous deconstructive thinking maintains that we are always already inscribed in an “economy of violence” where we are both excluding and being excluded. No position can be autonomous or absolute but is necessarily bound to other positions that it violates and by which it is violated. The struggle for justice can thus not be a struggle for peace, but only for what I will call “lesser violence.” Derrida himself only uses this term briefly in his essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” but I will seek to de-

11. Derrida outlines his thinking of *essential corruptibility* in *Limited Inc* [77–79, 91–96]. In recent work, it is reiterated as an *essential perversibility*; see, for example, *Adieu* 68–69/34–35, and *Of Hospitality* 53, 55, 65, 79.

velop its significance.¹² The starting point for my argument is that all decisions made in the name of justice are made in view of what is judged to be the lesser violence. If there is always an economy of violence, decisions of justice cannot be a matter of choosing what is nonviolent. To justify something is rather to contend that it is less violent than something else. This does not mean that decisions made in view of lesser violence are actually less violent than the violence they oppose. On the contrary, even the most horrendous acts are justified in view of what is judged to be the lesser violence. For example, justifications of genocide clearly appeal to an argument for lesser violence, since the extinction of the group in question is claimed to be less violent than the dangers it poses to another group. The disquieting point, however, is that all decisions of justice are implicated in the logic of violence. The desire for lesser violence is never innocent, since it is a desire for violence in one form or another, and there can be no guarantee that it is in the service of perpetrating the better.

Consequently, my argument is not that the desire for lesser violence answers to a normative ideal or that it is inherently good. Such an argument presupposes that there is a way to objectively define and measure violence, which is an untenable presupposition. Every definition and every measure of violence is itself violent, since it is based on decisions that are haunted by what they exclude. The criteria for what counts as violence are therefore always open to challenge. Indeed, there would be no chance to pursue political critique and to transform the law if the definitions of violence were not subject to possible alteration. A contemporary example is the extension of animal rights. What formerly went unrecognized as violence in the juridical sense—the abuse and killing of animals—has begun to be recognized as an illegal violence. A similar transformation of the criteria for what counts as violence is still underway with regard to subordinated classes, races, and genders. If there were an objective norm for what is less violent, the range of such political critique would be limited in advance and there would be an end to politics. In contrast, Derrida argues that politics is endless since any definition of violence is itself violent and given over to possible contestation.

Deconstruction cannot teach us what the “lesser violence” is in any given case. On the contrary, deconstruction spells out why the question of violence remains forever undecidable. The supposed lesser violence may always be more violent than the violence it opposes, and there can be no end to the challenges that stem from the impossibility of calculation. Derrida’s argument here is neither negative nor positive; it neither deplors nor celebrates the constitutive violence. Rather, it accounts for violence as the condition for both the desirable *and* the undesirable. Due to the economy of violence, there is always the possibility of less violence (and the risk of more violence). Otherwise there would be no politics in the first place. If there were not the chance of less violence (and the threat of more violence) there would be no reason to engage in political struggle, since nothing could ever be changed.¹³

12. For Derrida’s brief remarks on lesser violence, see *Writing and Difference* 313n21, 117, 130/136n1, 172, 191.

13. The first commentator to elaborate the notion of “lesser violence” was Richard Beardsworth in his valuable book *Derrida and the Political*. Beardsworth’s understanding of lesser violence is considerably different from mine, however, since he holds that deconstructive thinking makes us better at judging what is less violent. Beardsworth rightly observes that “it is in fact only through the experience of the economy of violence that judgments of lesser violence can be made” [24], but he wants to distinguish between political judgments that manage to “endure” the economy of violence and those that do not. Thus, Beardsworth claims that “political judgments which recognize difference according to the lesser violence are those that have endured this experience” [xvi–xvii]. This argument is untenable, since all judgments must endure the experience of a violent economy, and there can be no given criteria for how to deal with this experience. On the contrary, the experience of a violent economy precipitates judgments of greater

A possible objection here is that we must strive toward an ideal origin or end, an *arkhe* or *telos* that would prevail beyond the possibility of violence. Even if every community is haunted by victims of discrimination and forgetting, we should try to reach a state of being that does not exclude anyone, namely, a consummated presence that includes everyone. However, it is precisely with such an “ontological” thesis that Derrida’s hauntological thinking takes issue. At several places in *Specters of Marx* he maintains that a completely present life—which would not be “out of joint,” not haunted by any ghosts—would be nothing but a complete death.¹⁴ Derrida’s point is not simply that a peaceful state of existence is impossible to realize, as if it were a desirable, albeit unattainable end. Rather, he challenges the very idea that absolute peace is desirable. In a state of being where all violent change is precluded, nothing can ever happen. Absolute peace is thus inseparable from absolute violence, as Derrida argued already in “Violence and Metaphysics.” Anything that would finally put an end to violence (whether the end is a religious salvation, a universal justice, a harmonious intersubjectivity or some other ideal) would end the possibility of life in general. The idea of absolute peace is the idea of eliminating the undecidable future that is the condition for anything to happen. Thus, the idea of absolute peace is the idea of absolute violence.

In the following, I will track how Derrida pursues his thinking of violence via a reading of Levinas. I will thus seek to clarify why Derrida has devoted so much attention to Levinas’s work. What interests Derrida is Levinas’s insistence that the ethical must be thought on the basis of an alterity that cannot be appropriated. But alterity has a radically different sense in Derrida’s work. It does not testify to a Good beyond being, and “the other” does not primarily designate another human being. On the contrary, Derrida argues that alterity is indissociable from the spacing of time.¹⁵ Spacing is irreducibly violent because it breaches any interiority and exposes everyone—myself as well as every other—to the essential corruptibility of finitude. Thus, when Derrida maintains the necessity of the other for the constitution of the self, he does not locate an *ethical* openness toward other human beings at the core of subjectivity. Rather, what is at stake is the primordial opening to corruption and dissimulation, which opens the possibility of every relation. *Of Grammatology* succinctly describes this opening as the “origin of morality as of immorality. The non-ethical opening of ethics. A violent opening” [140/202].

Hence, when Derrida reads Levinas he seeks to demonstrate that the relation to the other cannot be ethical as such, but is a nonethical opening that cannot be appropriated by any ethics. For the same reason, the metaphysical and religious qualities that Levinas ascribes to the other are for Derrida incompatible with a rigorous thinking of alterity. As Derrida underscores in “Faith and Knowledge,” the alterity of spacing “will never have entered religion and will never permit itself to be sacralized, sanctified,

violence just as well as judgments of lesser violence, for the simple reason that it precipitates all judgments. Furthermore, the logic of deconstruction spells out that one cannot finally learn how to negotiate the economy of violence and make less violent judgments. As I argue, deconstructive thinking enables a new understanding of the inherent contradictions that have haunted politics from the beginning. But it does not necessarily make us better at dealing with the political problems that constantly emerge due to these inherent contradictions.

14. See, for example, Derrida’s remark that “absolute life, fully present life, the one that does not know death” would be “absolute evil” [175/278].

15. See, for example, chapters 5–6 in *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Positions*, where Derrida repeatedly underscores that for him alterity and spacing are “absolutely indissociable” [81, cf. 94, 106–07]. See also Derrida’s recent book *Voyous*, where he recalls his persistent argument that alterity must be understood in terms of spacing and reinforces that there has been no ethical or political “turn” in his thinking [63–64].

humanized, theologized. . . . Radically heterogeneous to the safe and sound, to the holy and the sacred, it never admits of any *indemnification*” [58] and is neither “the Good, nor God, nor Man” [59]. The implicit dissociation from Levinas is further reinforced when Derrida concludes the same paragraph by designating his conception of spacing as “an utterly *faceless* other” [my emphasis].

Derrida first developed his strategy of reading Levinas against himself in “Violence and Metaphysics.” The point of departure is Levinas’s designation of ethics as “first philosophy.” Levinas’s claim is based on his now famous notion of a face-to-face encounter with the other human being. According to Levinas, the distinctive trait of the encounter is a fundamental asymmetry. The subject is subordinated to the other through an ethical injunction to respect him as an absolute Other. Despite the clear resonances of power and dominance in his description (where the other appears as the Master, the High, the Transcendent, and so on) Levinas holds that the subjection to the other answers to the ethical Good. “To be for the Other is to be good,” he asserts in *Totality and Infinity* [261/239].

Levinas’s thinking describes a metaphysical opposition between a positive principle—which ought to reign supreme—and a negative principle that unfortunately has taken hold of our existence. The primary imperative is said to be “thou shalt not kill,” an injunction that according to Levinas emanates from the immediate revelation of the face and confronts the subject with an unconditional moral responsibility. Levinas recognizes that such a prohibition cannot prevent transgressions. But following his infinitist metaphysics, Levinas seeks to *derive* these violations from what he calls the Same, which compromises the positive infinity of the absolutely Other.

The dichotomy between the Same and the Other is the guiding principle for Levinas’s critique of the philosophical tradition. The problem with traditional metaphysical concepts of unity and identity is not, for Levinas, that they rely on an idea of originary peace. Rather, these concepts ultimately exercise violence by erecting a *finite totality* (the Same) that excludes the transcendence of *infinite alterity* (the Other). Thus, Levinas employs the concepts of totality and alterity in a very idiosyncratic manner. Derrida devotes large parts of “Violence and Metaphysics” to demonstrating how the above outlined conceptual schema is untenable, in order to read Levinas against himself.

Derrida’s principal argument is that the finite cannot be a totality. On the contrary, alterity is irreducible because of temporal finitude. That every slightest moment is disjoined by time entails that neither I nor anyone else can ever be protected *in ourselves*. Hence, alterity cannot be understood in terms of goodness and nonviolence. If alterity is irreducible, then violence is a necessary risk since, far from being “absolute,” one is always dependent on others that may violate, negate, or exploit.

Accordingly, the idea of absolute peace has traditionally been linked to the idea of a closed totality that is liberated from any form of negativity or difference. Only such a unity could guarantee serenity by not allowing any disintegrating forces or polemical antagonisms—which is to say, no alterity whatsoever—to enter. The idea of such absolute unity is the idea of the absolutely Same, and we can see how it concurs with Levinas’s idea of the absolutely Other. Contrary to what Levinas avows, the unity of totality has never been identified with the finite but is projected as a positive infinity beyond the violent conditions of history. It is to this line of thought that Levinas himself adheres.

Levinas’s favorite examples from the history of philosophy are Descartes’s idea of the Infinite and Plato’s Good beyond being. These concepts—which for Levinas testify to the absolutely Other—are cardinal examples of the idea of the absolutely Same. They define a state of perfect unity, liberated from any restraining relation and thereby from all forms of alterity. Or as Levinas himself puts it:

The One of which Plato speaks . . . is other absolutely and not with respect to some relative term. It is the Unrevealed, but not unrevealed because all knowledge would be too limited or too narrow to receive its light. It is unrevealed because it is One, and because making oneself known implies a duality which already clashes with the unity of the One. The One is not beyond being because it is buried and hidden; it is buried because it is beyond being, wholly other than being. ["The Trace of the Other" 347]

Apparently unaware of the inconsistency, Levinas thus criticizes the philosophy of identity, totality, and monadic being by invoking an absolute that reinstates these ideals. Indeed, Levinas speaks of the wholly Other instead of the wholly Same. But the shift in terminology makes no essential difference, since the two extremes—as Derrida maintains in “Violence and Metaphysics”—invert into each other and at bottom are founded on the same ideal.

The convergence between the wholly Other and the wholly Same is even more apparent if we examine Levinas’s fascination with the idea of the Infinite that Descartes puts forward in the third of his *Meditations*, in a classic attempt to prove the existence of God. What interests Levinas here is the sharp opposition between the finite and the infinite that Descartes establishes. When Descartes attempts to think the positive infinity of God he discovers that such an idea of the Perfect is beyond his power of imagination. This leads Descartes to the conclusion that such an idea of the Infinite cannot have originated in his own finite consciousness, but testifies to an absolute transcendence (namely, God). According to Levinas, such absolute transcendence is revealed in the face of the other, which thus bears a “resemblance” to the divine. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas even claims that Descartes’s opposition between the *primary* (the perfection of the infinite) and the *secondary* (the imperfection of the finite) “remains entirely valid” [41/12]. The perfection of the infinite answers to Levinas’s understanding of the absolutely Other as something “beyond history,” which is “absolved” from a limiting play of relations.

The treatment of Descartes is an instructive example of how Levinas misconstrues what is at stake in traditional philosophical notions of identity and alterity. Indeed, one can say that Descartes’s idea of the Infinite is absolutely Other in relation to the finite subject. But the idea of the Infinite is absolutely Other because it transcends the condition of alterity. Descartes cannot imagine the Perfect because it would be a state of pure autonomy, uncontaminated by anything other than itself. If the other were such a positive infinity it would be absolutely identical to itself and not allow for any alterity at all. Alterity requires a play of relations, where any given term is *other than* something else and cannot be “absolved” from limitation.

For the same reason, the other cannot be respected *as such*—as given in itself—but only by being related to the perspective of another. The “violence” of not being respected as such is not something that supervenes upon an instance that precedes it but is the trait of constitutive alterity. If the other could appear for me as him- or herself, from his or her own perspective, he or she would not be an other. Hence, we may always misunderstand or disregard one another, since none of us can have direct access to the other’s experience. The face-to-face encounter can thus not be characterized by the “immediacy” to which Levinas appeals. Rather, the encounter is always mediated across a temporal distance. Temporal distance opens the space for all kinds of discords, but it is nevertheless the prerequisite for there to be relations at all.

Moreover, the same temporality constitutes the self-relation of the subject. Even the most intimate auto-affection can only take place through the violent passage of

time, which requires the spatialization of traces in order to be marked as such but also risks deleting these traces in the concomitant movement of temporalization. To think the spacing of time is thus to think how death, discrimination, and obliteration are at work from the beginning and do not overtake an already constituted subject. Every experience is threatened by erasure in its very becoming and makes the subject essentially liable to violate itself as well as any other: to exclude, overlook, and forget.¹⁶

Thus, Derrida articulates a double argument concerning the relation between self and other. On the one hand, Derrida emphasizes that the subject cannot go outside of itself. The openness to the other is mediated through one's own experience and thus necessarily limited. On the other hand, the subject can never be in itself, but is always exposed to an alterity that exceeds it.¹⁷ Alterity does not stem from the Good beyond being, but from the spacing of time that breaches the integrity of self and other from their first inception.

The spacing of time entails that alterity is undecidable. The other can be anything whatsoever or anyone whosoever. The relation to the other is thus the nonethical opening of ethics. This opening is violent because it entails that everything is exposed to what may corrupt and extinguish it.

Hence, Derrida emphasizes that the other *as other* is the other *as mortal*.¹⁸ It is this originary finitude that raises the demand of responsibility in the first place. If the other could not be violated or annihilated (and inversely, if the other could not violate or annihilate me) there would be no reason to take responsibility or pursue reflections on ethical problems. As Derrida writes in *Politics of Friendship*, the violent opening of ethics is already revealed in the decree "thou shalt not kill." For Derrida, this injunction does not testify to a primary peace but indicates that violence is an imminent threat (otherwise there would be no need for a prohibition). Assaults and violations are always possible since relations can be forged only between finite beings, where the one is exposed to being murdered by the other and inversely. Even the most affectionate love or intimate friendship is therefore haunted by the sentence "I can kill you, you can kill me," as Derrida puts it in *Politics of Friendship* [122/143].

As a result, Levinas's injunction of unconditional submission before the other cannot be sustained. Although Levinas claims to proceed from the face-to-face relation, he evidently postulates that the subject in the ethical encounter either gazes upward (toward the Other as the High) or downward (toward the Other as someone who is helplessly in need, bearing "the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan" as a refrain declares in *Totality and Infinity*). But regarding all the situations where you are confronted with an other who assaults you, turns down the offered hospitality, and in turn denies you help when you need it, Levinas has nothing to say. If the other whom I encounter wants to kill me, should I then submit myself to his or her command? And if someone disagrees with me, should I then automatically accept this criticism as a law that is not to be questioned or counterattacked?

Questions like these make it clear that Levinas does not at all found his ethics on an intersubjective encounter. Rather, he presupposes that the ethical encounter exhibits a fundamental asymmetry, where the other is an absolute Other who reveals the tran-

16. Cf. Derrida's claim that time is violence: "In the last analysis, if one wishes to determine violence as the necessity that the other not appear as what it is, that it not be respected except in, for, and by the same, that it be dissimulated by the same in the very freeing of its phenomenon, then time is violence" [WD 133/195].

17. Derrida develops this double argument in the section "Of Transcendental Violence" in "Violence and Metaphysics."

18. See for example *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, where Derrida spells out "the other as other, that is, as mortal for a mortal" [39/57].

scendence of the Good. Accordingly, Levinas condemns every form of self-love as a corruption of the ethical relation, and prescribes that the subject should devote itself entirely to the other. To be ethical is for Levinas to be purely disinterested, to take responsibility for the other without seeking any recognition on one's own behalf.¹⁹

It suffices, however, to place yourself face-to-face with someone else to realize that the asymmetry assumed by Levinas is self-refuting. If you and I are standing in front of each other, who is the other? The answer can only be doubly affirmative since "the other" is an interchangeable term that shifts referent depending on who pronounces the words. I am an other for the other and vice versa, as Derrida reinforces in "Violence and Metaphysics."

Derrida's argument not only contradicts Levinas's idea of the absolutely Other, but also undercuts his rhetoric. That "the other" is a reversible term means that all of Levinas's ethical declarations can be read against themselves. To say that the I should subject itself to the other is at the same time to say that the other should subject itself to the I, since I am a you and you are an I when we are others for each other. To condemn the self-love of the I is by the same token to condemn the self-love of the other. Indeed, whoever advocates a Levinasian ethics will be confronted with a merciless irony as soon as he or she comes up to someone else and face-to-face declares, "You should subject yourself to the Other," which then literally means, "You should subject yourself to *Me*, you should obey *My* law."

Levinas cannot think these inversions of his own prescriptions since he refuses to realize that alterity cannot be ethical as such. Rather, alterity marks that nothing can be *in itself*. Levinas cannot assimilate this insight because his philosophy requires that alterity ultimately answers to the Good. Even when Levinas describes the ethical in apparently violent terms—as in *Otherwise than Being*, where the other "accuses," "persecutes," and "traumatizes" the subject—he understands violence as an instance of the Good, which disrupts the evil egoism of the subject by subordinating it to the demands of the other. It is thus quite crucial for Levinas that the subordination to a tyrant—who also accuses one of self-love and demands that one follow his command—can be rigorously distinguished from the subordination to an ethical other.²⁰ But it is precisely the possibility of such a distinction between the "good" other and the "bad" other that the deconstructive analysis calls into question. To posit the other as primordially Good is to deny the constitutive undecidability of alterity. The other cannot be predicted, and one cannot know in advance how one should act in relation to him, her, or it. Consequently, there is nothing intrinsically ethical about subjecting oneself to the other, who may always be a brutal tyrant. There can be no encounter that *precedes* such risks, which are implicated in every relation from the beginning.

19. See for example *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, where Levinas maintains that "Egoism" is "Evil" [81]. Levinas's denunciation of egoism should be contrasted with Derrida's affirmation of a constitutive narcissism: "I believe that without a movement of narcissistic reappropriation, the relation to the other would be absolutely destroyed, it would be destroyed in advance. The relation to the other—even if it remains asymmetrical, open, without possible reappropriation—must trace a movement of reappropriation in the image of oneself for love to be possible, for example. Love is narcissistic" [Points 199]. While Derrida does not explicitly engage Levinas in this remark, it exemplifies a recurrent schema in his readings of Levinas. What Levinas deplors as a contamination of the proper relation to the other (in this case, self-love) is for Derrida the possibility of any relation to the other. To eliminate contamination is thus to eliminate the relation to the other in advance. This answers to Derrida's general argument that pure nonviolence is pure violence.

20. Cf. Catherine Chalié, who observes that Levinas's philosophy "requires that the subject knows how to distinguish between the brutal heteronomy of the tyrant" and the ethical heteronomy of the other [62, cf. 78–79].

The relation to a finite other is accordingly what makes ethics *possible*, but at the same time what makes it *impossible* for any of its principles to have a guaranteed legitimacy, since one may always confront situations where they turn out to be inadequate. When one speaks of “the other,” one can never know in advance what or whom one invokes. It is thus impossible to decide whether the encounter with the other will bring about a chance or a threat, recognition or rejection, continued life or violent death.

Remarkably, we can articulate the link between alterity and violence by following passages in Levinas’s own texts. For example, some of the most fascinating pages in *Totality and Infinity* demonstrate that it is *mortality* that exposes being to a constitutive alterity. To be mortal is to be susceptible to forces that one’s own will cannot finally master. In this context, Levinas admits that violence must be regarded as an essential risk, since the inevitable death to come figures as a relentless threat. Regardless of how tranquil death may appear, it is always a “murder” that one neither can guard against nor prepare for. One can only try to delay death for as long as possible, haunted by an irreducible insecurity as regards one’s own future. Interestingly enough, Levinas connects this fundamental vulnerability with the relation to the other. Precisely because of my disquietude before what will happen, I become aware of my limitation and my dependence on others, which cannot be pacified by any transcendent Good. Levinas himself writes that “the fear of violence” is extended into “fear of the Other, of the absolutely unforeseeable” [235/212], which ought to mean that alterity does not point toward a positive infinity but toward an unpredictable and violent future.

The same line of thought can be read in *Otherwise than Being*. Here, alterity is linked to the diachrony of time and an originary exposure of the subject, described by Levinas in terms of a temporality where it is always already “out of phase with itself.” The subject comes into being through a relation to the past and the future that exceeds its control. Therefore, it can never be a closed entity. Rather, the subject is conditioned by an inherent alterity, which stems from the diachrony of time and is accentuated by the risk of being violated in the interaction with others.

If Levinas followed this argument consistently (adding that the diachronic temporality is the condition not only for the subject but for every other as well), then alterity could never be compatible with a metaphysical idea of Goodness. However, Levinas disarms the critical implications of diachrony by understanding alterity as a trace of the divine. As Levinas explains in “The Trace of the Other,” such a trace testifies to the absolute transcendence of God, which he also describes as “an absolute past which unites all times” [358]. Thus, Levinas’s religious understanding of the other reintroduces the idea of an instance beyond temporality, which is exempt from the diachrony that Levinas himself describes as the condition of alterity.

The appeal to an instance beyond temporality is salient in both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas holds out the promise of a “messianic peace,” which is to abolish “the ontology of war.” This eschatological vision quite literally projects an overcoming of time, to which I will return at the end of this essay. Here, it suffices to point out that the messianic “triumph,” according to Levinas, will put an end to the destructive forces of time by “converting” the temporal into the eternal [285/261]. In fact, such a closure is necessary for his doctrine of the Good beyond being. As Levinas asserts in *Otherwise than Being*, “The Good as the infinite has no other” since “nothing escapes its goodness” [187n8/13].

Hence, in order to read Levinas against himself one must be vigilant concerning two radically different notions of “alterity,” “transcendence,” and “infinity,” at work in his text. The infinite alterity of diachronic temporality is quite incompatible with the infinite alterity of the Good beyond being. In “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida pursues this argument by drawing on Hegel’s distinction between negative and positive

infinity. The concept of *negative infinity* names a process of displacement without end. The classical example comes from mathematics, where no number can be the greatest but is always superseded by another number, which in turn is superseded by yet another number, and so on. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel provides a general definition of such negative infinity by analyzing it as intrinsic to temporal finitude. As Hegel demonstrates, the finite is an incessant “ceasing-to-be” that prevents it from ever being in itself and thus opens the “*relation to an other*” [250]. Finite relationality necessarily entails a negative infinity since none of the terms can be absolute; each is always transcended by another finitude, which in turn is transcended by another finitude, and so on. For Hegel, such negative infinity is a “false infinity” that is to be overcome by the true Notion of infinity. The Notion is *positive infinity*, which is completely in itself and thereby sublates spatial limitation and temporal alteration. By negating the negation of time, “the image of the true infinity, bent back upon itself, becomes the *circle*, the line which has reached itself, which is closed and wholly present, without *beginning* and *end*” [149].

Consequently, if one wants to take issue with Hegel’s totalization one must undermine the idea of positive infinity. Derrida claims that “the only effective position to take in order not to be enveloped by Hegel” is “to consider the false infinity (that is, in a profound way, original finitude) irreducible” [WD 119/176]. In a parenthesis a few lines further on, Derrida points out that the false infinity as such is “time.” This is the key to his argument. The relentless displacement of negative infinity answers to the movement of temporalization, which is the spacing of *différance*. Accordingly, Derrida defines *différance* as an *infinite finitude*.²¹ The thinking of infinite finitude rigorously refutes the idea of totality by accounting for finitude *not* as a mere empirical or cognitive limitation, but as constitutive of life in general.²² Totality is not an unreachable idea but *self-refuting as such*, since everything is subjected to a temporal alteration that prevents it from ever being in itself. Alterity is thus irreducible because of the negative infinity of finitude, which undermines any possible totality from the outset.

In contrast to Derrida’s deconstructive logic, Levinas attempts to criticize philosophies of totality by referring to the other as a positive infinity. Levinas’s argument is untenable, since such an absolute Other would be an absolute Same. The idea of a positive infinity is the idea of a totality that is not limited by a relation to something other than itself and thus abolishes alterity. Derrida writes in “Violence and Metaphysics”:

The infinitely other, the infinity of the other, is not the other as a positive infinity, as God, or as resemblance with God. The infinitely Other would not be what it is, other, if it was a positive infinity, and if it did not maintain within itself the negativity of the indefinite. . . . The other cannot be what it is, infinitely other, except in finitude and mortality (mine and its). [WD 114–15/168–69]

21. See Derrida’s formulation in *Speech and Phenomena*: “Infinite *différance* is finite” [102/114].

22. Cf. Rodolphe Gasché’s essay “Structural Infinity,” which provides a valuable account of Hegel’s and Derrida’s respective conceptions of infinity. Gasché rightly emphasizes that for Derrida positive infinity (and thus totalization) is impossible for “structural” reasons and not because of empirical limitations. However, Gasché does not address the link between the impossibility of totalization and the constitution of time, which Derrida makes explicit in “Violence and Metaphysics.” For Derrida, the movement of temporalization is not an effect of the empirical, but is the “ultra-transcendental” condition for the infinite finitude of life in general. Thus, the constitutive movement of temporalization is the reason why totalization is impossible for structural (necessary) and not empirical (contingent) reasons.

Derrida's argument here is pivotal for understanding the notion of the "infinitely other" that is operative in his writings. Derrida's employment of the term "infinitely other" does *not* signal an adherence to Levinas's conception of the Other as a positive infinity. Rather, it designates the negative infinity of finitude. Finitude entails that the other is infinitely other, not because the other is absolved from relations and reposes in itself but because finitude entails that alterity cannot ever be eliminated or overcome.

The same logic informs Derrida's use of terms like "absolutely other" or "wholly other" (*tout autre*), which must be rigorously distinguished from Levinas's use of these terms. For Derrida, the "absolutely" or "wholly" does not refer to a positive infinity or to any other form of divinity, but to the radical finitude of every other. Every finite other is absolutely other, not because it is absolutely in itself but on the contrary because it can never be in itself. Thus, it is always becoming other than itself and cannot have any integrity as such (for example, as "ethical").

For the same reason, Derrida's notion of "infinite responsibility" should not be conflated with Levinas's. For Derrida, the infinitude of responsibility answers to the fact that responsibility always takes place in relation to a *negative infinity* of others. The negative infinity of responsibility is both spatial (innumerable finite others that exceed my horizon) and temporal (innumerable times past and to come that exceed my horizon). Far from confirming Levinas's sense of responsibility, the negative infinity of others is fatal for his notion of an originary encounter that would give ethics the status of "first philosophy" and be the guiding principle for a metaphysical "goodness." Even if it were possible to sacrifice yourself completely to another, to devote all your forces to the one who is encountered face-to-face, it would mean that you had disregarded or denied all the others who demanded your attention or needed your help. For there are always *more than two*, as Richard Beardsworth has aptly put it [137]. Whenever I turn toward another I turn away from yet another, and thus exercise discrimination. As Derrida points out in *The Gift of Death*, "I cannot respond to the call, the demand, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others" [68]. Consequently, Derrida emphasizes that the concept of responsibility lends itself *a priori* to "scandal and aporia" [68]. There are potentially an endless number of others to consider, and one cannot take any responsibility without excluding some others in favor of certain others. What makes it *possible* to be responsible is thus at the same time what makes it *impossible* for any responsibility to be fully responsible. Responsibility, then, is always more or less discriminating, and infinite responsibility is but another name for the necessity of discrimination.

The necessity of discrimination is at the heart of Derrida's thinking, and anyone who wishes to articulate a deconstructive understanding of ethico-political problems needs to elaborate it. I insist on this point since it calls for an approach that is opposed to the numerous attempts to forge an alliance between Derrida and Levinas. One of the first to argue for such an alliance was Robert Bernasconi, who paved the way for later Levinasian readings of Derrida.²³ In his essay "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida," Bernasconi claims that "Violence and Metaphysics" should not be understood as taking issue with Levinas's philosophy, but only as pointing out certain necessities that impose themselves on philosophical discourse. Derrida's critique of Levinas would then be limited to the way Levinas uses metaphysical language, and Bernasconi insists

23. See, for example, Cornell and Critchley, who both refer to Bernasconi in their attempts to find an "ethical moment" in deconstruction and to mitigate the critique of Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics." See also Jill Robbins, who relies on Bernasconi and Critchley for her claim that "the alterities with which Derrida's work is concerned may be shown to have an ethical force" [29] and that "it is possible to make explicit in Derrida's work the ethical—in Levinas's sense of the word—significance that invests it, the ethical demand to which it responds" [30].

that “this should not be confused with passing judgment on what Levinas says” [26]. Thus, Bernasconi disregards the central arguments in Derrida’s essay and does not even address the notion of violence that is elaborated there. Bernasconi asserts that “we let the finite stand for the totalizing thought of the tradition of Western ontology, as the infinite stands for the attempt to surpass it” [15]. This is a misleading matrix for discussing Derrida’s essay, since Derrida demonstrates the incoherence of such a set-up. Derrida argues that the finite cannot be a totality and that the idea of totality is the idea of the (positive) infinity that Levinas posits as a challenge to the idea of totality. Hence Derrida’s insistence on taking “history, that is, finitude, seriously . . . in a sense which tolerates *neither finite totality, nor positive infinity*” [WD 117/172, my emphasis]. Because Bernasconi disregards the logic of this argument—which pervades Derrida’s entire essay—he misconstrues the difference between Derrida and Levinas. In his later essay “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics” [128], Bernasconi claims that Derrida’s argument concerning how alterity already is *in* the Same has been adequately responded to by Levinas, through the latter’s recognition that the idea of the Other is reflected within history and within Western ontology, in Plato’s Good beyond being and Descartes’s idea of the Infinite. But in fact, none of Derrida’s criticisms are answered by this move. Derrida’s argument is, on the contrary, that alterity cannot be thought in terms of the positive infinity that Levinas subscribes to in Plato and Descartes. Rather, alterity is indissociable from the violence of spacing, which is always already at work in the infinite finitude of *différance*. Instead of recognizing this argument, Bernasconi reiterates his claim that Derrida is not at odds with Levinas. According to Bernasconi, Derrida never really intended to show that “certain of Levinas’s central terms were incoherent” [129]. Rather, Bernasconi formulates the ethics of deconstruction in Levinasian terms, as originating in a face-to-face relation.

Bernasconi’s thesis is further developed by Simon Critchley in his widely influential *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. Critchley asserts that ethics in Levinas’s sense is “the goal, or horizon, towards which Derrida’s work tends” [2]. The motivation of deconstruction would thus be an “unconditional ethical imperative” [31] that Critchley links to Derrida’s notion of an originary “yes.” For Critchley, the originary yes is the “ethical moment” in deconstruction, which commits it to an “affirmation of alterity, of the otherness of the Other” [189]. This assertion is repeated passim, without Critchley considering Derrida’s analysis of the intrinsic link between alterity, violence, and temporality. Rather, Critchley argues that the “undecidability” of deconstructive reading has an ethical underpinning, since it supposedly hesitates and suspends judgments in order to respect the alterity of the other. Critchley thinks this is a compelling ethics, but he worries about how it can be transposed to the domain of politics, which always involves decisions, discords, and conflicts. According to Critchley, Derrida avoids these phenomena for the benefit of an “undecidable” approach, so deconstruction does not provide an adequate account of the necessary “passage” from the ethical to the political. As Critchley puts it:

Deconstruction fails to thematize the question of politics as a question—that is, as a place of contestation, antagonism, struggle, conflict, and dissension on a factual or empirical terrain. The rigorous undecidability of deconstructive reading fails to account for the activity of political judgment, political critique, and the political decision. [189–90]

Thus, Critchley believes he has discovered an “impasse” in Derrida’s thinking and attempts to show us a “way out” of it through Levinas’s philosophy.

Critchley’s account is misleading for several reasons. First, what Derrida calls the originary yes does not designate an ethical affirmation of the other, but answers to the

trace structure of time that is the condition for life in general. Whatever we do, we have always already said yes to the coming of the future, since without it nothing could happen. But for the same reason, every affirmation is essentially compromised and haunted by negation, since the coming of the future also entails all the threats to which one may want to say “no.” The unconditional “yes” is nothing in itself; it only marks the opening of an unpredictable future that one will have to negotiate, without any affirmative or negative response being given in advance.

Second, Derrida’s notion of “undecidability” has nothing to do with a pious respect for the Other. As I have argued, undecidability elucidates what it means to think temporality as an irreducible condition. Accordingly, everything must be understood on the basis of a constitutive duplicity, which at the same time makes possible both promises and threats, life and death, fidelity and betrayal, and so on. What is at stake is to think temporal alterity as the nonethical opening of ethics. Temporal alterity gives rise to both the desirable *and* the undesirable, to every chance *and* every menace. Hence, alterity cannot answer to someone or something that one ought to unconditionally “respect.” Rather, it precipitates affirmations *and* negations, confirmations *and* resistances, in relation to undecidable events that stem from the “same” infinite finitude. There is thus no opposition between undecidability and decisions in Derrida’s thinking. On the contrary, it is the undecidable future that necessitates decisions. One is always forced to confront temporal alterity and engage in decisions that can be made only from time to time, in accordance with essentially corruptible calculations.

Third, there is no support in Derrida’s thinking for the Levinasian distinction between ethics and politics. Critchley’s claim that Derrida fails to account for the political as “conflict, and dissension on a factual or empirical terrain” is simply false, since Derrida maintains that violence is irreducible—that we are always already involved in the process of making decisions that are more or less violent. Critchley’s critique is all the more misleading since it is actually he and Levinas who defend the thought of a primary “ethical experience,” which would precede the conflicts they ascribe to the political. They are thus confronted with the question of how to find a “passage” from a supposedly primary “ethics” to a supposedly secondary “politics.” It is in Levinas’s answer to this question that Critchley thinks he has found a “way out” of what he perceives as the Derridean impasse. But in fact one can track how the Levinasian argument that Critchley adopts is a clear example of the metaphysical logic Derrida deconstructs. As we have seen, Levinas wants to promote ethics as “first philosophy” with reference to an “immediate” encounter, in which the subject is submitted to the Other as the incomparably High. This would be the *de jure* of ethics: its categorical imperative. However, on Levinas’s own account it turns out that such an approach *de facto* is untenable, since the encounter between two is called into question by “the third” (*le tiers*), who interrupts the ethical relation and demands that we consider others than the Other. We are thus caught up in what Levinas designates as the domain of the political, where it is necessary to interrogate and calculate intersubjective relations in order to achieve social justice. Levinas’s observation does not, however, entail that he renounces his notion of a singular, ethical encounter with the Other, which would precede the political. Instead, he holds that the political community should be guided by the respect for the Other, who here turns out to be no one less than God the Father, recalling us to “the human fraternity.”

Even if one disregards the theologico-patriarchal humanism in Levinas’s line of reasoning, one should note how he attempts to explain away the incoherence of his conceptual schema. Both Levinas and Critchley admit that “the third” haunts the face-to-face encounter, at the same time as they describe the arrival of the third as a passage from one order to another, from the immediate to the mediate, the originary to the

derivative, the ethical to the political. The same argumentative structure recurs in Bernasconi's essay "Justice without Ethics?" Bernasconi points out that there are always already others, which contradict the ethics of submission before an absolutely singular Other, but he does not draw the deconstructive consequences of this contradiction. That the third party *de facto* is there from the beginning does not, for Bernasconi, call into question the *de jure* definition of ethics as "a face to face relation with the Other without the third party" [65]. Indeed, Bernasconi categorically excludes that Levinas's ethical ideal can be contested by the problem of the third: "one cannot argue that, because there can never be a face to face with the Other without the others, the notion of ethics makes no sense" [65]. Thus, Bernasconi precludes the deconstructive thinking of originary discrimination, and retains the Levinasian distinctions between the Other and the others, the ethical and the political. But if there are always already more than two, then there is no justification whatsoever for the Levinasian demarcation of ethics from politics. The very idea of a primary "ethical experience" in the face-to-face encounter is untenable, since any encounter always excludes others and thus exercises discrimination.

Derrida makes precisely this point in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Here, Derrida insists that "the third does not wait" and undermines the primacy of ethics.²⁴ Where Levinas holds that there is a "primordial word of honor" in the "uprightness" of the ethical encounter, Derrida argues that such a pledge of unconditional fidelity necessarily commits perjury, either by betraying its relation to other others in favor of a certain other or inversely. In *Adieu*, the nonethical opening of ethics is described as an arche-perjury or arche-betrayal that makes us doubly exposed to violence: "exposed to undergo it but also to exercise it" [33/66]. Moreover, there have always been innumerable others, whom one cannot sort into categories such as "the other" and "the third." Consequently, Derrida maintains that one can only choose "between betrayal and betrayal, always more than one betrayal" [34/68].

However, Levinas draws a quite different conclusion from his thinking of the third. Instead of regarding the ineluctable relation to the third as refuting the idea of an originary ethical encounter, Levinas claims that it paves the way for a universal justice under the heading of God.²⁵ Levinas's reference to God is not fortuitous, but is necessary to consolidate his vision of "a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest," as he puts it in *Otherwise than Being* [159/203]. The only way to achieve such an ideal society would be through a totalizing instance, which would have the ability to survey every aspect of every relation and thereby be absolutely assured against the risk of committing mistakes or exercising discrimination. Of course, Levinas claims to be refuting philosophies of totality. But he does not assess the consequences of such a refutation. If not everything and everyone can be included—which is to say, if totalization is impossible—it will always be necessary to exclude. This is what Derrida's deconstructive logic underscores. Moreover, deconstructive logic undermines the notion that it would be desirable to attain an absolute peace (an ideal that guides Levinas's "ethical" vision of unconditional submission before the Other, as well as his "political" vision of a society that would respect alterity without exclusion). Such a peace would in fact abolish the very possibility of relations and thus be the equivalent of an absolute violence. For Derrida, then, Levinas's ideal ethical relation between two is not only untenable but undesirable; it would be "the worst violence," Derrida writes in "Faith and Knowledge" [100]. In contrast to Levinas, Derrida argues that "more than One

24. For a trenchant reading of *Adieu* along these lines, see Bennington's chapter "Deconstruction and Ethics" in his *Interrupting Derrida*.

25. See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 157–60/200–04

is at once more than two” [100]. This originary dissemination of others can never be mastered by any ethics or politics. Rather, it opens the space and time for all kinds of violence, dramatically abbreviated by Derrida as “perjury, lies, remote-control murder, ordered at a distance even when it rapes and kills with bare hands” [100]. Such threats of violence cannot be eliminated—since they are concomitant with the very possibility of relations—but can only be mitigated in essentially precarious processes of negotiation.

We can specify the deconstructive logic of violence by considering Drucilla Cornell’s book *The Philosophy of the Limit*. Like Bernasconi and Critchley, Cornell wants to endow deconstruction with an ethical motivation, reading it as “driven by an ethical desire to enact the ethical relation” [62]. Although Cornell is critical of certain aspects of Levinas’s philosophy, her understanding of the ethical relation is strongly informed by his notion of the Other as the Good. According to Cornell, to be ethical would be to “respect” alterity and “enact a non-violent relation to otherness” [64]. Cornell repeatedly speaks of such an “enactment” of the ethical, but for the most part she limits herself to positing it as an ideal, as something toward which we can “aspire” but never quite reach. Hence, while Cornell recognizes that “we can never fully meet the promise of fidelity to otherness” [90], she does not question the desirability and ethical status of such fidelity. On the contrary, Cornell explicitly adheres to a notion of how things *ought* to be by subscribing to “the *ideal* of community as the hope for a non-violent ethical relationship to the other” [56], a hope she also rehabilitates in terms of the utopian “dream” of a “communalism understood as belonging together without violence” [60].

The utopian dream of peace pervades Cornell’s book and is symptomatic of her misconception of the deconstructive thinking of alterity. As I have argued, the notion of a nonviolent relation to the other is based on a suppression of alterity, since it must presuppose that the other is not violent in its turn and consequently denies the radical unpredictability of the other. Only if one assumes that the other is primarily peaceful does it make sense to prescribe a nonviolent relation, since the command to “respect” the alterity of the other does not make any sense if the other wants to destroy me. Moreover, the dream of a community without violence is the dream of a community in which there would be *nothing other* than peace, excluding anyone or anything that does not want to engage in the “ethical” relation. Hence, the supposedly ethical dream is unethical on its own terms, since it dreams of eliminating the susceptibility to radical alterity, which cannot be dissociated from the susceptibility to violence and the concomitant attempts to combat it.

It is only by coming to terms with the deconstructive “logic” of violence that one can assess the ethico-political significance of deconstruction. The deconstructive logic of violence does not prevent one from criticizing social injustices or any other forms of violence, but it exposes the internal contradictions of the doctrines that hold it to be desirable to eliminate exclusion once and for all. Discrimination is a constitutive condition. The negotiation of it cannot be governed by a regulative idea or harbor any assurance of its own legitimacy. For precisely this reason it will always be urgent to reflect on ethico-political questions, to work out strategies for a “lesser violence” that is essentially precarious. Those who, like Levinas, proceed from metaphysical premises of how things *ought* to be will in one way or another attempt to deny this predicament for the benefit of one ideal or another. But the argument here is that one thereby blinds oneself to the condition that makes responsibility *possible*, while at the same time making it *impossible* to sustain the metaphysical values and ethico-theoretical decisions by which Levinas lets himself be guided.

Nevertheless, there is a widespread assumption that Derrida has come to adopt these values, especially with regard to the themes of justice and hospitality that have

been salient in his work ever since *Specters of Marx*.²⁶ The source of misreading is that Derrida seems to operate with an opposition between two principles, as in the distinction between law (*droit*) and justice that is a guiding thread in *Specters of Marx*, as well as in the preceding essay “Force of Law.” Derrida describes law as deconstructible, whereas justice is said to be the “undeconstructible” condition of deconstruction. Many readers have thus been led to believe that Derrida subscribes to an idea of absolute justice, which is impossible to reach but nevertheless designates the ideal to which we should aspire. As I will attempt to demonstrate, however, such a reading is untenable. Indeed, some of Derrida’s claims may seem to invoke an ideal justice when lifted out of their context. But a closer reading will show that his notion of justice is incompatible with a regulative idea and adheres to the thinking of necessary discrimination that I have elaborated above.

Once again, it is pivotal to understand that there is no opposition between undecidability and decisions in Derrida’s thinking. On the contrary, it is *because* the future cannot be decided in advance that one has to make decisions. If the future could be predicted, there would be nothing to decide on and no reason to act in the first place. Derrida reiterates this line of thought in his description of the relation between law and justice. The former term designates how we establish rights and lay down laws in order to reckon with unpredictable and potentially violent events. Derrida does not deny the necessity of such defensive measures, but maintains that every law and right is deconstructible. The established laws may always turn out to be inadequate and are fundamentally exposed to the undecidable coming of time, which can challenge or overturn what has been prescribed.

The second step in Derrida’s argument is the one that is usually misunderstood. Derrida describes the undecidable future as the very possibility of justice, or quite simply as a “justice” beyond law. The point is that decisions concerning justice cannot be reduced to the following of a rule for how the law should be applied. Rather, the demand for justice is always raised in relation to singular events, which there is no guarantee that the law will have anticipated. The condition of justice is thus an essential contingency. The specific applications of the law cannot be given in the law itself, but require decisions in relation to events that exceed the generality of the law.

Derrida’s argument is that there can be no justice without such making of decisions, which are precipitated by the undecidable coming of time. Justice is thus essentially a matter of temporal finitude, since it is ultimately because of temporal finitude that one has to make decisions. Derrida writes:

The moment of decision as such, what must be just, must always remain a finite moment of urgency and precipitation. . . . Even if time and prudence, the patience of knowledge and the mastery of conditions were hypothetically unlimited, the decision would be structurally finite, however late it came—a decision of urgency and precipitation, acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule. Not of the absence of rules and knowledge but of a reinstitution of rules that by definition is not preceded by any knowledge or by any guarantee as such. [255]

It is this necessity of making finite decisions—of calculating with the incalculable coming of time—that Derrida calls “justice.” As he writes, justice requires an incalculable temporality in which “the *decision* between just and unjust is never insured by

26. For example, in “Justice without Ethics?” Bernasconi holds that what Derrida calls “justice” answers to what Levinas calls “the ethical.” I take issue with this conception, which has been further developed by Critchley, in the following.

a rule” [244].²⁷ This may appear paradoxical, since it means that justice is nothing but the predicament that decisions can only be made from time to time, without any assurance concerning what is just or unjust. But it is exactly this condition on which Derrida insists. If laws and rights cannot encompass everyone and everything, if they cannot be grounded in a totalizing instance, then it is inevitably necessary to negotiate what exceeds them. This exigency of “justice” is not something positive in itself, but designates that every decision is haunted by the undecidable coming of time, which opens the risk that one has made or will have made unjust decisions. Without such risk, there would be no question of justice in the first place, since the execution of law would be nothing but a faultless application of rules.

If law is essentially deconstructible, the undecidable coming of time is thus the undeconstructible condition of justice. Far from promoting an idea of absolute justice, this undeconstructible condition of justice opens it to injustice from the first instance.²⁸ For justice to be absolute, it would have to preclude the coming of time, which may always jeopardize or question the given justice. For Derrida, on the contrary, the coming of time is inscribed in the concept of justice as such. The *possibility* of justice is thus the *impossibility* of absolute justice. Justice is and *must* be more or less unjust, since it must demarcate itself from a future that exceeds it and may call it into question.²⁹

The impossibility of justice can thus not be understood in terms of a regulative idea of absolute justice. A regulative idea is impossible to attain for us as finite beings but is nevertheless possible to think as an ideal toward which we should aspire. Such an idea of absolute justice is necessarily the idea of a *positive infinity* that would be sealed against corruption, alteration, and error. In contrast, the deconstructive idea of justice is the idea of the *negative infinity* of time, which will always disjoin the present from itself and expose it to the unpredictable coming of other circumstances.³⁰ The coming of time is the possibility of justice, since it opens the chance to challenge laws, transform rights, and question decisions. The concomitant impossibility of absolute justice

27. Cf. Derrida's argument that “there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth” [“Force of Law” 257].

28. Cf. Specters of Marx, where Derrida spells out that the undeconstructible condition of justice is the disjointure of time, which he also describes as “the de-totalizing condition of justice” since it inscribes the possibility of corruption, evil, and mischief (Un-Fug) at the heart of justice itself. The undeconstructible condition of justice is thus “a condition that is itself in deconstruction and remains, and must remain (that is the injunction) in the disjointure of the Un-Fug” [28/56].

29. Derrida explicitly connects his use of the term “justice” to a principally endless questioning by defining “the possibility of the question” as what “we are calling here justice” [Specters of Marx xx/16]. When Derrida speaks of justice as the coming, he is thus not invoking anything or anyone that will come and ordain a final justice. On the contrary, it is the possibility of the question that always comes, the possibility of yet another question that always opens anew and “questions with regard to what will come in the future-to-come. Turned toward the future, going toward it, it also comes from it, it proceeds from [proviend de] the future. It must therefore exceed any presence as presence to itself” [xix/16].

30. As Derrida writes, “if there is a deconstruction of all presumption to a determining certainty of a present justice, it itself operates on the basis of an ‘idea of justice’ that is infinite, infinite because irreducible, irreducible because owed to the other . . . because it has come, because it is coming [parce qu’elle est venue] the coming of the other as always other singularity” [“Force of Law” 254]. The idea of justice is thus indissociable from the negative infinity of time: “Justice remains to come, it remains by coming [la justice reste à venir], it has to come [elle a à venir], it is to-come, the to-come [elle est à venir], it deploys the very dimension of events irreducibly to come. It will always have it, this à-venir, and will always have had it” [256].

is not a lack of justice, since it does not testify to the absence of an ideal justice. Derrida describes the negative infinity of justice as an *infinite perfectibility*, which is the same as an *infinite corruptibility* and undercuts the regulative idea of final perfection. The impossibility of such an absolute state is not a privation, but the possibility of change at any juncture, for better and for worse.³¹

Hence, Derrida argues that the deconstructibility of law is at the heart of emancipatory projects. The force of any call for justice resides in its ability to demonstrate that the legal system of laws and rights, while laying claim to a solid foundation in the community, in fact is ungrounded and violently exclusive. The deconstructibility of law is thus what enables the demands for a justice beyond the prevalent structures of power. But, for the same reason, the demands for justice cannot be oriented toward a society that would finally be liberated from violence and antagonistic interests. Those who succeed with their reforms or revolutions must in turn enforce a legal system that is more or less discriminating and open to new attacks or conflicting demands. This double argument allows Derrida to confirm the need for emancipatory narratives at the same time as he undermines their traditional ideal. Instead of relying on a *telos* of absolute liberation, emancipatory politics is reconceived as a strategy for negotiating an irreducible discrimination. In this violent economy neither law nor justice, neither the general nor the singular, can be ascribed a positive value in itself. Indeed, these poles do not have any meaning at all if they are not played out against each other, in a process where it cannot be known which instance will be more violent than the other.³²

In *Specters of Marx* and many of his recent texts, Derrida also takes on the concept of *hospitality* in order to articulate the deconstructive logic of violence. As in the case of the relation between law and justice, Derrida seems to describe an opposition between two principles: *conditional* and *unconditional* hospitality. In his sequel to *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, entitled *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, Simon Critchley takes advantage of these supposed oppositions in order to consolidate his proposed liaison between Derrida and Levinas in terms of a shared demarcation of ethics from politics.³³ According to Critchley's schema, the political sphere does not leave room for the proper ethical relation, since it requires consideration of innumerable others, without any given criteria as to who or which one should prioritize. As Critchley puts it, *politics* is therefore a matter of making more or less ungrounded, unjust decisions. "Each choice I might make in favour of *x* might work against *y* and *z*, not to mention *a*, *b* and *c*" [108]. But Critchley's observation does not prevent him from advocating an *ethics*

31. Cf. "Force of Law," where Derrida argues that it is the undecidable time of justice that opens for "the transformation, the recasting or refounding [la refondation] of law and politics" [257]. The undecidable time of justice is thus "the chance of the event and the condition of history," but for the same reason "it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculations" [257], since there is no guarantee that the transformation of the law is for the better.

32. Accordingly, Derrida emphasizes that the relation between law and justice cannot be understood as an opposition: "Everything would still be simple if this distinction between justice and law were a true distinction, an opposition the functioning of which was logically regulated and masterable. But it turns out that law claims to exercise itself in the name of justice and that justice demands for itself that it be established in the name of a law that must be put to work [mis en oeuvre] (constituted and applied) by force enforced" [250–51].

33. See, for example, Critchley's assertion that Derrida affirms "the primacy of an ethics of hospitality, whilst leaving open the sphere of the political as a realm of risk and danger" [Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity 275]. On Critchley's account, this is Derrida's argument in *Adieu*. As we have seen, however, *Adieu* elucidates the constitutive violence of an *arche-betrayal* or *arche-perjury*, which undermines Levinas's distinction between ethics and politics. The *arche-necessity* of discriminating between innumerable others is a persistent theme throughout *Politics of Friendship* as well.

that precedes the condition of politics. Thus, Critchley claims that Derrida's notions of law (*droit*) and conditional hospitality should be ascribed to the political, while justice and unconditional hospitality answer to an "ethical injunction" that in Critchley's view must be presupposed for a democratic politics.³⁴

On closer inspection, however, it turns out that Derrida undermines the basic premise of Critchley's reasoning. Derrida argues that injustice is inscribed in the very possibility of justice and thus not something that comes about secondarily, through an alleged passage from ethics to politics. It is indeed true that, like Levinas, Derrida repeatedly speaks of justice in terms of a relation to "the other." But this does not mean, as Critchley believes, that Derrida adheres to the Levinasian notion of an originary ethical experience in the face-to-face encounter.³⁵ On the contrary, the disjuncture that opens the relation to the other is inseparable from the nonethical opening of an undecidable future. Derrida writes in *Specters of Marx*, concerning what it means that time is, and must be, *out of joint*:

. . . if adjoining in general, if the joining of the "joint" supposes first of all the adjoining, the correctness (justesse), or the justice of time, the being-with-itself or the concord of time, what happens when time itself gets "out of joint," dis-jointed, dis-adjusted, disharmonic, discorded or unjust? . . . But with the other, is not this disjuncture, this dis-adjustment of the "it's going badly" necessary for the good, or at least the just, to be announced? Is not disjuncture the very possibility of the other? How to distinguish between two disadjustments, between the disjuncture of the unjust and the one that opens up the infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other, that is to say, the place of justice? [22/48]

And he continues a few pages further on:

Beyond law, and still more beyond juridicism, beyond morality, and still more beyond moralism, does not justice as relation to the other suppose on the con-

34. See Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity 283 and chapter 5. Critchley here picks up his critique of Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony. Taking issue with Laclau's refusal to ground his thinking of radical democracy in a Levinasian ethics, Critchley writes: "if all decisions are political, then in virtue of what is there a difference between democratizing and nondemocratizing forms of decisions?" [112]. Now, the deconstructive point is precisely that there is no such guarantee for what is democratic and nondemocratic, no way to finally tell which decision is more democratic than another. This is why politics is an endless, violent negotiation with undecidability. Critchley, on the contrary, claims that there is an "ethical moment . . . which governs the whole field of undecidability opened by deconstruction" [111]. This is a startling statement, to say the least, since undecidability cannot be delimited as a "field" and is quite impossible to "govern." Cf. here Laclau's reading of *Specters of Marx* [in *Emancipation(s)* 66–83], which rightly emphasizes that no ethical injunction can be derived from undecidability.

35. See Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity, where Critchley attempts to legitimize his reading by maintaining that Derrida in "Force of Law" and *Specters of Marx* employs "[Levinas's] conception of justice to illuminate his own account" [99, cf. 151]. But in fact, Derrida warns against such a reading in the very passage that Critchley refers to: "since I would have other difficult questions about Levinas' difficult discourse, I cannot be content to borrow a conceptual trait without risking confusions or analogies. And so I will go no further in this direction" ["Force of Law" 250]. The point, then, is that we cannot base an analogy between Levinas and Derrida on the simple fact that they both speak of justice as a relation to the other. Rather, an expression such as "the other" does not have any inherent meaning, which is why we must follow the precise articulation and syntax of the arguments in question. If we do that, I argue, it turns out that Levinas's and Derrida's respective notions of "the other" are incompatible.

trary the irreducible excess of a disjuncture or an anachrony, some Un-Fug, some “out of joint” dislocation in Being and in time itself, a disjuncture that, in always risking the evil, expropriation, and injustice (adikia) against which there is no calculable insurance, would alone be able to do justice or to render justice to the other as other? [27/55]

That Derrida’s answer to this question is yes, that he is thinking the undecidable relation between justice and injustice as a constitutive condition, should be clear. On the following page, Derrida speaks of the “unpredictable singularity of the *arrivant as justice*” [28/56]. But one should then keep in mind that the coming (*l’arrivant*) is inseparable from the disjuncture of time, the being *out of joint*, which is also what “can do harm and do evil, it is no doubt the very possibility of evil” as Derrida emphasizes [29/57].

It is here important that *l’autre* and *l’arrivant* can be understood in two ways: as the one *who* is other and coming, as well as *what* is other and coming. The oscillation between the who and the what is always undecidably at play in Derrida’s work, since he reinforces that *l’autre* and *l’arrivant* can be anything whatsoever or anyone whosoever. Accordingly, deconstruction does not allow for a primary ethical relation that would be characterized by “goodness,” but elucidates the fundamental exposure to the undecidable coming of the other. Or as Derrida puts it with a seemingly enigmatic phrase that he often has repeated in recent years: deconstruction is what happens. The French phrase here is *ce qui arrive*: whatever or whoever that comes, happens, arrives and that one is forced to negotiate, in the more or less imminent danger that even the very situation of negotiation will be shattered by the force of what happens.³⁶

For the same reason, what Derrida calls unconditional hospitality is not an ethical ideal that we unfortunately have to compromise due to political realities. Rather, Derrida demonstrates that “hospitality and exclusion go together,” as he writes in *Specters of Marx* [141/223]. If I did not differentiate—and to differentiate is to discriminate, as Derrida often reminds us—if I did not discriminate, then, between what I welcome and do not welcome, what I find acceptable and unacceptable, it would mean that I had renounced all claims to be responsible, make judgments, or pursue any critical reflections at all. Moreover, it would mean that I had opened myself without reservations to whatever is violently opposed to me and can extinguish everything that is mine, including my principles of hospitality.

Hence, it is *not* the case that an ethics of unconditional hospitality is what we *ought* to strive for, while we regrettably have to make hospitality conditional. On the contrary, an ethics of unconditional hospitality is impossible for *essential* reasons, since it would require that I could not react in a negative or protectionistic manner but automatically must welcome everything. Consequently, an ethics of unconditional hospitality would short-circuit all forms of decisions and be the same as a complete indifference before what happens.³⁷

Now, this does not prevent Derrida from saying that conditional hospitality is bound to an “unconditional hospitality.” But what he then invokes is not an ethical

36. The French verb *arriver* can mean “to happen,” “to come,” and “to arrive.” This undecidability is important in Derrida’s writing, since he argues that the event cannot be a self-identical presence. On the contrary, every event is both superseded (no longer) and to come (not yet) in its very event. What happens is what comes, and to arrive is therefore to be transgressed, to be disjointed anew.

37. Cf. Of Hospitality, where Derrida maintains that unconditional hospitality is not a regulative idea, which would be unattainable because of the limitations of finitude. Rather, unconditional hospitality is impossible for conceptual, structural reasons and thus “barred” by internal contradictions, as Derrida puts it [149].

ideal. As distinct from the ethics of unconditional hospitality he deconstructs, Derrida's notion of unconditional hospitality designates the exposure to the unpredictable, which can always be violent and to which one cannot know in advance how one should relate. The "hospitality" to otherness is unconditional *not* because it is ideal or ethical as such, but because one is necessarily susceptible to violent visitations. Even the most conditional hospitality is thus unconditionally hospitable to that which may ruin it. When I open my door for someone else, I open myself to someone who can destroy my home or my life, regardless of what rules I try to enforce upon him or her or it.³⁸

Thus, the question of hospitality cannot finally be mastered. Even the most securely guarded borders may be transgressed or compromised from within. Otherwise there would be no need for protection in the first place. In effect, all limitations of hospitality are at the same time exposed to what they seek to exclude, haunted by those who—rightly or not—question the legitimacy of the determined restrictions. Derrida's thinking of hospitality thus articulates yet another version of the nonethical opening of ethics. To think the nonethical opening is to think why there will always be problems and why the process of dealing with them has no end. The work of politics (here understood in the widest possible sense: as all kinds of demarcations and decisions) takes place in an "economical" negotiation, where no position can be autonomous or absolute but is necessarily bound to other positions. Since the play of relations cannot ultimately be controlled, one is always exposed to the threat (and the chance) of interactions that will challenge or overturn the premises of the negotiation.

Hence, neither justice nor unconditional hospitality can be understood as an ethical ideal. If Derrida is easily misunderstood on this point, it is because he uses a "positively" valorized term (hospitality, justice) to analyze a condition that just as well can be described with a "negatively" valorized term (violent exposition, irreducible discrimination). This is not a valid excuse for those who want to turn Derrida into an ethical philosopher. But it reminds us that we have to be vigilant concerning the strategies Derrida applies in his deconstruction of traditional concepts.

The most problematic strategy in *Specters of Marx* involves Derrida's notion of "the messianic." More than any other term in Derrida's vocabulary, the messianic has invited the misconception that Derrida advocates a form of utopianism or even harbors a religious hope of salvation. Such readings are due to misunderstanding Derrida's distinction between the messianic and every form of "messianism." In Derrida's vocabulary, the messianic is another name for the relation to the undecidable future, which makes emancipation possible while at the same time threatening it from within, since there can be no end to questioning and critique.³⁹ In contrast, messianism is the religious or political faith in a future that will come and put an end to time, replacing it

38. As Derrida puts it in *Adieu*: "this possible hospitality to the worst is necessary so that good hospitality can have a chance, the chance of letting the other come" [35/69]. This should be linked to what Derrida in *Of Hospitality* calls "the incalculable timing of hospitality" [127], which opens the chance of beneficial or devastating *contretemps*. Because of this undecidable, nonethical opening, any "ethics of hospitality" is "limited and contradictory a priori" [65, cf. 53, 55, 79, 81, 125]. See also *Voyous*, where Derrida recalls that his notion of unconditional hospitality cannot be assimilated to "the ethical" or to any form of normativity [204n1]. Rather, Derrida underscores that nothing happens without unconditional hospitality [205], since there cannot be anything without the exposure to the unpredictable coming of time.

39. See for example how Derrida speaks of the critical idea or the questioning stance ("To critique, to call for interminable self-critique") as "a spirit of Marxism I will never be ready to renounce" and further connects this to "a certain emancipatory and messianic affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any messianism" [*Specters of Marx* 89/146–47].

with a perpetual peace that nothing can come to disrupt. Consequently, Derrida emphasizes that what he calls the messianic is without messianism and without religion. The only common trait concerns the formal structure of a *promise of the coming*, which is what Derrida takes advantage of in order to read messianism against itself.

Derrida's reading is easily misunderstood since the respective meanings of the promise of the coming are quite incompatible. What Derrida designates as the to-come (drawing on the French word for future, *avenir*, which literally means "to-come," *à-venir*) can never come to repose in a presence, but always opens itself to yet another future. The promise of the coming is thus intrinsic to experience in general, which always has to commit itself to a future that in turn is threatened by the coming of another future.⁴⁰ Consequently, the promise of deconstruction "pledges only to what is mortal."⁴¹ Far from supporting the promise of messianism, the promise of deconstruction undercuts it *a priori*. There can never be a peaceful resolution, since the opening toward the undecidable future is the condition for anything to happen. Messianism, on the contrary, promises a Messiah that will come and *close* the opening toward the undecidable future.

A clear example of messianism is the "messianic triumph" Levinas invokes toward the end of *Totality and Infinity*. Here, Levinas notes that the metaphysical "truth" of ethics is incompatible with a temporality that does not admit of any definitive judgments but is always related to yet another future, where the criteria of judgment can be revised. Given this temporal predicament, no ethical principles can be protected against critical interrogation or violent deformation and no God can ever come to impose a verdict on the injustices of history. For Levinas, then, the *negative* infinity of time—time as infinitely finite displacement—must be overcome by the *positive* infinity of the Good beyond being. Or as Levinas literally puts it: there must be a transcendent truth that in the last instance will "seal" the opening toward the contingent future by "converting" the temporal into the eternal. It is precisely this conversion Levinas hails as the "pure" messianic triumph, which is "secured" against the "evil" that an endless temporality cannot prohibit [285/261].

What Levinas calls the messianic is thus the opposite of what Derrida calls the messianic.⁴² That Derrida nevertheless uses the term in order to undermine its established meaning may seem too risky, since it easily provokes misunderstandings. However, such misunderstandings should not prevent the reader from being confronted with the pivotal argument in *Specters of Marx*. Time is from the very beginning out of joint. Its opening is at the same time a threat against which there cannot be any final assurance in the spectral moments to come.

40. Cf. how Derrida links "the future as such, in its being-necessarily-promised, prescribed, assigned, enjoined, in the necessarily formal necessity of its possibility" to that which "dislodges any present out of its contemporaneity with itself. Whether the promise promises this or that, whether it be fulfilled or not, or whether it be unfulfillable, there is necessarily some promise and therefore some historicity as future-to-come. This is what we are nicknaming the messianic without messianism" [*Specters of Marx* 73/124].

41. Derrida, *Mémoires for Paul de Man 150/143*. Derrida's analysis of the temporality of "the promise" in this book is instructive reading for an understanding of his use of the term in *Specters of Marx*.

42. Hence I take issue with John Llewelyn's account of the messianic in his *Appositions of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas*. Llewelyn provides a paraphrase of Levinas's notion of messianic triumph, but does not raise any critical questions and moreover suggests an affinity with Derrida's notion of the messianic in *Specters of Marx*, without pursuing a specific discussion of the issues involved [229–30]. Apparently, Llewelyn thinks that the suggested affinity is convincing enough to close his entire book, while I argue that the question of "the messianic" exemplifies the general incompatibility of Levinas's and Derrida's respective thinking.

If we follow this line of thought, we can also articulate the link between deconstruction and what Derrida calls democracy to come (*démocratie à venir*).⁴³ Democracy to come does not designate a utopian hope for a democracy that will come one day and bring about a just society. It is not an ideal, and it cannot serve to *justify* political investments. If such justification were possible, there would be an origin or end to politics, which is precisely what Derrida contests. Furthermore, deconstruction challenges the very notion that such justification is desirable. If a political investment were justified as such, it would abolish the process of democracy, since the investment could not be criticized or questioned. There would be nothing to come in relation to the investment, which would be unquestionably just.

What Derrida calls democracy to come is precisely the impossibility of such final justification. In this sense, democracy to come is what happens all the time, in every moment and every political regime. As Derrida puts it in *Voyous*: “there is always some trace of democracy, every trace is a trace of democracy” [64]. The exercise of power cannot be an act of indivisible sovereignty, but has to remain more or less open to alteration and critique. Even the most despotic monarch or totalitarian dictator is engaged in a “democratic” relation, since he must negotiate with past and future selves that may overturn his rule. For the same reason, there can be no essential demarcation of democracy from dictatorship; such demarcation is always a matter of precarious negotiations and more or less violent decisions.

If Derrida nevertheless privileges the concept of democracy it is not because he thinks it can guarantee a good or just society, but because it more evidently than other concepts takes into account the double movement of stabilization and destabilization in any constitution. Strictly speaking, one cannot posit an absolute democracy even as a theoretical fiction. The very concept of democracy inscribes the relentless coming of other circumstances that one will have to negotiate. The coming of the future presupposes an intrinsic alteration that gives the space and time for change in any circumstance. Such spacing opens the chance for critique, but simultaneously opens the risk that any critique will have been inadequate and thus needs to be scrutinized in its turn. Because the ever-possible revision is inscribed in the concept of democracy, it undermines the idea of a final goal for the work of politics and marks the undecidable future as a constitutive condition. The undecidable future makes it *possible* to enforce laws and rights, but at the same time makes it *impossible* to eliminate incalculable forces that may break the laws or transform the rights.

To be sure, the essential corruptibility of democracy can have the most devastating effects. But for Derrida corruptibility is also the possibility for anything to happen. A form of government that would be able to guarantee its own legitimacy—exempted from the risk of powers being misused or principles corrupted—would short-circuit the possibility of politics and of life in general. The only way to secure an absolute peace would be to extinguish everything that could possibly break the peace and thereby extinguish the undecidable time to come that is the condition for anything to happen.

Hence, deconstructive thinking exercises a critical vigilance against all ideals of an absolute peace: as we have seen, absolute peace would be absolute violence. However, this vigilance does *not* entail that the deconstructive thinker can automatically be ascribed any ethico-political insights; he or she is as liable as anyone else to make mistakes or erroneous judgments in a given situation. But to deny this inevitable risk, to deny the essential corruptibility of responsibility or to project its consummation in an ideal future, is to deny the condition that makes responsibility possible in the first place.

43. Derrida's most comprehensive discussion of *démocratie à venir* is to be found in *Voyous and in Politics of Friendship*. See also *L'autre cap and Specters of Marx*.

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