

Responsibility and Moral Philosophy as a Project in Derrida's Later Works

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Abstract

A prominent theme of Jacques Derrida's recent work has been that of responsibility. He has attempted to approach moral issues and philosophy without abandoning his philosophical project of deconstruction, a project that in the past has seemed critical if not outright hostile to moral philosophy.

Moral and philosophical reflection is situated, and by the time one can even start posing questions, one is already embroiled for better or for worse, in a moral situation for which one bears some responsibility, and which also involve a responsibility of reflection as well as action. Adopting a confessedly conservative reading of Derrida, I argue that his recent philosophy does allow for the possibility of morality to be realized through philosophical and moral projects, and that the ever-present possibility of these lapsing into irresponsibility does not undermine the positive, though contingent and gratuitous, achievement of responsibility when it does take place.

Derrida begins the work *Aporias* by discussing Diderot's defense of Seneca. This type of writing that deliberately exploits ambiguity is characteristic of his works, making it difficult to decide when Derrida is writing in his own name and presenting his own position, or writing through another, presenting one or more ways in which another's writings can be taken. This problem, however, as often happens in Derrida's writing, is thematized as part of the content of his own writings. The question that Derrida shifts to, during and after his discussion of Diderot, is: how one can understand death, the death of oneself or the death of the other? Abstractly considered, this seems to be a self-invitation to generate a philosophical discourse on alterity and time. Concretely considered from its placement in a philosophical text by a writer who is best known for philosophical work, this question is more pregnant and yet more limited. As one asks it, it is transformed into a related question which asks: given that one has already lived out a portion of one's life, spent one's time already,

in the study of philosophy among other disciplines, how can one make sense out of this life in the face of thematics such as time and alterity? Put another way, it is the question of how awareness of one's complicity and responsibility grounds the possibility of moral discourse and action. Or, to put it in one other way, given a world in which, by the time one realizes that theoretical life is never pure and never innocent, one has already lived part of one's life as the life of theory, what relationship can one uncover and articulate between philosophy, morality, and redemption?

One of the difficulties of philosophy is, given that there are too many different thinkers and texts for one to be able to read them all, let alone compare their respective merits, one still has to evaluate the events, problems, and particularities which they can illuminate or make sense out of. Given this, by the time that one comes to ask how one can do philosophy ethically, how one can do justice to the other by doing philosophy, it is at least in a certain sense already too late. One's life has already been lived, one's habits of thought furrowed into routines, whether of comportment or perception. The irony, which risks lapsing simply into pathos, is that the call to responsibility is a call, not only to commitment, but to making sense of the commitments which one has already made, and it cannot be simply an uncritical justification of those commitments.

One could retort to this by asking whether this is not somehow too personal, and thereby idiosyncratic, particular, non-philosophical. Or alternately, one could demand

to have explicitly clarified what there is in this which *is* philosophical. These are legitimate concerns. What I will try to present using selections from Derrida's works *The Gift of Death*, *Aporias*, and *Specters of Marx* is the importance and the inextricability of the personal for philosophy that would take account of this responsibility toward the other. Accordingly, what follows cannot make a claim to being a comprehensive survey of these analyses of Derrida's, but rather follows out the thread of this question: given that one is engaged in philosophy, how can that project play a part of an ethical life, a life which, among other things, attempts to take up its responsibility towards the other?

The answer I give may seem in some quarters to be overly-optimistic about the possibility of this project, and in other respects marked by advocacy of a conservatism which threatens to slip into the lack of responsibility through a premature closure of the question. In this sense, I depart, if not from Derrida, certainly from many of his interpreters, admirers, and imitators. I will argue for this sort of conservatism throughout the paper, trying to keep the problematic from veering towards another side, that of a paralyzing pessimism which takes the problem of doing justice to the other as irresolvable. This paper itself follows a fairly linear scheme. First, I selectively lay out Derrida's position on secrecy and responsibility. Second, arguing that language through its function as a human and historical institution contains spaces in which secrets can be kept, I turn to the discussions on decision and aporiai. Third, taking up a conclusion from the other two sections that

philosophy is radically conditioned as personal, I examine the roles of friendships of three sorts in the understanding of responsibility.

One may ask why Derrida turns explicitly in his later writings to these themes of the ethical, the political and the religious. One tempting answer would be that his project is to carry out to a conclusion the premises of his early works, among them foremost *Of Grammatology*, to work out the conclusions of the inescapability of these fields of experience and discourse, that one cannot claim to do philosophy which would be free of responsibility (logic alone, for instance, or a pure ontology), for since these divisions within philosophy have taken place historically, they are already marked by decisions which have excluded certain people and privileged the voices and thoughts of other people. In *The Specters of Marx*, Derrida characterizes the project of deconstruction as a political one. “Even where it is not acknowledged, even where it remains unconscious or disavowed, this debt remains at work, in particular in political philosophy which structures implicitly all philosophy or all thought on the subject of philosophy.” (1994, p. 93) This terse passage reflects several important claims made by Derrida throughout his work. First, although he will not claim that political philosophy is foundational for all other philosophy, he does claim that no philosophy is unstructured to some extent by political philosophy. Second, there is a “debt” involved in political philosophy just as in all other philosophy, a debt that, under many different forms, Derrida has spent his career attempting to articulate, through the forms and targets of deconstruction. “[N]amely the deconstruction of the ‘proper’, of logocentrism, linguisticism, phonologism, the demystification or the de-

sedimentation of the autonomic hegemony of language (a deconstruction in the course of which is elaborated another concept of the text or the trace, of their originary technization, of iterability, of the prosthetic supplement, but also of the proper and what was given the name exappropriation.)” (1994, p. 93)

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida views his philosophical contribution of deconstruction as a historical possibility, that is, a possibility that can only be brought to fruition in light of a development in the history of philosophy. “Such a deconstruction would have been impossible and unthinkable in a pre-Marxist space. Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also *in the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*”. (1994, p. 93) The difference that Marx introduced can be summarized here, and hopefully not glossed over in that process, as his call for philosophy to change the world. This is to think thought as a decision which has to be made, not simply to know, or to mourn, or to reconcile, but to act, to take up a position of solidarity with the others, those who have not thought or who have been precluded from thought.

Deconstruction, also characterized as a textual and academic project of denaturalization, is inherently political for Derrida, not because it leads to direct political action through prescription, but because it leads to the possibility of action which can try to think itself as responsible action, precisely because the subject of this action questions the historically given, sedimented in language, conditions of its action and thought. A certain antinomy of the relation between the subject and its

propria results from this, however. On the one hand, for particular subjects engaged in it, deconstruction *must* end up somewhere or it becomes a paralyzing academic exercise of reading and deconstructing texts; this means that the type of philosophy that is the negation of the possibility of the “proper” founding itself fully must generate or appropriate, in order to allow a responsible subject, a region of discourse and action where the subject can lay claim to what is “proper” to him- or herself. On the other hand, the subject cannot be allowed to think that they have fully satisfied the demands of thinking out the implications of these *propria*, or put in other way, strategies of questioning must be arrayed against him or her.

This not only raises, or calls in question, or “subverts”, but *is* a question of normativity. Deconstruction is a project of calling any given or existent normativity into question, of making it answer for itself, usually through the techniques of reading the letter of texts against their hidden or sedimented premises. But, what does this allow, in the end? Do we deconstruct everything? Then, there is nothing left, no secure way to redress the problems. But, then, this means that deconstruction would itself need its own “prosthetic supplement”. In order to supply the conditions, not for action, but for action that is thought as responsible, it would have to enter into collusion with thought outside of its own critical perspective. This reconstruction takes place through a re-evaluation of subjectivity, thinking out the consequences of one’s own radical contingency.

Responsibility has to take place through a responsible subject. How then, does Derrida present this possibility? In *The Gift of Death*, he realizes that responsibility is a self-reflective concept. He criticizes a thematization that would allow the questioning to be closed and finished:

And let us not forget that an inadequate thematization of what responsibility is or *must be* is also an *irresponsible* thematization: not knowing, having neither a sufficient knowledge or consciousness of what being *responsible* means, is of itself a lack of responsibility. In order to be responsible it is necessary to respond or to answer to what being responsible means. For if it is true that the concept of responsibility has, in the most reliable continuity of its history, always implied involvement in action, doing, a *praxis*, a *decision* that exceeds simple conscience or simple theoretical understanding, it is also true that the same concept requires a decision or responsible action to answer for itself *consciously*, that is, with a knowledge of a thematics of what is done, of what action signifies, its causes its ends, etc. In debates concerning responsibility one must always take into account this original and irreducible complexity that links theoretical consciousness (which must also be a thetic or thematic consciousness) to “practical conscience” (ethical, legal, political), if only to avoid the arrogance of so many “clean consciences” (1995, p. 25)

To notice this is to call to one’s own notice the problem of being a historical being. For, in order to even to begin to answer a question put to oneself as to whether one acts responsibly, one must also know where one is to turn to get the answer, to what people, what concepts, perhaps even to what texts. There is the fact that one is finite. To really think that out, to realize that one’s language and one’s thoughts, which provide the conditions for thinking out one’s actions are founded in a history which one comes into but which is vaster than the comprehension of a finite human lifetime,

this is also to realize the difficulty of answering the question put to oneself. Where then does one turn, what can provide a foundation for moral action?

Derrida locates the possibility for a responsible subject in various forms and figures of secrecy. A temptation in carrying out this kind of analysis of the possibility of moral consciousness would be to carry out a transcendental analysis, through which a distinction would be made between the various economies¹ in which the subject finds him or herself, and the singularities of the subject and the other, a distinction which would yield the latter as foundational in a non-reciprocal manner for the former. Ultimately, this distinction cannot be sustained, however, because the very possibility of human existence as singularity presupposes an economy of human relationships. The problem is to make sense of the requirement that moral consciousness take concrete place in the world, that is, within the interpersonal and historical matrix of economies, foremost among them being language, and at the same time comprise relations among singularities, between oneself and the self of the other or the absolute other. What the deconstructive approach offers to this perennial problem is that the analyses are purportedly conducted in full consciousness that both sides of the distinction require the other side in order to be thought. Put phenomenologically, singularity and substitution would be reciprocally foundational.

Derrida, in *The Gift of Death* and *Aporias*, will signify this difficulty in terms of “impossibility”. The requirement, if his analyses are to be effective as a communication between the writer and the reader, is that this impossibility be undone,

be made sense of by a reader who would not simply be a repetition of the writer. Let us examine how these regions of secrecy can take place. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida assigns the possibility of singularity to the fact of mortality. Reading through Jan Patochka's claim that through the historical transformations Christianity brings about, the responsible subject is constituted through the "gift" of finitude and mortality, Derrida sees in this mortality the condition for the singularity of the person which is a requirement of responsibility, that one cannot substitute anything for one's own being which is called into judgment. "In order to understand in what way this gift of the law means not only the emergence of a new figure of responsibility but also of another kind of death, one has to take into account the uniqueness and irreplaceable singularity of the self as the means by which C and it is here that it comes close to death C existence excludes every possible substitution." (1995, p. 41)

This law that comes as a gift is not distinguished in any indelible way from the moral structuring of normativity germane to the societies in which humanity takes place. One cannot derive it from oneself, but rather it is given to one through one's upbringing, through the history of one's relationships to other people, through the reading of texts, through arguments. One will be judged precisely by what one has not chosen, according to criteria that come to one heteronomously. Yet, at the same time, for Derrida, one cannot simply fulfill certain criteria given by the moral discourses of a society, or an overlapping of societies, and be responsible, for the existence of oneself as a singularity excludes the possibility of substitution of another, one's parents, the police, one's teachers, etc., for one's place.

The realization of oneself as finite and historical, as called into judgment by the fact that one is conscious and alive has another side to it, however, that of the other.

Derrida, calling Levinas to mind, writes that,

Levinas wants to remind us that responsibility is not at first responsibility of myself for myself, that the sameness of myself is derived from the other, as if it were second to the other, coming to itself as responsible and mortal from the position of my responsibility before the other, for the other's death and in the face of it. In the first place it is because the *other* is mortal that my responsibility is singular and "inalienable". (1995, p. 46)

How, though, does the fact that one is mortal, that the other is mortal as well, make responsibility possible? The finiteness of the human condition, on the contrary, would seem to preclude any absolute responsibility, to make it an impossible correlate of social existence, a mere idea. To maintain that, however, is to maintain responsibility as abstract, as separated from the subject, rather than an intimate and everyday experience. Given the fact that one has only so much time to live, that one lives in a certain place, in a certain time, under a certain government, within a certain social system, one is still faced with the fact that one's actions, or lack of actions have consequences, and that, once one has begun to think about the consequences, that thought too is part of one's history. One comes to think about responsibility while moored in it, after one already has a history, a history by which one will be judged.

In fact, one cannot turn away from one's past, in the events which recede beyond one's lifetime and provide a language, a society, a history, for those are always constitutive of the future to come. One could not resolve then to suddenly become responsible, apart from participation in this history. But, the problem Derrida brings up in *The Gift of Death* is that of the inherent secrecy of responsibility. Given that responsibility cannot be extricated from singularity, given that one's own singularity cannot be extricated from the singularity of the other, and given that coming to know this singularity must take place through economies of substitution which, as they become more general, efface those very singularities, one must, in order to be responsible, act and think in such a way as subverts those economies' inevitable tendencies towards erasing singularity(s). But where is one to find the resources for this maintenance of a secret? The possibility for this will have to lie within these economies themselves, within history, within language, within law, within society. But how, in turn, will this be possible? On the grounds of thinking these economies of substitution as inherently unstable, as being able to be played off against each other.

One can see one of these subversions in Derrida's recourse to the absolute other. By examining this concept, which is, we must remember, one which Derrida writes about in language, for us, to us, he already presupposes, if his discourse is not to simply fall into yet another form of irresponsibility, that these cracks in an economy which would induce irresponsibility exist and can be exploited. Let us begin with the effacement of singularity through its representation in language. In reflecting on Kierkegaard reflecting on Abraham, Derrida treats a liminal case that is at the same time

paradigmatic. Abraham is called by God to sacrifice his son Isaac; he cannot make sense of this demand, though he attempts to carry it out. Here is a paradoxical relationship with language, for what is precluded from Abraham is his ability to speak, to make sense of his duty or fate in the company of others who could respond to him or for him.

He cannot participate in the ethical, as Kierkegaard calls it, for “far from ensuring responsibility, the generality of ethics incites to irresponsibility. It impels me to speak, to reply to account for something, and thus to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept” (1995, p. 61). He cannot re-enter into discourse, make his responsibility rational by leading it before the others, the people who share his language, his hearth (or those who live in his tents, who share his *tabernaculum*), perhaps even his other intimate secrets of the heart (such as his wife), for to do so would destroy the singularity of the duty. Derrida traces this imposition of the necessity of a relationship that takes place in secrecy to the figure of the sacrifice. Even in the case of Abraham, the choice does not lie between a completely-other whom one would know as such, and others whom one knows as being only others, not the completely other. If it were, Abraham could justify himself to them, maintain the singularity of his relationship to God in an arrogance which would announce itself in language, saying, “I know I am right, that what I do is justified. It is you, who will mourn my son, who will be bereft, who will think me wrong, who are wrong.”

Mutuality infects even the relationship to the absolute other. If, as is true, no human other is completely other, and, in order to know the human other, one has to know them as not-other, as someone who can be known, because the very possibility of a relationship or experience of oneself with the other must be mediated by customs, words, institutions, then the call of God must itself be mediated as well. One cannot know for certain that the voice which one hears is the voice of God, for if one is absolutely convinced, one's hands are washed, God acts, and not the responsible subject. This introduces a danger into every secret, that one's sacrifice will be a murder:

But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility, a general and universal responsibility (what Kierkegaard calls the ethical order). I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others (1995, p. 68).

This is the consequence of finitude. Not only can one not know all of these other others, not only can one not know how one would approach them, or decide, prioritize between them, but one could not act in such a way as to recognize their singularity. The one technique, generalization, which promises to reach more others, makes the recognition of even the singularity of one impossible.

How then, is one to think out the conditions of one's responsibility? Derrida's response is characterized by a double debt:

Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude. 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 respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. I offer a gift of death (1995, p. 68).

This debt is double, because the recognition of the singularity of oneself and the other, perhaps the absolute other, must come through the non-recognition, the ignorance of the singularities of others, that is, to treat them as already dead, as not mattering except in so far as they enter into the economy of relations which is centered around the relations with the people who matter, those who live. One gains the words in which to carry on a secret discourse through taking what they make possible. In order to not have to justify oneself and the others whom one figures into one's responsibility, that is, not to allow one's responsibility to become a simple matter of ethics, one has to exclude these others, *without so much as a gesture towards them*, from the possibility of demanding justice for their contribution.

The question that can be asked then is whether this does not simply amount to a subversion of ethics, within the discourse of philosophy. Can one not then generate a discourse within society that would make this taking up of responsibility into a new ethic? Could not, according to this very logic, the exclusions inherent in any society be justified as making the "ethical life", the "good life" possible for at least some people? Derrida must answer no, for he has already been forced to maintain that moral consciousness, temporalized and historical, cannot be what it is to be by excusing itself as merely historical. There can be nothing merely historical, and moral

action cannot be simply action within the conscience of the *Zeitgeist*, because the possibility of having a history that would not have already come to its eschatological end is already tied to that of responsibility. “Is one responsible for what one says in an unintelligible language, in the language of the other? But, besides that, mustn’t responsibility always be expressed in a language that is foreign to what the community can already hear or understand only too well?” (1995, p. 74). In short, a language in which the opening of secrets would no longer be necessary nor difficult.

This raises a point at which the interpretation of Derrida can go in two ways. One can view this unintelligibility as a transcendental condition of the possibility of responsibility in a historical community; this would mean that what can be expressed in any community, what can be understood outside of the sphere of secrecy not only cannot be fully adequate to the demands of responsibility, but it is, so to speak, anti-responsibility. In this view, the ethical, that which the community can understand as responsibility, can *never* be responsible, and only the secrecy of the individual subject can ever restore to it any value of responsibility. The other possibility, the one that I continue to develop here (perhaps being too charitable to Derrida), stresses in a non-transcendental way the difficulty of the discourse of the secret; to take this interpretation is to refrain from a sort of individualistic pessimism (or even Gnosticism), and to maintain a possibility of responsibility that can come to discourse in certain communities, can even be incorporated into its language, and thereby precedes and offers possibility to the individual subject aiming at responsibility.

In the fourth chapter of *The Gift of Death*, a discussion of visibility and invisibility distinguishes between two kinds of invisibility. There is the invisible as that which is out of sight, but which could be brought into sight. Then, there is the invisible as that which is not visible, by its very structure. “[T]here is also absolute invisibility, the absolutely non-visible that refers to whatever falls outside the register of sight, namely the sonorous, the musical, the vocal or phonic (and hence the phonological or the discursive in the strict sense), but also the tactile and the odiferous” (1995, p. 90). Again, a disjunction of interpretation emerges in Derrida’s distinction. One could interpret this as a complete disjunction between that which could be visible, the possibly visible, and thus possibly referable, indicable, imitable, and thereby substitutable, and that which could never be visible, the impossibly visible. Or, one can reconnect the invisible proper to the possibilities of reference, indication, even imitation, in such a manner that these do not fall into the substitutable.

There is a reason for Derrida to make his distinction here; his book has been playing on Patochka’s distinction between the Platonic experience of responsibility as destroying secrecy, and what he takes to be the definitive Christian experience, in the *mysterium tremendum*, of the necessity of secrecy for responsibility. To write of the visible and the invisible neatly works on this axis. The secrecy corresponding to the Christian experience would then partake of being unable to be made manifest, to be opened up to the gaze of the public, the other in abstraction. To stop at this point is in effect to adopt the first interpretation.

But, we can turn Derrida's distinction along another axis, coming back again to the difference between the economic and the particular. For, it is not only by laying out a visible structure that one introduces an object, a concept, a person (under a name or a role) into the possibility of substitution that conceals the particularity. This takes place also through language, the phonological and the discursive. Here we can distinguish between that which can be fully or essentially brought into matrices of substitution, and that which cannot, that which, when one tries to do so, alters, becomes no longer itself, leaves a residue. That for Derrida these are limit-concepts, that nothing clearly and unequivocally fits these concepts, is indicated by his following comments about the possibility of the invisible coming into play in the realm of the visible. "But they can come into play only within these limits ascribed to the invisible: the invisible as concealed visible, the encrypted invisible or the non-visible as that which is other than visible. This is an immense problem that appears both classic and enigmatic yet every time as if new, and we can merely draw attention to it here" (1995, p. 90).

The secret, which we spoke of earlier as having a place, cannot have a place which would be absolutely inaccessible to the gaze of others; it may be difficult to access, it may be impossible, under certain circumstances, but not all, to decipher, because the location of the secret relationship which constitutes responsibility takes place within human language, human society. To understand this will carry us out of *The Gift of Death* and into *Aporias*. Derrida remarks, in a brief digression into the Melville story "Bartleby the Scrivener", without commenting on it later on, that irony allows the

creation of such a space within language, where secrecy becomes possible because the language is neither clear, nor clearly hides something.

The responses without response made by Bartleby are at the same time disconcerting, sinister and comical: superbly, subtly so. There is concentrated in them a sort of sublime irony. Speaking in order not to have to say anything or to say something other than what one thinks, speaking in such a way as to intrigue, disconcert, question, or have someone or something else speak (the law, the lawyer), means speaking ironically. Irony, in particular Socratic irony, consists of not saying anything, declaring that one doesn't have any knowledge of something, but doing that in order to interrogate, to have someone or something (the law, the lawyer) speak or think (1995, p. 76).

Irony allows the creation of this space of secrecy within an economy of substitution, an economy which, taken to its extreme limit, would be the impossibility of particularity, by exploiting an economy against itself; it is precisely because irony is one of the most economic uses of language, for with one expression, syntagm, line in a play, sentence in a letter, an undecidability is set up, an undecidability which leads off to possibilities which do not all share the same weight or clarity. There is, of course the literal meaning. In the Socratic irony, we, the audience, know already what Socrates knows, that his opponent does not know what they claim to know. But there are other possibilities. What does the speaker really think? What do they know? What remains hidden? Have they talked to somebody else before the exchange, a hidden interlocutor whose identity would be the key to their hidden meanings? Are they simply mocking, as it would be if the ironic were comic or satiric? Are they plotting something? And, how far are we to press? How deep should our hypotheses go?

Irony partakes of the structure of the secret, by the fact that it leads off, not into regions that are merely hidden, but because, once introduced, the depth of the lacking words, the missing affectivity, the coded message, becomes itself undecidable, and continues to retain a degree of undecidability even when, through practical decisions, the amphibolic structure has been brought to a decided state. As with the secret, all one has to do is suggest that there is something hidden, for there to remain something hidden. So too for the relationship of the ironic and the secret to singularity. How deeply does one have to penetrate into the singularity, how much time does one have to give to the other, in order to know the other? No absolute and final answer can be given to this, no answer that would satisfy everyone and structure these relationships, determine just how much one has to expend of oneself in order to call one's relationship an ethical or responsible one.

In *Aporias*, Derrida, while trying to answer the question of how one is to understand one's death or the death of the other, treats the problem of the creation, maintenance, and institution of boundaries through decisions which come to be characterized as aporetic. The discussion of this will lead us back into the theme of responsibility for and in one's singularity, but in continuity with this theme of irony, or the possibility of secrecy within language and institutions, let us consider a few remarks Derrida makes in the first section. Beginning with an amphibolic remark (*il va d'un certain pas*) which resists translation from the French, because it already has, within that language, several possible denotations, he writes that within a language itself, within what might appear to be a given and bounded economy (for instance if one were to

think of the language through the vantage of a dictionary), there is already the disruption of this economy into sub-economies:

This border of translation does not pass among various languages. It separates translation from itself, it separates translatability within one and the same language. A certain pragmatics then inscribes this border *in the very inside of the so-called French language*. Like any pragmatics, it takes into consideration gestural operations and contextual marks that are not all and thoroughly discursive. Such is the shibboleth effect: it always exceeds meaning and the pure discursivity of meaning.

Babelization does not therefore wait for the multiplicity of languages. The identity of a language can only affirm itself as identity to itself by opening itself to the hospitality of a difference from itself or of a difference with itself (1993, p. 10).

The shibboleth effect or the untranslatability within the same language does not mean simply, given the context of secrecy and irony which we have been discussing so far, that this is an option available within language, that one can speak mysteriously if one likes to. It takes place whether one wants it to or not, ladening every exchange with the possibility of misunderstanding, of a too-quick understanding, an understanding that, in light of other exchanges to be understood, one does not have the time to give in order to understand.

This differentiation of the economy of substitution into regions that remain heterogeneous to each other can take place along many lines. One example is provided by dialectialisation, as V. N. Volišinov notes, without naming the shibboleth effect as such:

Existence reflected in signs is not merely reflected but *refracted*. How is this refraction of existence in the ideological sign determined? By an intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community, i.e. *by the class struggle*.

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e. with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various classes will use the one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle.

This social *multiaccentuality* of the ideological sign is a very crucial aspect. By and large, it is thanks to this intersecting of accents that a sign maintains its vitality and dynamism and the capacity for further development....

The very same thing that makes the ideological sign vital and mutable is also, however, that which makes it a refracting and distorting medium. The ruling class strives to impart a supraclass, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgements which occurs in it, to make the sign uniaccental (1973, p. 23).

One could name off a litany of distinctions to which this “refraction” or “intersection” would apply; without having to reach very far, one can use already inscribed axes of difference: gender, ethnicity, regionality, the rapidly self-altering distinction between rural and urban. We could make historical distinctions between the use of a term fifty years prior and today, or we could notice a differentiation in a synchronic moment, that the young and the old mean different things by the same expression. The sign, the expression, the mark, the index, even the name of a person, is already caught up within this play of boundaries, a strange sort of fence-sitting where the sign takes part at an intersection and overlapping of economies.

We do not have to rely exclusively on these distinctions, which would separate the experiences of certain groups of people. There is also the fact of education, allowing us to ask if a person is traversed by these boundaries when they have learned to use an expression differently, when it comes to mean something different in their continuous lifetime. And, it is not a matter of words alone, either. These regions of splitting, irony, boundary-setting can take place at the level of the single word (ambiguity), or at the level of an entire exchange (amphiboly). Paralleling these rhetorical terms based on the Greek prefix *ambi-*, we could use another term applying to these regions at the level of disputes or arguments, *amphibetesis*, highly appropriate in this context because ambiguity and amphiboly come to prominence precisely because there is something up for dispute, for opposed interpretations at higher levels of complexity. These regions can multiply within discourses, playing off of the mutability of discourse, that one speaks a language which one does not possess in its entirety (although one can be set up as an “expert”), a language which belongs to others (but not entirely to them either), a language which can be forced out of one, in which one can make verbal slips, in which the flow of time itself can give or take meaning away.

Returning to the quote from *Aporias*, we notice that it is not the case that these borders, regions of untranslatability simply crop up within the language, unmotivated, without a history. “A certain pragmatics”, Derrida writes, because it is not enough to say that is just a matter of context, determining on which sides of the boundary one’s discourse oscillates, for this “context” would be determined by the same pragmatics, a pragmatics that, to remain as such, cannot be made univocal, completely discursive,

cannot be unfolded into yet another economy of complete substitution. For, here, it is clearly a matter of language being a human institution, meaning that the very disruption of the consistency and comprehensiveness of the language, far from being attributable to the flow of time, is so because the flow of time is also historical time, which is the incorporation of human singularities who inhabit the language into the language. The language contains these internal borders within, these folds that make irony or secrecy not only possible, but at times unavoidable, because as a human institution, it is a site, or space and time of sites, of decision. And, this decision is a decision in light of and structured by though irreducible to other's decisions.

Derrida's discussion of borders in *Aporias* carries the establishment and institution of these borders back to a locus of decision. The problem, in philosophy which attempts to be critical, to get at the real, to carry itself out toward and for the other as singularity, is that one can never think enough, one can never know enough, but as human, as a singularity, one has to commit oneself, trying to think this engagement out, never having the full resources required. The subject of death comes up as the guiding theme in that work, for the reason that death, as one tries to think it out, which one must do in order to take responsibility for one's life before death and the deaths of others which are the condition of one being able to live, is the aporetic *par excellence*.

Derrida makes a distinction early on in the work between a problem and an aporia, casting a problem as something that can be figured (*problema*), again raising the distinction between the public, the visible, and that which must remain secret to be

itself. Inherent in his distinction, his erection of this conceptual border, is a genetic perspective, for if the aporia can be cast as the decision which created borders, the problem, as “the projection of a project, of a task to accomplish, or as the protection created by a substitute, a prosthesis which we put forth in order to represent, replace, shelter, or dissimulate ourselves, or so as to hide something unavowable --like a shield” (1993, p. 11), must already presuppose boundaries. Still, within Derrida’s discourse, the problem cannot be simply traced back to the aporia, for the aporia is itself anchored as a simultaneity and singularity in time as a response to figured problems. The aporia is the other side of the problem, the side that it cannot show:

There, in sum, in this place of aporia, *there is no longer any problem*. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem which would constitute itself and that one could keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project, as a protective representative or a prosthetic substitute, as some kind of border still to cross or behind which to protect oneself (1993, p. 12).

To protect oneself from what?, one might ask at this point. For, this seems to be the essence of the problem of responsibility. If one still has something of one’s own to protect, a certain line of thought would conclude, one is not justified, one has irresponsibility to conceal from judgment. Yet, at the same time, if responsibility is only possible as the possibility of a singularity in response to other singularities, then it cannot be responsible except by maintaining a certain reserve of secrecy. The process, thinking itself out, reduplicates itself. Derrida finds another way to cast it, however, bringing us back to temporality:

What if the exoteric aporia therefore remained in a certain way irreducible, calling for an endurance, or shall we rather say an *experience* other than that consisting in opposing, from both sides of an indivisible line, another concept, a nonvulgar concept, to the so-called vulgar concept.

What would such an *experience* be? The word also means passage, traversal, endurance, and rite of passage, but can be a traversal without line and without indivisible border. Can it ever concern, precisely (in all the domains where the questions of decision and of responsibility that concern the border C ethics, law, politics, etc. C are posed), surpassing an aporia, crossing an oppositional line *or else* apprehending, enduring, and putting, in a different way, the experience of aporia to the test? (1993, p. 14-5)

The decisions made in the experience of aporia have to last, but this could mean several things. Decisions do last, they mark one's history, the history of those to come, even retroactively the structure of the past (which is to say that the historian too makes choices). They can become institutionalized, cultural edifices, they can even come to be preserved, in a certain way, by monuments erected by other decisions, for instance the Vietnam Memorial Wall, containing the names of the American soldiers who were sent off to fight, authorized both to kill and die, by networks of decisions. But there is another possibility for lasting.

One can remain responsible for the decision, by not casting it as simply the solution to a problem, by not allowing it to be figured, by remaining accountable for the decision, beyond the range of one's knowledge. This would be, to say the least, difficult to display as a structure. The event of the decision is past, it is part of one's past, no longer present. Yet, responsibility requires that it be thought, by the present, by those who live, even though it is not-there any longer, not- here. This returns again to the

economy of sacrifice, to the keeping of secrets, to the preservation of a decision in an economy that constantly tends, as an economy, to reduce the decision to a fact.

Derrida precludes bringing the process of living with the decision to an end, calling for it to remain “an interminable experience”(1993, p. 16). A short space later, he casts it into a discussion on conscience, in a passage which will require some explanation to recover it from a pessimism which would not act towards but rather paralyze responsibility:

How to justify the choice of *negative form (aporia)* to designate a duty that, through the impossible or the impracticable, nonetheless announces itself in an affirmative fashion? Because one must avoid good conscience at all costs. Not only good conscience as the grimace of an indulgent vulgarity, but quite simply the assured form of self-consciousness: good conscience as subjective certainty is incompatible with the absolute risk that every promise, every engagement, every engagement, and every responsible decision C if there are such C must run. To protect the decision or the responsibility by knowledge, by some theoretical assurance, or by the certainty of being right, of being on the side of science, of consciousness or of reason, is to transform this experience into the deployment of a program, into a technical application of a rule or a norm, into the subsumption of a determined “case”. All of these are conditions that must never be abandoned, of course, but that, as such, are only the guardrail of a responsibility to whose calling they remain radically heterogeneous (1993, p. 19).

This passage poses to the reader the requirement to ask, despite all of the qualifications, what it means to have a “good conscience”, a question which, as aporetic, will not be resolvable, but must be continually thought out. To avoid good conscience cannot mean, for instance, to throw one’s hands up in despair and to do, think, write, say, nothing, nor, even worse, to throw thought to the winds and simply

act in accordance with themes which the hidden structures of one's past and desires would dictate, on the grounds that "we are all hypocrites" or "responsibility is impossible". To lose oneself in mourning for the other or in lamenting the sacrifices of others would be precisely to lose the locus of responsibility.

Instead, we are called to act, to think, to write, to love, even to hate, as human beings, that is as singularities who have to live, think, and act within a history, language, and culture which is not of our own choice, but which we come to, at the same time maintaining, introducing, even institutionalizing humanity into those structures. This requires making countless decisions, which requires, at that moment of decision, that what Derrida calls "guardrails of responsibility" be affirmed as such. There must be a normativity, we have to allow not only for life, but actively act so as to continue it, even when this involves us in complicity and collaboration, in distant murder.

At the same time, in order to live with the aporiai, to sustain, to experience, to think them out, we must remain open to the possibility that our decisions have been wrong. Whether the decision be political, ethical, legal, or one drawn within and from a more intimate history, the decisions of the family, the home, even that of the individual engaged with reading texts, this involves thinking, not beyond the borders drawn up in decision, but also the contingency within the necessity of those divisions. Derrida casts this, in a refiguring of the absolute other in the *arrivant*, or the event.

One does not expect the event of whatever, of whoever comes, arrives and crosses the threshold C the immigrant, the guest, or the stranger. But if the new *arrivant* who arrives is new, one must expect C without waiting for him or her, without expecting it C that he does not simply cross a given threshold. Such an *arrivant* affects the very experience of the threshold, whose possibility he brings to light before one even knows that there has been an invitation, a call a nomination, or a promise. . . . He surprises the host C who is not yet a host or inviting power C enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, families and genealogies (1993, p. 33-4).

Again, paradoxically, the possibility of welcoming the *arrivant* depends on a double condition. For, indeed, there must be a place, a language, a locus in which to welcome the person. Yet, to welcome them is to look past the fact that a moment ago, they were not there, that his or her coming is contingent; yet now to welcome them, the necessity of one's distinctions must necessarily be called into question. Derrida casts the *arrivant* as vulnerable, as "disarmed as a newly born child", but to really think this event which does not fit the structure of events known up until then, to treat the other person as an absolute singularity, requires also a reciprocal vulnerability of the host.

At the same time, cast into time, unable to ever lay all history, culture, language aside, the event of this arrival must always be figured. Inevitably, the host must reinscribe the relationship between himself and the *arrivant* within structures, economies of substitution, if there is even to be the possibility of offering him or her a seat, even to exchange a glance. And indeed, this event can be one of the most common of our

lives. We too, everyone who has lived or who will live, were at one time a newborn child. All of one's contingent relationships, which make one who one is but which could have been different or even not have been, participate in this oscillation between the other and self as singularity and as names, roles, personas who have to share a common space which neither of them has absolutely created. Derrida himself reinscribes within his text the necessity of the welcomer to figure the relationship, by claiming that "the aporia can never simply be endured as such" (1993, p. 78), that is, as a requirement of thinking the aporia, one make it concrete; it cannot remain merely transcendental and we must not forget that "aporia" is itself a term in the language, so that it must be re-appropriated by one who would want to think it, else it slips into the role of another substitutable term inscribed within the economy of culture and language.

Near the end of *The Gift of Death*, it is even more clear, in the reflections on the problem of secrecy, that there can be a discourse on secrecy, and that this very discourse could give the impression that it has said all there is to be said, that one does not have to still think it out, that it has already been thought out for one, by the likes of a Kierkegaard or Derrida, and would just remain to be applied:

We share with Abraham what cannot be shared, a secret which cannot be shared, a secret which we know nothing about, neither him nor us. To share a secret is not to know or to reveal the secret, it is to share we know not what: nothing that can be determined. What is a secret that is a secret about nothing and a sharing that doesn't share anything?

Such is the secret truth of faith as absolute responsibility and as an absolute passion, the “highest passion” as Kierkegaard will say; it is a passion that, sworn to secrecy, cannot be transmitted from generation to generation. In this sense it has no history. This untranslatibility of the highest passion, the normal condition of a faith which is thus bound to secrecy, nevertheless dictates to us the following: we must always start over... Each generation must begin again to reinvolve itself in it without counting on the generation before. It thus describes the nonhistory of absolute beginnings which are repeated, and the very historicity that presupposes a tradition to be reinvented every step of the way, in this incessant repetition of the absolute beginning (1995, p. 80).

Once again we find ourselves involved in a paradoxical demand: each generation, each person, each reader, has to take up what their placement in history allows, and make it their own, by thinking it out. Yet this thought, this possibility of thinking is itself founded on a history, an ethos, a culture, a language. It has exemplars, paradigms, moments of decision and boundaries that the subject must “buy into” in order to have a thought that would be recognizable, which could recognize itself as such. This is the condition of a subject in time, a subject that has to endure the aporia by making it into a personal relationship, while at the same time laboring under the difficulty of preserving the secrecy with those structures of this responsibility, not letting it slip into a made and finished decision, of making one’s singularity into a totality

Indeed, the relationship of the subject to time, the fact that the subject which will try to understand what it means to be responsible, is cast into time, has to make decisions which continue that history and give it meaning, is already marked by a double problem of that relationship. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida begins with Shakespeare’s

play *Hamlet*, containing the immortal line “the time is out of joint”. The time is always out of joint, or else it would not have to be thought, and thought cannot bring it back into joint, although that is the driving motivation of thought and action, indeed the call of responsibility. On the one hand, the fact that a subject has a history does not mean that this history is to be cast aside, for responsibility, though not being reducible to something that can be given to the subject by that history, which the subject can accept in good conscience, has to be figured as a secret *within that history*. But, there is still also the fact that the other who one can be responsible for is not simply the other of one’s time, but also the others in history:

This spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority (which may be on the order of generation, of more than one generation) and asymmetry, according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion. Here anachrony makes the law (1994, p. 7).

Anachrony is the condition of the subject, of any subject, that they it place in a history, an economy of meanings in which the subject is nevertheless not simply the term which is substituted for his or her presence, actions, words, and expressions. The time is always out of joint, as the condition that there be time at all. The present cannot be the past or the future, nor can it be simply itself. And, it will never be any different, yet it will never the same. The degree to which and the conditions under which the time is out of joint will never be the same. And, yet, even though the present, by being thought, by being questioned, is revealed as requiring a decision, on

the basis of a relationship to alterity, to others who one realizes, must be approached, difficult as it is, as singularities, this present, the present of a subject who realizes that their present is anachronistic, that their singularity is already contaminated by irresponsibility, this present is the only place where there is still the possibility of redress: “no differance without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now” (1994, p. 31).

We return finally to the question, the reframing of a question, making it more concrete, the relationship of responsibility to philosophy. For, this question is asked, as the condition of asking it within a history, in the discourses of philosophy. How is one, given that one has already, by the time that the question of responsibility comes to be posed, not as a problem, but as consciousness of an aporia, entered into institutions, culture, and language precisely, albeit only in part, through the discourses of philosophy, going to work with that, what one has at hand, what one is given? I do not think that a satisfactory answer can be provided by Derrida, or within certain discourses which would set up boundaries within philosophy, whether they be the traditional ones which make a distinction between, for instance, logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, or philosophy of religion, or whether it be through a discourse which would call itself, in a form of self-assurance, “ethical philosophy”. Yet, the conditions for answering as oneself, as one for whom philosophy is part of one’s history and world, require one to find a way for philosophy to be a taking up of responsibility.

Perhaps the key to this is in considering Derrida's analyses not to be ultimately exposition of structures or a blueprint for responsibility, but rather an attempt to continue a discourse, to provoke it, to leave behind something which has to be appropriated taken up, as if by a new generation. This would, to use a grammatical distinction which has largely disappeared in our language, English, cast his discourse into the subjunctive rather than the indicative mood, to make it hortatory, concessive, a guess, a wish. To read it in this way would be to play upon the possibility in the English language of supposing that the subjunctive would still be there, of maintaining a secret discourse in the heart of that language which would not be set apart by any absolutely distinguishing marks.

This would return us to the necessity for a pragmatics in order to distinguish between these regions of untranslatability within a language, which would remain sub-economies within an economy of substitution, but which derive their possibility from that economy, the fact that this economy is not what it seems to be. This would be a realization of the preciousness and the radical contingency, the untimeliness of every moment of time, that so long as one is alive, within a history, the singularity of a human person is not only possible, but must be made actual if there is to be responsibility. Philosophy then would have to take place, would have to be *done*, within a pragmatics, the traces of which, the possibility of which, would lie partly with the relationships and institutions inhabited by human beings (e.g. the classroom, the conference, the family dinner table), but also partly within the structures which have already become part of history (e.g. texts, records, history).

I will end this paper on Derrida with several quotations from his *Politics of Friendship*. In that work, we find that inherent in the concept of friendship, there is the presupposition of some sort of commonality, some shared experience. The friend must be more than just another person, there must be some singularity to them, for they to be friends. They must not be exchangeable. Summarizing a selection from Aristotle, Derrida contrasts the good and bad friend:

Why are the mean, the malevolent, the ill-intentioned (*phauloi*) not, by definition, good friends? . . . Because they prefer things (*pragmata*) to friends. They stock friends among things, they class friends at best among possessions, among good things. In the same stroke, they thus inscribe their friends in a field of relativity and calculable hypotheses, in a hierarchical multiplicity of possessions and things. Aristotle affirms the opposite: in order to accomplish the antithesis of these mean people or bad friends, I assign (*prosnemo*) relations otherwise, and distribute the priorities differently. I include good things among friends or in view of friends (1997, p. 19).

The relationship between the friend and the economy of sacrifice is suggested by the range of meaning of the related and in this case synonymic word *chrema*, the “thing” that the friend is not to be mistaken for or measured against. For, in the singular, denoting a “thing”, it is the generic not simply of objects, as opposed to people, for there are no simple objects, but also contains in its meaning its history, its place in the economy of a culture, language and society. In the plural, denoting “money”, it is not simply the medium of exchange, but the principle of an economy within which one must inscribe borders between people, between the friend and the person who is not taken into account as a singularity.

But Derrida evokes the concept of another kind of friend, the friendship implicit in the goal of politics, to treat people as they should be treated, while at the same time not knowing them as one would seem to have to. “We are friends of an entirely different kind, inaccessible friends, friends who are alone because they are incomparable and without common measure, reciprocity or equality. Therefore without a horizon of recognition” (1997, p.35). This would be the friend one discovers in scholarship, in reading another who is not present, except in as much as they can be said to be present in their works. This is also the friendship evoked by and towards the other experienced at a distance, away from common life with oneself, at its extreme, the *revenant* we discussed earlier.

To write, to study, to teach philosophy then, taken within this discussion of secrecy, of responsibility, of singularity, carried out within a shared language or family of languages, at a time which is always the wrong time, partakes of these two figures of friendship which would be, both of them, attempts at thinking singularity. Let us end with a selection then, from the *Politics of Friendship*, which, like all the rest of Derrida’s texts, is forced to choose a figure for this, a figure requiring a pragmatics whose elaboration is one of the implicit goals of commenting on Derrida:

The friends of the *perhaps* are the friends of truth. But the friends of truth are not, by definition, *in* the truth; they are not installed there as in the padlocked security of a dogma and the stable reliability of an opinion. If there is some truth in the *perhaps*, it can only be that of which the friends are the friends. Only friends. The friends of truth are without *the* truth, even if friends cannot function without truth. The truth C that of the thinkers to come C it is impossible to *be it*, to *be there*, to *have it*; one must only be its friend (1997, p. 43).

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NOTES

¹ There is more than one way in which to characterize an “economy”. Here, what I refer to under that term is a range in which substitution can be, in principle carried out across the fields of relations, so that the non-identical can be made equivalent, and then substituted. The economy in this sense is, abstractly considered, the impossibility of absolute singularity.

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