

## ***The Other of Derridean Deconstruction: Levinas, Phenomenology and the Question of Responsibility***

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### **Abstract**

Derrida has been rather frequently acclaimed for his conception of alterity, which we are told is irrecoverable and beyond the dialectic. However, this essay will argue that his attempts to instantiate an ethics of responsibility to the “otherness of the other” are more problematic than is commonly assumed. Much of Derrida’s work on alterity palpably bears a tension between his emphasis upon an absolute and irrecoverable notion of alterity that is always deferred and always ‘to come’, and his simultaneous insistence that the other is somehow always already within the self. These two aspects of his treatment of alterity do not necessarily contradict one another, but they represent an important tension between a Levinasian inclined account of alterity (the other is that which can never be known), and a more traditionally phenomenological conception of alterity (i.e. the imperialism of the same, in which the other is always partially domesticated by the self’s horizons of significance).

Derrida’s philosophical career seems to gradually move closer and closer towards adopting the first position at the expense of the second, which emphasises that alterity must always, at least to some extent, be dependent on and relative to the self. Indeed, while “Violence and Metaphysics” criticises Levinas’ rather absolute conception of alterity, it will be argued that Derrida’s own eventual position in the *Gift of Death* and in his theorising of the messianic, is actually rather similar. His notion of responsibility towards the other prioritises the aspects of them which are forever elusive and resist any encroachment with the self. Though such aspects of responsibility are important, this essay will argue that they also need to be counterbalanced by other more phenomenological considerations (i.e. a relational conception of alterity), and perhaps ones more closely aligned with the chiasmic ontology that Maurice Merleau-Ponty theorises.

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Deconstruction, and postmodernism more generally, have both associated their various criticisms of the philosophical tradition with a desire to emancipate a conception of alterity that has been marginalised by basically all metaphysics. This essay does not intend to validate or cast aspersions upon what is sometimes termed postmodernity, but it does want to begin to form some qualitative judgements regarding this pivotal aspect of Derrida’s deconstructive enterprise. In examining his treatment of alterity, it is necessary to explore an aporia that is discernible in many of Derrida’s writings. That is, the tension his work often bears between emphasising an absolute and irrecoverable alterity that is

always deferred and always “to come”, and his simultaneous insistence that the other is always, already within the self—a conception of alterity that can be summed up most presciently as always, already encroaching. These two aspects of his treatment of alterity do not necessarily contradict one another, but they do exist in some tension with one another, and it will be argued that this problem is symptomatic of Derrida’s vacillation between a Levinasian inspired conception of alterity and a more traditionally phenomenological conception of the other. In attempting to unpack this important tension, this essay will examine the *Gift of Death*’s ruminations on what responsibility to the alterity of the other might consist in, and it will also consider Derrida’s persistent emphasis upon what he refers to as the messianic aspects of alterity.

In order to disclose the full ramifications of the problem that is being addressed however, it is worth digressing to emphasise that the phenomenological treatment of the other has been disparaged by a multitude of thinkers for subscribing to what is sometimes termed the “imperialism of the same” (Levinas, 50). The suggestion propounded by Levinas, among others, is that the phenomenological conception of the other—and this is intended to apply to Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, as much as to Husserl—actually deprives the other of exactly that which would constitute their alterity. According to this interpretation, phenomenology almost invariably describes the other along the lines of what subjectivity knows of it (or at least thinks it knows). While there are good reasons to retain a healthy scepticism in regards to this schematic dismissal of phenomenology (particularly in relation to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty), it is not overly surprising and nor is it simply wrong. At least in its stated methodological intent, the phenomenological reduction is an attempt to bracket out the outside world, and to restrict itself to a description of the contents of consciousness. As a consequence of this theoretical starting

point, it would *seem* that alterity can only be analysed according to how it appears to consciousness, and is hence defined in terms of what it is for the self. For Levinas, on the contrary, the other is precisely the opposite to this, being primarily that which resists knowledge as well as every attempt to thematise or capture that alterity. The other is that which does not and cannot appear. This essay will argue that Derrida's conception of alterity vacillates between these two positions: i.e. between a phenomenology that while perhaps not an imperialism of the same certainly emphasises the way in which the self always encroaches upon the other, and a more Levinasian influenced conception of alterity which, to some extent, downplays this recognition. Derrida's work can be envisaged to stage a battle between phenomenology and something tantamount to a post-phenomenology (a conception of alterity that is irrecuperable and beyond the dialectic), and in addressing this problem, this essay promises to allow some important insights into the question of responsibility towards the other.

A tension between these two aspects of alterity is evident in much of Derrida's work, but it is also apparent in his explicit interactions with the philosophy of Levinas. It has been widely recognised that Derrida owes Levinas quite a considerable philosophical debt, and at times Derrida implies that his conception of alterity is similarly absolute and irrecuperable; the other is that which by definition must elude any attempt to grasp it. Like Levinas, Derrida claims that the other precedes philosophy and "necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any genuine questioning can begin" (AL 299), and he also describes his work as "a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons, motivates it" (DO 118). Without going into unnecessary detail at this still formative stage of this essay, Derrida clearly endorses at least some aspects of Levinas' rather unsympathetic interpretation of phenomenology, as well as his more general desire

to accord alterity a less derivative role in his philosophy (or perhaps more accurately, non-philosophy). It might be reasonably suggested that Derrida's enduring suspicions regarding phenomenology, in conjunction with his declared empathy with Levinas' philosophical project, provide enough circumstantial evidence to indicate that his account of alterity would be importantly different to the phenomenological paradigm that Levinas castigates (including the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, whose work will be considered towards the end of this essay).

Before sliding too quickly down this post-structuralist vs. phenomenologist path however, it is also worth complicating such an account by pointing out that despite his avowed affinities with Levinas' way of thinking, in other places Derrida seems suspicious of Levinas' position, and even of aspects of his own formulations that seem to resemble Levinas' work. It should not be ignored that Derrida has frequently returned to the writings of Levinas, and intermingled his appreciation for him with multifarious criticisms. In no particular order, Levinas has been accused of humanism (WD 114, 127), of remaining within the tradition of Western metaphysics while claiming otherwise (WD 126), of betraying the feminine (AEL), of trying but failing to distinguish between the religious and the ethical (GD 84), and of misguided and inaccurate readings of Heidegger (WD 135-8, cf. GD 42) and Husserl (WD 120-21). Undoubtedly there are also other issues with which Derrida's deconstructive interventions have been concerned, but for the moment it suffices to recognise that all of these apparently disparate criticisms relate to Levinas' fundamental conception of alterity. For this reason, it is worth momentarily returning to the vast and complicated text that is "Violence and Metaphysics", in which Derrida first sets about textually articulating some of his differences from Levinas.

For the purposes of this essay, it is significant that in “Violence and Metaphysics”, Derrida seeks to reveal that rather than the other being infinite and absolute as Levinas demands, the other must also be recognisable as “*other than myself*”. The notion of alterity, Derrida suggests, requires this relational aspect (being other than myself), for it to even be conceivable at all (WD 126). Suggesting that dissymmetry would be impossible without some form of symmetry (WD 126), Derrida is somewhat wary of imbuing alterity with the absolute qualities that are involved in the singularity of Levinas’ face-to-face encounter. It is also worth acknowledging that according to Derrida, Levinas’ position partly betrays itself, because the wholly other is absolutely other only if it is human and hence partly the same (WD 127). While Derrida is convinced that his own work avoids the residual humanism that he argues is discernible in Levinas’ early work, in insisting that alterity must be ‘other than the self’ (and is hence conceivable only in relation to the self), Derrida tacitly acknowledges a *minimal* truth to what Levinas has denigrated as the phenomenological ‘imperialism of the same’—i.e. the notion that the other is always being conditioned by the horizons and contexts that the subject brings to bear upon that alterity. This is one example, among others, of the distance that Derrida is keen to establish between his own work and that of Levinas. It is also evidence that Derrida’s debt to his deconstructive predecessor is not enough, on its own, to justify an oppositional logic when considering his relationship to the phenomenological conception of alterity.

More needs to be said about Derrida’s relationship to Levinas in this regard, but this summary of one of the main arguments of “Violence and Metaphysics” has hopefully managed to suggest that though a conception of radical alterity might well be privileged by Derrida, at least according to his specific interactions with the work of Levinas, it is

not valorised to the same extent. Of the two, Derrida *seems* to be the more receptive to what might be called the traditional phenomenological perspective (cf. WD 120-1), and if this is sustained in his later writings on alterity, then this would also seem to bring the Derridean position into a closer relationship with Merleau-Ponty's conception of alterity.

Of course, it is also possible that despite his protestations to the contrary, Derrida's conception of alterity in his later work nevertheless inclines towards the position that is best exemplified by Levinas, and John Caputo implicitly claims this in relation to the messianic (Caputo 1997a, 83-4). If that is the case, then some of Derrida's early criticisms of Levinas would also appear to be self-criticisms. Without pre-empting this essay's ultimate verdict, it will be claimed that there is a tension in Derrida's later work between a Levinasian inclined description of alterity, and a more relational or traditionally phenomenological conception of alterity, though some of the details of both of these positions are still to be filled in.

Before delving into the paradoxes of Derrida's later philosophy however, it is worth recognising that the questions that concern this essay can also be situated in terms of his own deconstructive methodology. Even if one wants to suggest, as Rodolphe Gasche has, that deconstruction is, in part, the deconstruction of the concept of method (Gasche p. 123, cf. MDM 122-4), it nevertheless has a distinguishable strategy that Derrida has made explicit (M 195). Particularly in his early texts, Derrida describes deconstruction as proceeding according to two main strategies—the first being the reversal or inversion of the prioritised term of a metaphysical opposition, and the second being the displacement or disruption of that opposition by corrupting it from within. A genuinely deconstructive intervention requires both of these aspects in relatively equal measure. These dual

ambitions have been explicated in greater detail elsewhere, but for the moment it suffices to recognise that Derrida's vacillation on the question of alterity can be cogently seen to derive from these dual methodological concerns, and their importantly distinct, although not completely opposed imperatives. A major issue for this essay will be to determine whether Derrida satisfies himself with reversing the alleged priority of the self in the phenomenological conception of alterity, for a philosophy that emphasises how the other does not and cannot appear. Theoretically at least, deconstruction must also succeed in disrupting this self-other opposition rather than merely reversing it, for it is this aspect of his methodology that Derrida acknowledges is the important one, and this is because of an enduring suspicion about the mere reversal of binary oppositions. One always inhabits for Derrida, and all the more when one doesn't suspect it (OG 24), and to attempt to reverse an opposition, or to just step outside of metaphysics, does not necessarily challenge the framework and governing presuppositions that are attempting to be reversed. In the example that concerns us in this essay, to merely reverse the conception of the self as determinative of the qualities of alterity (as phenomenology is accused of), for a notion of alterity as absolutely indeterminable and capable of being accorded no tangible qualities, might be to leave in place a discrete separation between self and other that retains a propensity towards a type of individualism, and a conception of subjectivity that has long since been disparaged. Having sketched such a framework for this essay, it is time that this analysis became a little more specific.

The most obvious aspect of Derrida's later philosophical conception of alterity is his advocacy of the *tout autre*, the wholly other, and the *Gift of Death* will be the main focus of this essay's attempt to explicate what this exaltation of the wholly other might mean. Focusing upon Soren Kierkegaard's discussion of the supreme Abrahamic

sacrifice upon Mount Moriah, the latter half of this text promises to be of benefit in understanding Derrida's evocation of the wholly other, and also, albeit less directly, in beginning to comprehend his emphasis upon the messianic qualities of alterity<sup>1</sup>.

Any attempt to sum up this short but ominously difficult text would have to involve the recognition of a certain incommensurability between the individual and the universal (or perhaps the singular and the multiple, though these are not quite synonymous), and consequently the dual demands felt by anybody intending to behave responsibly. For Derrida, the paradox of responsible behaviour both installs a self-other opposition, in that there is always a question of being responsible before a singular other (e.g. a loved one, God etc), and yet it also breaks the intimacy of this self-other opposition down by referring us to our responsibility towards others generally, and to what we share with them. Derrida insists that this type of aporia is too often ignored by the “knights of responsibility” who presume a rationalistic discourse of intention, conscience and good will (cf. MDM 247), such that accountability and responsibility in all aspects of life—whether that be guilt before the human law, or even before the divine will of God—is quite easily established (GD 85). These are the same people who insist that concrete ethical guidelines should be provided by any philosopher worth his or her salt (GD 67) and who repeatedly ignore the difficulties inherent in a notion like responsibility, which obviously demands something importantly different from merely behaving dutifully (GD 63).

Derrida's exploration of Abraham's strange and paradoxical responsibility before the demands of God, which consists most obviously in sacrificing his only son Isaac, but also

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<sup>1</sup>The later stages of this essay will also explore the distinction that Derrida draws between the messianic and the messianistic aspects of alterity.



in betraying the ethical order through his silence about this act (GD 57-60), is designed to problematise this type of ethical concern that exclusively locates responsibility in the realm of generality. In places Derrida even verges on suggesting that this more common notion of responsibility, which insists that one should behave according to a general principle that is capable of being rationally validated and justified in the public realm (GD 60), should be replaced with something closer to an Abrahamian individuality where the demands of a singular other (e.g. God) are importantly distinct from the ethical demands of our society (GD 61, 66). It should be noted that this emphasis upon responsibility as involving a radical singular confrontation with something or someone wholly other seems to bear some similarities to the Levinasian conception of alterity, and the radical singularity upon which his face-to-face encounter is predicated. This cannot be justified as yet, but it is also important to recognise that, ostensibly at least, Derrida equivocates regarding just how far he wants to endorse such a conception of responsibility, and also on the entire issue of whether Abraham's murder is an act of faith or simply an unforgivable transgression.

Derrida's methodology here, this undecidable equivocation, might also be termed an 'agnosticism'. This is obviously a somewhat paradoxical thought given the quasi-religious themes with which this essay is concerned, but such an assertion does not necessarily contradict the arguments of someone like Caputo, who has highlighted the 'religious' significance of Derrida's thought (Caputo 1997a). For Derrida, responsibility to the other is such that we cannot know whether we have or haven't made a mistake by them. In deciding, we endure the trial of undecidability that ensures that there is no right answer, since the decision is that which must leap into the unknown, and into madness, according to both Kierkegaard and Derrida alike (GD 65). But textually speaking, it is

worth noting that Derrida does not actually descend into this madness very often. He refuses to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question of whether Abraham is the person of greatest faith. Abraham is “at the same time, the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible” (GD 72). In this respect, it is worth momentarily invoking William James’ famous definition of the agnostic, for in his reliance upon such equivocations, Derrida appears to take the risk of being wrong more seriously than the risks of missing out on the spiritual benefits of belief (that is, of deciding)<sup>2</sup>, and he leaves his options open. This, of course, is a defining trait of deconstruction which has been variously pillared and praised for this refusal to propound anything that the logocentric tradition could deem to be a thesis. In this respect, it is also not surprising that Simon Critchley has described Derrida’s work as a ‘philosophy of hesitation’ (Critchley, 41).

Of course, to point out this type of agnosticism and/or equivocation, is not necessarily to criticise him. Who can blame Derrida for not finding a formulaic response to the question of responsibility towards the other? This essay will not be able to provide it, even though it will eventually be suggested that an alternative and possible more promising way to conceive of this responsibility is one that is more intimately acquainted with the position of Merleau-Ponty, which will soon be briefly delineated. But before entertaining any criticisms of Derrida, it must be recognised that this particular type of undecidability—which is sometimes expressed via an insistence upon the ‘perhaps’ (PF 38)—is typical of deconstruction, and there is also an analogous problem in his recently published text, *Of Hospitality*.

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<sup>2</sup>In his essay “The Will to Believe”, William James suggests that the agnostic’s position - a refusal to commit oneself to faith because of insufficient evidence - is untenable. He sees it as being a position of ‘pure intellectualism’. See James, W., *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York: Longmans, Green, 1896.

Towards the end of this text, Derrida returns to biblical themes and considers the famous story of Lot. The story basically revolves around some foreigners arriving at Lot's footsteps, and asking to be taken in. Lot agrees, but when some other men from Sodom arrive at his house and demand those foreigners whom he has taken in under his protection, Lot refuses. After first offering them his daughter, Lot eventually decides to sacrifice his wife to the sexual whims of the men from Sodom rather than give up his duty to be hospitable to his recently arrived guests (OH 151-5). Derrida concludes this text, as well as this particular discussion of hospitality and what it might involve, by asking: "Are we the heirs to this tradition of hospitality? Up to what point? Where should we place the invariant, if it is one, across this logic and these narratives?" (OH 155). These are all pertinent questions, but they are also questions that are notoriously difficult to figure out in Derrida's texts, where there is never an obvious answer, and where self and other designations (e.g. where the exegesis ends, and the deconstruction begins) are also relatively few and far between.

Nevertheless, it is relatively clear that in the *Gift of Death*, Derrida intends to free us from the common assumption that responsibility is to be associated with behaviour that accords with general principles that must be capable of justification in the public realm. In opposition to such an account, he emphasises the 'radical singularity' of the demands placed upon Abraham by God (GD 60, 68, 79), and those that might be placed on us by our own loved ones. In the process, he also verges on reinstalling a self-other binarism. While such a suggestion runs against the grain of much of what Derrida says about alterity, it is worth recognising that the aporia that surrounds Abraham's decision presumes a rather discrete self and other. Abraham is estranged from God (even if God is within, he is nevertheless importantly distinct), aware only that he is compelled to

sacrifice his son, and he has no access to the rationale behind the necessity for such a sacrifice, and no possibility of a conversation with God or a plea bargain that might lead to respite from this most horrible of commandments. Perhaps even more importantly, Abraham's family are also other radically disparate individuals, entirely estranged from Abraham and his predicament (GD 73). His wife Sarah, is she to whom nothing is ever said (GD 76). This is not to suggest that Abraham has no feelings for them—he certainly does, and this is what imbues the sacrifice with worth (GD 65). But the point is that Abraham seems to be envisaged as making a decision in a vacuum from the rest of existence. How is that possible? Abraham does not come, or even exist without his family, and it is difficult to conceive of a radically singular conversation between the essence of Abraham, his interior reserve, and God. Admittedly, it is not always transparently clear that Derrida endorses this interior reserve of subjectivity that Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham reveals. However, both Kierkegaard and Derrida repeatedly insist upon the importance of this radical singularity in behaving responsibly, and in deciding upon a course of action (GD 60, 68, 79, 87).

What exactly is this radical singularity that Derrida keeps referring to in this text, as well as in others from the same period, including the *Politics of Friendship*, where he also refers to an “absolutely and irreplaceably singular responsibility” (PF 37)? In what does this radical singularity of the other, and by implication ourselves consist? In this respect, it is worth recalling Derrida's insistence that a decision, if it is to genuinely be a decision, must create a rupture with all prior preparations or anticipations for that decision (GD 77). A decision must leap beyond any mere calculative reasoning and anticipatory modes of figuring out what might be the best course of action. Now if a decision cannot follow from any prior preparations, or from any particularly salient advice, or even simply from

one's lifelong commitment to family or religion, then it would seem that one is importantly alone when deciding, and we can hence understand Derrida's insistence upon a radical and absolute singularity. Indeed, Derrida suggests that this radical singularity is illustrated equally well in two main phenomena, those being death and the decision, as no-one can die or decide in place of me (GD 60). That said, Derrida also has some substantial reservations in regards to the Heideggerian conception of death as the ultimate individualising agent, though these cannot be explored here.

Derrida's emphasis upon this radical singularity seems to be referring to the solitude that responsibility brings with it, and in this respect, it is worth noting that he has elsewhere made some revealing comments about the solitude that deconstruction presupposes. In a relatively recent interview, one speaker asks Derrida if *differance* is analogous to what in contemporary literature is called solitude and his response is highly intriguing. Derrida replies that:

The notion of solitude obeys a highly disconcerting logic. Pure solitude is absolute non-solitude, whether it cuts off all relation to the other or whether it relates to all that is other, which is also not relating at all. Is not the relation to every other, which is the only opening to a possible solitude, also the interruption to solitude? (OD 85)

Merleau-Ponty has similarly suggested that solitude and communication are but two moments of the same phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 79, 233), and at least in this moment, Derrida is not that far away from such a position. As a consequence, he is also a considerable distance from affirming only the pure and unconditional alterity of the other. Nevertheless, Derrida does go on to suggest that "I do not absolutely reject the proposition according to which *differance* would also be solitude" (OD 86). This is an

important admission, for even where Derrida recognises that it must be balanced by its counterpart, it is the solitude and the disruption that remains his focus. Of course, an emphasis upon solitude does not necessarily preclude a meaningful conception of alterity. It might be suggested that it is the change to the ‘I’, and one’s own constant displacement that is alterity.

Indeed, in Derrida’s discussion of the decision in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, he repeatedly argues that if a person decides on a course of action based only on their own ego and what they are capable of, then it is not a decision (AEL 23). A decision must reach beyond what he describes as the “autonomic” and “egological” resources of a self-contained individual (AEL 24), and towards an unknown future. What then becomes of this notion of a radical singularity, if a “theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision”? (PF 68). It clearly still refers to a being alone with the decision, but this does not mean that one can decide simply on the basis of one’s own propensity for doing things in a certain way. That is not a decision either. The decision, which installs one as radically singular, should also come from something other, and perhaps even something “unconscious” (cf. PF 69). Radical singularity is, paradoxically enough, where one is best open to alterity. A typical Derridean formulation might be that the only possible decision is this impossible decision by order of the other whose alterity must somehow be within me, and yet I am nevertheless responsible for this decision that exceeds my being (e.g. Abraham’s sacrifice of his son for, and by order of God). The roles of self and other are inextricably intertwined in such ideas, and so it is not, in the end, a binarism of self and other that this essay is accusing Derrida of, despite this radical singularity that obtains between God and Abraham and that seems to make all other considerations superfluous.

It is necessary to return to the *Gift of Death* in a little more detail, to see what can be made of this equivocation that has been discerned. Though Derrida emphasises the Kierkegaardian and Abrahamian affirmation of an absolutely singular responsibility before the wholly other, as yet it has not been made clear how this balances with his more general intent to expose that we all have competing claims upon us, and to highlight that there is no easy way to address the question of responsibility.

In exploring the paradoxical status of responsibility, Derrida observes that:

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all of the others (GD 68).

He suggests that in this “land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day” (GD 69), we betray and offer gifts of death to those most intimate to us, just as Abraham so dramatically did to his family and son. Ethics, with its dependence upon generality, must be continually sacrificed as an inevitable aspect of the human condition and its aporetic demand to decide (GD 70). As Derrida points out, in writing about one particular cause rather than another, in pursuing one profession over another, in spending time with one’s family rather than at work, one inevitably ignores the “other others” (GD 69), and this is a condition of any and every existence. As he says, “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others” (GD 68). One can only presume that, for Derrida, the Buddhist desire to have attachment to nobody and equal compassion for everybody is an

unattainable ideal. He does, in fact, suggest that a universal community that excludes no one is a contradiction in terms.

According to him, this is because

I am responsible to anyone (that is to say to any other) only by failing in my responsibility to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice; I must always hold my peace about it... What binds me to this one or that one, remains finally unjustifiable (GD 70).

Derrida hence implies that responsibility to any particular individual is only possible by being irresponsible to the ‘other others’, that is, to the other people and possibilities that haunt any and every existence. Moreover, no choice can be justified, because every other is wholly other (GD 71), as other to us as the next person. The meaning of this enigmatic formulation will be pursued in the following paragraph, but for the moment it is clear that responsibility towards the other involves both disclosure and secrecy, both an ethical demand for generality and a simultaneous compulsion towards radical singularity. Balancing these two competing claims is envisaged to be inordinately difficult. Derrida suggests only that a responsible appreciation of aporia requires a respect both for the universal and the particular (DN 22), and he hence implies that a responsible treatment of alterity should involve trying to keep the recognition of both of these ‘truths’ together.

However, presuming that we have appreciated the aporia that envelops responsibility and the decision, one timeless question still remains and that is “what is to be done?”. In this respect, Derrida is not an ethicist and will not dictate any guidelines for the decision, except perhaps that enduring the trial of undecidability (LI 210) should not be avoided.



He will also, typically enough, restate the aporia that surrounds responsibility in the form of an aphorism, and one that has intrigued and repelled commentators in perhaps equal measure. The aphorism that he coins to express this paradoxical confrontation between the general and the ethical in attempting to behave responsibly is *tout autre est tout autre*, which translates as the tautologous sentiment that every other is every other. Derrida alters this to decree that “every other (one) is every (bit) other”, though he warns us against abusing this aphorism as the secret of all secrets (GD 82), and admits that it readily betrays his purpose (GD 83). It might be interjected that aphorisms and neologisms that work aphoristically are the staple diet of deconstruction in all of its various guises, but Derrida’s assertion that every other is wholly other does manage to convey much of the import of the *Gift of Death’s* discussions regarding the aporia of responsibility. It performatively introduces a tension between singularity and generality, in that every other is wholly other, inaccessible even, and yet this must apply to every single other, in a general sense (GD 87). As Geoffrey Bennington has pertinently put it, Derrida’s aphorism reveals that “the principle whereby the very (irreplaceable) singularity of the other (the principle of its difference) is thinkable only in the context of that singularity’s potential equalisation with every other singularity (the principle of its indifference)” (Bennington, 46).

Of course, certain questions still abound, including exactly what Derrida is referring to through this recourse to conceptions of the ‘wholly other’. His point seems to be that the infinite alterity and transcendence exemplified by God (GD 27, 33) is typical of our relations with every other (GD 78), and that there is hence a sense that like Abraham, we all have pacts with people that we can never really know, and we can never adequately justify why the pact is with them and not somebody else. Such a position certainly throws

conceptions of responsible behaviour free of the moralising assertions that are commonly associated with any command to behave responsibly. While this encapsulation of his project should not be taken to mean *only* that every other is perpetually incapable of being comprehended—for Derrida readjusts his formulation throughout—such an interpretation is a reasonable enough beginning.

However, one obvious response to such a position would be to suggest that if every other were wholly other, then they wouldn't be conceivable at all, as Derrida himself pointed out to Levinas all those years ago (WD 126). If we were not adequately prepared for the other, then their coming would not cause a ripple and their alterity would not be appreciated. According to Caputo, the wholly other is hence wholly other only up to a point—“an absolute surprise *relative* to what we were *expecting*” (Caputo 1997a, 22) and anticipating. The alterity of the wholly other cannot be too great, or too small, but is a shock to the system in place that modifies the same, and “alters it, instead of confirming it in its complacency” (Caputo 1997a, 24). This emphasis upon the relative and non-absolute aspect of alterity would seem to be quite closely related to the notion of surprise that some phenomenology can theorise well, and Merleau-Ponty's work will be considered towards this end in the concluding pages of this essay. It will also become important when contrasted with other assertions that Derrida makes about our experience of the wholly other as being symptomatic of a “relationless relation”. The question that concerns this essay will become one regarding how to conceive of this relational aspect with an alterity that is wholly other, and radically singular. How can the wholly other be anticipated, as even Caputo accepts that it must be, and yet Derrida elsewhere insists that the wholly other, like the decision, is precisely that which cannot be anticipated and which must remain forever elusive?

Such questions must be postponed for the time being, as there are more complications in store for any attempt to get a grip on the Derridean other, since according to him, the wholly other can never be present. This is not quite the same thing as suggesting that the wholly other can never be encountered, since for deconstruction, the impossible, in the peculiar sense with which Derrida imbues the term, can very much be encountered. Nevertheless, the first and most obvious question is what is Derrida getting at by these apparently absurd questions, which like the question of Being (though he would insist in an importantly different way), seems to exceed all of our resources for attempting to describe them? Derrida thinks that his notion of the wholly other is important to all of us, and also retains a practical and everyday relevance, because in some way or another we are all perpetually waiting for something wholly other. To borrow an image of Caputo's, Derrida's point is that we persistently set a place at the table for the wholly other even if we never actually expect them to turn up. His conception of the wholly other hence does have something to do with our lives, and is always tethered to the horizon of the same. The wholly other is not opposed to the other as known, and it does not simply occupy a different and more ephemeral realm, but insists that given any other that we do know, something about them must forever remain aloof and unthematisable.

But if we ask "what is the wholly other?", then we are equally missing the point. Deconstruction insists that it has no place in identifying the wholly other, for that would be to propose a theism. This brings us to a term that Derrida has resuscitated from its association with Walter Benjamin and the Judaic tradition more generally, to shed some explanatory light upon why this notion of the wholly other is relevant to all of our lives, and yet why it also cannot be identified with any determinate characteristics. That term is

the messianic, and it relies upon a distinction with messianism. Given Derrida's mistrust of any philosophy that is not contaminated by negative theology (Caputo 1997a, 48, 146), it seems apt that this essay's exegesis should proceed negatively and with the later term first. It is certainly easier to explicate what the messianic is not referring to—that being a messianism—rather than precisely what it is referring to.

According to Derrida, the term messianism refers predominantly to the religions of the Messiahs—i.e. the Muslim, Judaic and Christian religions. These religions proffer a Messiah of known characteristics, and often one who is expected to arrive at a particular time or place. The Messiah is inscribed in their respective religious texts, and in an oral tradition that dictates that only if the other conforms to such and such a description is that person actually the Messiah. The most obvious of numerous necessary characteristics for the Messiah, it seems, is that they must invariably be male. Sexuality might seem to be a strange pre-requisite to tether to that which is beyond this world, wholly other, but it is only one of many. That said, Derrida is not simplistically disparaging religion and the messianisms they propound, and as has been previously mentioned, Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* has revealed the significance that Derrida accords to the religious experience. Moreover, in an important respect, the messianic depends upon the various messianisms, and Derrida admits that he cannot say which is the more originary (DN 24). The messianism of Abraham, for example, in his singular responsibility before God, for Derrida (though perhaps not Kierkegaard), reveals the messianic structure of existence more generally (and vice versa), in that we all share a similar relationship to alterity even if we have not named and circumscribed that experience according to the template provided by a particular religion.

However, Derrida's call to the wholly other, his invocation and incitation for the wholly other 'to come', is not a call for a fixed or identifiable other of known characteristics, as is arguably the case in the archetypal religious experience. His wholly other is indeterminable, and can never actually arrive. Derrida more than once recounts a story of Blanchot's where the Messiah was actually at the gates to a city, disguised in rags. After some time, the Messiah was finally recognised by a beggar, but the beggar could think of nothing more relevant to ask than: "when will you come?" (DN 24). Even when the Messiah is 'there', he or she must still be yet to come, and this brings us to the distinction between the messianic and the various concrete and historical messianisms. The messianic refers predominantly to a structure of our existence that involves waiting—waiting even in activity—and a ceaseless openness towards a future that can never be circumscribed by the various horizons of significance that we might attempt to bring to bear upon that possible future. In other words, Derrida is not referring to a future that will one day become present, but to an openness towards an unknown futurity that is always already involved in what we take to be 'presence', and hence also renders it 'impossible'.

Despite his invocation of the term 'messianic' with all of its religious associations, Derrida's position verges on being an agnosticism in regards to the Messiah, in that there is an obvious refusal to definitively say whether or not the Messiah will ever come. This type of question is bracketed away in favour of pointing out that the wholly other must always be a surprise, and that it hence makes no real sense to imbue the messianic with determinate qualities, because the surprise is precisely that which resists expectations (though it also tacitly depends upon them, as we shall see).

Derrida's notion of the messianic also contains a more psychological register, in that he

argues that while we persistently hope for the arrival of the wholly other, there is also a sense in which we don't actually want the Messiah to turn up. The prospect scares us, and we hence harbour a desire for the coming of the Messiah to be infinitely postponed. As Derrida has suggested, "we wait for something that we would not like to wait for" (DN 25), and like Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, this suggests that the wait for something unknown (the wholly other, the future), is our predominant mode of being. Indeed, the wait to encounter Derrida's *tout autre* seems destined to be just as unfulfilled as that which preoccupies Vladimir and Estragon. The messianic is a general structure in which the 'to come' is absolutely undetermined and deferred, though the responsibilities assigned by the messianic are nevertheless here and now. Just because Godot is not actually going to turn up, doesn't mean that Vladimir and Estragon can, or should, simply give up their impassioned wait.

However, it is also worth observing that in another of his recent texts, Derrida enigmatically suggests that this type of messianic structure refers to "*a sort of relationship without relation, with one guarding itself from the other, in the waiting without horizon, for a language that only knows how to keep people waiting. That is all it knows how to do, to keep people waiting, and that it all I know about it (my italics)*" (MO 71).

This thematic of the "relationship without relation", which Derrida also uses in the *Gift of Death* to describe the asymmetrical relation that obtains with something absolutely transcendent (GD 72-3), refers to Blanchot, and more importantly for the purposes of this essay, again to Levinas, who have both used similar formulations in describing alterity. Moreover, as Derrida himself implies, in suggesting that this relationship without relation

refers to a “waiting without horizon”, such a position also involves a denial of the phenomenological insistence upon horizons of significance, as well as its tacit suggestion that the other is inevitably conditioned, and some might say curtailed, by the tools and experiences that we bring to bear upon any attempt to appreciate alterity (e.g. the ‘forestructures’ of our understanding)<sup>3</sup>. The problem with this however, is that the notion of the messianic has been primarily associated with the notion of a surprise. It has also been established that the surprise cannot but be relative to our expectations, and this seems to suggest that the wholly other cannot actually be absolutely other, for if it were it would not be conceivable as a surprise. Formulations of Derrida’s like ‘waiting without horizon’, and ‘relationless relation’, tend towards denying this more phenomenological and relative aspect of alterity, and yet both the notion of the messianic and the wholly other (which his above formulations are attempting to describe), are inconceivable without some recognition of the ‘imperialism of the same’—that is, of the ways in which alterity is never absolute, but is always conditioned and even partly prefigured by the forestructures of our understanding. It seems that Derrida cannot do away with phenomenology as easily as his later work sometimes seems to presume.

It is worth digressing to reaffirm that these related notions of the messianic and the wholly other are not merely isolated aspects of his conception of alterity, or simply unimportant rhetorical devices. Derrida’s emphasis upon the messianic aspects of alterity that elude any attempt to grasp them (which contains an implicit treatise on how to responsibly treat alterity: i.e. messianically rather than via a messianism that attempts to

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<sup>3</sup>In *Being and Time*, Heidegger has famously emphasised the forestructures of our understanding, and the way in which all interpretation must be grounded in something that we see in advance. In some sense, we must know what we are looking for otherwise we would not be looking, and in this minimal respect, he is an obvious forerunner to hermeneutics. See Heidegger, M., *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarie & Robinson, London: SCM Press, 1962, sections 188-192.

imbue the other with a certain concrete exigency), are part of his larger deconstructive enterprise that insists upon the radical singularity that constitutes such an important part of responsibility, and that emphasises the solitude of the deconstructive thinker. In this respect, it seems that Derrida's conception of alterity, particularly in regards to his later philosophy, actually bears an increased proximity to the work of Levinas. This radical otherness, and the singularity of this otherness of which Derrida speaks, return us to a Levinasian account of the radical singularity involved in the face-to-face confrontation. Even though Derrida has again criticised aspects of Levinas' position in the *Gift of Death* (cf. GD 84), this very same text ultimately privileges responsibility conceived of in terms of a demand that the wholly other has made upon a singular person, and pays less attention to the ways in which this very personhood and identity of the 'I' can never be extricated from the communal society and responsibilities in which it partakes. What has happened to the Derrida who relativised the Levinasian conception of alterity in "Violence and Metaphysics", and who supported Husserl's notion of the alter-ego against Levinas' rather aggressive criticisms of it (WD 120-1)? He now propounds a closely related position, and it seems that some of Derrida's earlier criticisms of Levinas are, in fact, relevant to his own increasingly prophetic concerns. At the very least, it is apparent that he cannot easily rid his conception of alterity of its more relational and phenomenological implications—that is, of the way in which something that is other, even wholly other, must always still be conceivable as 'other than the self' (cf. WD 126).

But what does Derrida's apparent rejection of these phenomenological horizons, at least as they apply to the *tout autre* entail? If the wholly other is never simply present as Derrida repeatedly insists, there is a political significance to this—that being a denial of fundamentalisms of all sorts, for any claim to a privileged access to the sovereign words



or intent of the Messiah is immediately looked upon with suspicion. According to Caputo, the exaltation of the wholly other releases a politics of the singularity of the other and a respect for this singularity (Caputo 1997a, 54), and there is something valuable about this. After all, there is an irreducibility of the other to the self, which is equally pertinently described as a messianic openness to the future. However, the important question is whether responsibility consists in paying due attention to the aspects of the other that resist any transformative interaction with the self (e.g. the radically singular encounter between Abraham and God), or to the ways in which the self inevitably overlaps with that which is other. In the *Gift of Death*, Derrida acknowledges this second aspect of alterity, but is it accorded its due importance? His treatment of the other seems to place an inordinate amount of importance upon the singularity of the individual, and doesn't always recognise the ways in which that singularity is itself a product of others, and is intertwined with the world in a way that renders any easy distinction between self and other tenuous. This is immensely paradoxical since Derrida's thought, and particularly his early thought, sought the exact opposite; i.e. to banish reference to an individual subjectivity (but not to deny that it exists), and to suggest that to the extent that the effects of subjectivity are undeniable, they remain a product of the play of *differance* (SP 82)<sup>4</sup>.

It seems that there is an unequal tension in his later work between a privileged conception of responsibility as involving respecting the radical singularity of the wholly other, and a conception of alterity that acknowledges the importance of the relation, in that the wholly other must be an other relative to ourselves (WD 126), and hence to what

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<sup>4</sup> There are some important political differences between these two conceptions of otherness, and Derrida's latest position seems to be likely to legitimise some type of benevolent humility before an other that is absolutely elusive, though this cannot be justified in any detail here.

we have experienced and anticipated. Can these apparently incompatible thoughts be reconciled? Perhaps not, as Derrida very rarely wants to get rid of aporias, but to accord them their due import. Deconstructive epistemology privileges a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” response to such questions, and his philosophy is hence not a dialectic that seeks eventual reunification. The question that remains however, is what are we to make of these competing accounts of the other as wholly other, and yet also as always already encroaching upon the self (a problem that is structurally isomorphic with the aporia that the *Gift of Death* discerns between being responsible to an individual who is always wholly other, and the ethical responsibility required for all humanity)?

In regards to a resolution of this problematic, it is worth recognising that Derrida consistently asserts that it is the privilege granted to unity, to totality, and even to community as an organised whole, that is dangerous for the other, as well as for responsibility, the decision, and ethics (DN 13). This is not to deny that unity and gathering are indispensable to the human condition. However, he maintains that it is what disrupts this totality, rather than what preserves this totality, which is the condition of relating to the other. This would seem to reaffirm that responsibility consists more in the recognition of that which disrupts the totality, rather than that which unifies the totality.

Regarding this privilege that he accords to disruption and disassociation, Derrida goes on to elaborate:

Once you grant some privilege to gathering and not disassociating, then you leave no room for the other, for the *radical otherness of the other, for the radical singularity of the other* ... disassociation is not an obstacle to society but the condition... I can address the other only to the extent that there is a separation, a disassociation, so that I cannot

replace the other and vice versa (DN 14).

One question worth asking in response to this, is whether Derrida's final suggestion in this quotation—that one can only address the other if there is a separation or disassociation (which depending upon the way this disassociation is characterised, this essay certainly does not want to contest)—necessarily also affirms the radical singularity of the other. This is not a *fait accompli* or some irrefutable logical deduction, and an alternative response to this type of problematic might be that presented by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Merleau-Ponty also posits a constitutive disassociation that he terms a divergence (*ecart*). To schematically summarise his position, the divergence that Merleau-Ponty discerns between the sentient and the sensible is not such that it can ever allow us to access solely the sentient or the sensible paradigm. Our embodied existence precludes us ever managing to simply touch someone, for example, without also feeling touched. More importantly for the purposes of this essay however, Merleau-Ponty also argues that a similar chiasmic logic applies to the domain of alterity, and he defines self and other as “the obverse and reverse of each other” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 83, 160). According to Merleau-Ponty's position, there is a divergence or disassociation between self and other, but they are also chiasmically intertwined with one another in such a way that to speak of the radical singularity of the self, or the radical otherness of the other, is to ignore the fact that both paradigms are conceivable only on account of being of the one same flesh.

It should be apparent that Merleau-Ponty's position does not require, and perhaps even condemns an affirmation of the radical singularity of the other. His notion of this

divergence ‘deconstructs’ the dictum that the self is not other, because the self is revealed as other than itself, in that a non-dualistic divergence between the sentient and the sensible is conceived of as being that which makes subjectivity possible at all. As is the case for Derrida, Merleau-Ponty hence emphasises that we can address the other only on account of this separation. However, the important point to ascertain from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, is that responsibility to the other requires a recognition of the overlappings, intertwinings, and encroachments that typify any relation between self and other, and also problematise the very ease of this distinction (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 123). This is not an attempt to encourage a domesticated conception of alterity, but it is a recognition of the empirical status of the other for us—that is, as someone or something at least partially known, and to some degree always already encroaching upon us in a way that problematises any conception of a radically singular confrontation with the wholly other. If we are always already intertwined with the other, then perhaps responsibility to the alterity of the other consists precisely in not respecting an ‘absolute singularity’ that downplays our inherence in the one shared world.

Let me present this alternative in a slightly different way. Merleau-Ponty’s position has been aptly characterised as suggesting that the other’s difference inspires an attempt at communion (not union)<sup>5</sup>. In other words, responsibility to the other’s difference (alterity) demands the transformation and intertwining of these notions of self and other, such that we can affirm what he terms our “natal bond” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136) and “deepen our inherence in Being” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 123). The implication of this is that alterity is best encountered in an interaction between two or more people in which the

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<sup>5</sup> This particular turn of phrase is indebted to Rosalyn Diprose, and more specifically to her paper “Here I am by the Grace of the Other and Politics is in Disgrace”, as it was given at the Australian Society for Continental Philosophy Conference, University of New South Wales, November 2000.

lives of both participants are irretrievably altered, and in which this transformative interaction between self and other is deepened rather than resisted (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 142-3). While Derrida acknowledges that such an intertwining exists, he emphasises that responsibility involves respecting the radical singularity of the other, and the qualities of their alterity that resist this encroachment of self upon other, and this is an important difference between he and Merleau-Ponty.

Indeed, it would seem that as well as a methodological agnosticism (i.e. a refusal to propound a single thesis), Derrida's later philosophy also exhibits an agnosticism in regards to the other. He repeatedly demands that one must, above all, respect the otherness of the other—that being their messianic qualities and their radical singularity. For Derrida, genuine responsibility towards the other's radical singularity necessitates that that alterity must not be imbued with any determinate characteristics. To put the problem somewhat crudely, the idea motivating such a claim is that the radical singularity of the other cannot be accessed, for even if it could be, that which was accessed would no longer be radically singular. Derrida implies that the answer to this problem is to refuse to limit that alterity to any determinate shape or form (a refusal to decide), and to be open to the aspects of that alterity which might yet come (the messianic). In his own passion for certitude, Derrida will not say more than is true, and not being able to find any *a priori* form of responsibility to the other, he makes a religion of the other's elusiveness (it is called deconstruction), and a religion of agnosticism. Whatever the other qualities of this religion, such an understanding threatens to fetishise responsibility towards the other as simply the prioritising of that which resists any transformative encroachment with the self. As well as omitting from consideration some alternative and compelling explanations of what a responsible appreciation of alterity

might consist in—e.g. Merleau-Ponty’s—such an account also seems to ignore, or at least downplay the significance of Derrida’s own critique of Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics”. His more recent exaltation of themes like the messianic and the wholly other seeks to reverse the traditional hierarchical opposition between self and other, but it often does so without due recognition of phenomenological considerations, including the inevitability of a certain imperialism of the self/same.

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