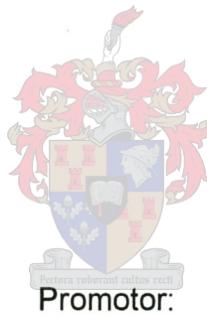


# POSTSTRUCTURAL ETHICS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A GENERAL ETHICAL THEORY

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## **DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously, in its entirety or in part, submitted it at any university for a degree.

## SUMMARY

This study is concerned with the possibility and characterisation of poststructural ethics and the ethics of general theories. It contains a review of selected readings on Modernity and provides a "snapshot" of an ethical system that is essentially rule based and privileges rationality. Some of the problems with such a system, such as inflexibility, tolerance based on superiority and force and the privileging of male gender is explored.

It proceeds by perusing some literature on postmodernity as an open ethical system in which values are free floating and lists of rules are constantly produced and disregarded in a dizzying ethical free for all in which "anything goes". No value is considered more worthwhile than personal survival.

As a starting point for reading Modernity and postmodernity together, Levinas introduces a radical perspective on ethics that can be read as a condemnation of postmodern morality. He relates an ethics in which the survival of the "other" is more important than the survival of the self. However, he does not ground the metaphysics of such a privilege in rationality or knowledge and hence does not turn it into an ethical rule, but rather, subtly shifts the responsibility for the other person to an ultimate responsibility for the Other as God.

This radical responsibility is rejected by deconstruction which does not reject either postmodernity or Modernity but is an attempt to think through the limits of rule-orientated rationality, free-play and mystical metaphysics to produce an ethical awareness that has a sensitivity for the complexity of context. Through the notion of "writing", the peculiarities it displays and the objections it attracts, Derrida seeks to establish a uniquely ethical writing that is both a stable manifestation of ethics and a dynamic engagement with those subject to it.

With these readings in the background the thesis attempts to provide a framework for poststructural ethics. It is an ethics based in the notion of friendship but does not ground itself in any guarantees. It re-evaluates rationality in terms of a sublime struggle for meaning and truth. This sublime struggle offers a unique perspective on political debates that strive towards responsible development for multicultural societies and also on a sociological approach to law and the ability to dispense justice without undue prejudice.

The main contention of the thesis is that although poststructuralism does not suppose a grounding metaphysics in either rationality or responsibility towards God it cannot be satisfied with the self-indulgent nihilism of an "anything goes" postmodernism. Thus, it depends on the notion of a "complex system" that "self-organises" and produces limits through spontaneous connections. Through the working of deconstruction complex systems can take on a more human manifestation as friendships flourish and decay through the interaction of faces.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie is gemoeid met die moontlikheid en karakterisering van poststrukturele etiek en die etiek van algemene teorie. Dit bevat 'n geselekteerde oorsig van Moderniteit en verskaf 'n "kiekie" van 'n etiese sisteem wat essentieel op reëls gebaseer is en rationaliteit privilegieer. Sommige probleme met so 'n sisteem, soos byvoorbeeld onbuigsaamheid, verdraagsaamheid gegrond in superioriteit, geweld en die privilegieering van manlikheid, word ondersoek.

Die studie sit voort deur sommige literatuur oor postmoderniteit as 'n oop etiese sisteem onder oë te neem. So 'n sisteem veronderstel vryvloeiende waardes en lyste van reëls wat gedurig geproduseer en geabandoneer word in 'n duisligwekkende etiese vryspel wat beskryf kan word as "anything goes". Geen waarde word hoër geag as persoonlike oorlewing nie.

As die beginpunt van 'n lesing wat Moderniteit en postmoderniteit met mekaar in verband bring verskaf Levinas 'n radikale perspektief op etiek wat verdoemend staan teenoor die moraliteit van postmoderniteit. Hy beskryf 'n etiek waarin die oorlewing van die "ander" meer belangrik geag word as die oorlewing van die self. Hy grond egter nie die metafisika van so 'n voorreg in rationaliteit of kennis nie, en lê dit dus nie neer as 'n etiese reël nie, maar verskuif eerder op subtile wyse verantwoordelikheid vir die ander persoon na 'n uiteindelijke verantwoordelikheid vir die Ander as God.

Laasgenoemde radikale verantwoordelikheid word deur dekonstruksie verwerp in 'n poging om postmoderniteit en Moderniteit saam te snoer en die limiete van reël-georiënteerde rationaliteit, vry-spel en mistiese metafisika deur te dink. Hierdeur word 'n etiese gewaarwording geproduseer wat sensitiviteit vir die kompleksiteite van konteks vertoon. Deur die nosie van "skryf", die eienaardighede en teenkating daaraan verbonde, is Derrida op soek na die neerlegging van 'n unieke etiese skryf wat beide 'n stabiele manifestasie van etiek is en 'n dinamiese betrokkenheid by die wat daaraan onderhewig staan.

Met hierdie leeswerk in die agtergrond poog die tesis om 'n raamwerk vir poststrukturele etiek daar te stel. Dit is 'n etiek wat as basis die nosie van vriendskap aanvaar sonder om enige waarborge uit te deel. Rationaliteit word gere-evalueer in terme van 'n sublime stryd vir betekenis en waarheid. Hierdie sublime stryd bring 'n unieke perspektief na politieke debatte wat volhoubare ontwikkeling in multikulturele samelewings ten doel het en vir 'n sosiologiese benadering tot die reg en regsvaardigheid.

Alhoewel poststrukturele etiek nie 'n metanarratief veronderstel, soos die etiek van Moderniteit, nie kan dit egter ook nie tevrede wees met die destabiliserende nihilisme van 'n "anything goes" postmodernisme nie. Poststrukturele etiek steun dus swaar op die idee van 'n "komplekse sisteem" wat self-organiseer en limiette stel deur middel van spontane konneksievorming. Deur die werking van dekonstruksie kan so 'n komplekse

sisteem ook in meer menslike terme verwoord word as vriendskappe wat groei en vergaan in die interaksie tussen "gesigte".

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Forgive me the violence just now, in the end I did not call you for that and we succeeded (true duelists) in listening to each other at length while avoiding murder, making the blows deviate, without going back down into hell, without going over the same confession (Derrida, 1987a: 45).

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 THE POSSIBILITY OF A GENERAL ETHICS

The aim of this thesis is to examine the possibility of poststructural ethics as an attempt for a general theory of ethics.

The assumption underlying the thesis is that poststructural ethics does not exclude the possibility of a general theory, although the nature of such a theory differs from the nature of what would be called "Modern" theories. Modern theories are generally understood to entail metanarratives. A general theory of poststructural ethics, on the other hand, would favour a *complex of narratives* in an essayistic style<sup>1</sup>.

The "strategy" followed in this thesis will be to draw rigorously on the philosophical aspects inscribed in *deconstruction*. This will entail a double process of discovering these inscribed philosophical aspects and concurrently, of applying them<sup>2</sup>. The "double gesture" (Caputo, 1997; 81) of simultaneous discovery (of opening up) and application (of acting decisively and disciplined), characteristic of deconstruction, will mark the movement towards a break through the oppressive and ultimately deterministic projects of Modernity and Structuralism.

Hence, the engagement with a poststructural ethics will allow for a tracing of the ambiguous<sup>3</sup> "oscillation" of a "playful" (Critchley, 1993; 42) double movement between uncertainty and certainty, or impossibility and possibility, in other words, for an exploration of nothing less than the possibility or impossibility of ethics itself.

## 1.2 THE LOVE OF WISDOM

In this study “poststructural” refers both to an attempt to discover some limits to what is ethically possible, and to the transgression of these limits in the name of a justice yet to come<sup>4</sup>.

I will argue that poststructural ethics is an attempt to get out of an impossible situation that is, the acceptance that ethics is impossible, by thinking and acting on this impossibility. I will use the word “morality” to designate that stubborn impulse, which drives the pursuit of ethics. The word “ethics” will signify a porous distinction between moral action, and reflection. The power of poststructural morality, so I will argue, resides in the vigorous and pre-rational refusal to accept the task of contemporary ethics as permanently overwhelming or non-sense<sup>5</sup>.

It must be stressed from the outset that this exploration of a deconstructive or poststructuralist ethics will differ substantially from the “history of ethics” considered as an atrophied *branch* in the trident shaped (Physics - Logic - Ethics) tree of philosophy. No lists of virtues will be deduced for the eager moralist to flaunt at will. It is exactly the structure and politics of lists, always and infinitely deconstructable, that is at stake.

The force of the poststructural argument is contained in the claim that “ethics is first philosophy” (Levinas, 1994a; 75). In other words, ethics is what makes philosophy possible. If we accept the impossibility of ethics it follows that the whole of philosophy will be in jeopardy. This position is in direct opposition with the history of philosophy in the West, also called “Platonism”, in which rationality and knowledge (Levinas, 1994a; 76) has always been regarded as the cornerstones of philo-sophia, “the love of wisdom”.

The theory put forward here is a tentative offering, or entering into a debate that has not been settled and shows few signs of ever doing so. The extensive literature and jargon that has already accumulated is daunting enough without mentioning the actual problems this body of work is supposed to address. I am respectfully aware of the precarious position held by someone who does not yet know the rules by which a specific game is played

and of the formidable language used by many of the theorists who are taking part in the debate. But, I will endeavor to translate the words and concepts into plain English. Since English is not my native tongue and many of the works cited have already been translated from other languages (French, German, etc.), my version can be expected to differ from the one intended by the original authors<sup>6</sup>.

This difference is not only an indication of the impossible task any translator faces when confronted with a text, but is also an indication of the ethical problematic to be confronted. Ethics based on a notion of mutual understanding, an understanding brought about by the generation and manipulation of concepts, the production of knowledge, expressed and received as words in language, will always be inadequate. This inadequacy of words to express their meaning fully, enhanced when they are incorporated (translated or wholly taken over) into the alien context of another language, illustrates the necessity for ethics to find its feet elsewhere.

But, finding one's feet in a world from which the ground seemed to have disappeared is no easy matter<sup>7</sup>. On the one hand, the attempt to engage a poststructural ethics has the implication of criticizing, to the point of destruction, some of the most cherished assumptions of Western metaphysics. The main target is rationality and specifically the form of Rationality brought to full extension during the Enlightenment. Rationality dominated by the "word" or *logos*<sup>8</sup> as the privileged place of meaning<sup>8</sup>. The carrier and natural inheritor of Rationality namely man (as distinct from animal) and more specifically the male gender's (as distinct from the female gender's) natural and sovereign right to claim superiority on the basis of greater Rational ability, is placed under fatal suspicion by poststructuralism.

On the other hand, the study also aims at placing poststructuralism in context as a strategy that attempts to address the ethical challenges of postmodernity, most notably the postmodern notion that "anything goes" (Cilliers, 1995; 127). There are many objections to using the term postmodernity and little agreement can be reached between commentators about what postmodernity, or *postmodernism*, is or that it even exists (Sarup,

1993; 129). Use of the term here, however, provides a vital theoretical tool for thinking about the contemporary environment. Furthermore, it designates Modernity as a precursor providing a much-needed historical distance that can be effectively employed to frame the excesses of Enlightenment Rationality as the pinnacle of what is considered Modern.

### **1.3 A PECULIAR REALITY**

One of the reasons for the ephemeral existence of postmodernity is the peculiar quality of reality that pervades it. Postmodern reality seems to exist only as the product of information technologies. It is easily manipulated by a powerful media concealing its own agendas and the interests of its powerful owners amongst outrageous yet infinitely desirable images of instant wealth, leisure, luxury and, above all, Truth. Postmodern reality holds out the promise of total access to everything, however fragmented the resulting picture, with nothing hidden from view<sup>9</sup>.

Such a total fragmentation of reality has the effect of annihilating specific identities of individuals and groups while at the same time appropriating these identities and offering them for sale as “lifestyles”. Baudrillard (1993b; 133) describes the postmodern individual as follows: “It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparence of the world [ ] traverse him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being ... He is ... a switching centre for all the networks of influence”.

The moral impulse to interact ethically is numbed by the oversupply of possible choices. Different identities either react by competing mercilessly to establish the authority of their interpretations (Bauman, 1994a; xx) or sink into a catatonic indifference towards ethics. There seems to be no middle ground between fanatically clinging to one’s own identity or drifting on the current of an “anything goes” relativism. As Bauman (1995; 66) has it: “The Scylla of indifference, of the responsibility abandoned, and the Charybdis of the autonomy stolen, of the responsibility degenerating into coercion - seem too close to each other for safe sailing”.

To make postmodern reality seem even bleaker politics also disappears into the promise of total transparency. Postmodern politics has no specific domain; everything is “politicized”. No-thing can “avoid involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses” (Hutcheon, 1991; 3). No strategy seems to be effective against the co-opting powers of the total gaze of politicised information technologies. Able to neutralize even the most virile opposition into the bland cynicism of a *been there, seen that* culture, it regards everything as “so very five minutes ago!”. Only *political irony* still fascinates the postmodern “watcher”.

Into this context, I will argue poststructuralism inserts a refreshing new approach that not only re-enchants the world, but also encounters and re-vitalizes the encounter through an ethical discovery of otherness. Poststructuralism is by no means an a-historical endeavour. History is an integral part of the re-enchantment of a world that is constantly driven to amnesia by new developments. Poststructuralism, however, does not regard history as a master key that can open all the doors of perception and much less a single story with absolute truth value.

#### **1.4 THE WISDOM OF LOVE**

The articulation of a poststructural investigation opens onto the radical ethics proposed by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas’ ethics finds a unique trajectory between the Ancient Greek world of philosophy and the Jewish tradition of the Old Testament. He seeks to bring about awareness of a pre-rational reality that is already immediately ethical, which is the origin of all ethics. This is best explained by the inversion of philosophy, “the love of wisdom” to express something much older, “the wisdom of love” (Levinas, 1981; 161).

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas (1994b; 68) articulates an ethics able to accommodate the excessive claims of individuality. He writes that “[t]he face to face both announces a society, and permits the maintaining of a separated I”. He describes the notion of *il y a* as merely the “there is” of Being. Being’s unbearable solitude, the unhappy, undifferentiated horror of merely “being

there,” inevitably opens onto a confrontation with the other as an “I” or ego that has to take into account the radical exteriority of the other as Other.

According to Levinas exteriority manifests in the appearance of a “face”. The proximity of the individual face that transcends appearance is the mark of a place that is infinite and precedes all claims to grasp it as knowledge or to understand it. The account or regard to be paid to this exteriority as “face” is like the answer to a call that places the ego’s existence into question.

Hence, for Levinas, the question of ethics *par excellence* is not the question of an ego asking itself, “to be or not to be?” but, one that, accepting that it already exists, is obliged to ask, “how is my being justified?” (Levinas; 1994a; 86). As Lyotard (1989; 299) puts it: “. . . what is at stake in the discourse of Levinas is the power to speak of obligation without ever transforming it into a norm”.

The fault line cutting through Levinasian ethics, allowing a certain correction of this otherwise wholly acceptable thought, is the blatant attempt to introduce an all-encompassing metaphysics of the “absolutely Other” itself “understood as the alterity of the Other and of the Most-High” (Levinas, 1994b; 34). This, after claiming to have destabilized every form of metaphysics through the “*idea of infinity* . . . which is the common source of activity and theory” (Levinas, 1994b; 27).

In the attempt to introduce a metaphysics of the Other, Levinas falls into the age old philosophical and Old Testament trap of privileging the male gender. He does so to the extent that it is not clear whether or not the category “feminine” could be articulated as individual “woman” and hence as having a face. As Luce Irigaray (1991; 114) explains: “To go beyond the face of metaphysics would mean precisely to leave the woman her face, and even to assist her to discover it and to keep it”.

This implicates Levinasian ethics in a certain kind of violence, identified by the philosopher Jacques Derrida<sup>10</sup>, that cannot be easily escaped. Not only is it the violence of the speaking (rational) male subject answering the call to

responsibility but also the violence of a metaphysics, a totality, attempting to establish itself as a no-name-brand religion.

Levinas attempts to foresee and respond to these objections, which he regards as merely “philosophical”, in a discussion of “scepticism” and the concepts of “said” and “saying”. Thus, the language of *Otherwise than Being* (Levinas, 1981) “is the performative enactment of ethical writing” provoking a disturbance within philosophical discourse that “performs a kind of spiralling movement . . . between the inevitable language of the ontological Said and the attempt to unsay that Said in order to locate the ethical saying within it” (Critchley, 1993; 8).

The attempt to escape the violence inherent to his philosophy brings Levinas’s ethics into a strange, and for Levinas a difficult, complicity with art. The style of writing he develops to express the ambiguity of love’s wisdom draws strongly on the repetitive character of poetry and musical composition. He also refers regularly to the novels of great Russian writers such as Dostoyevski and Tolstoy to illustrate his point.

The strangeness of this strategy lies in the fact that Levinas holds a very traditional philosophical and Biblical view of art as reality’s shadow (Levinas, 1994a; 129 -143). But, unlike Plato, for example, Levinas seems to regard art as a necessary evil that opens up the possibility of access to the “ethical infinitude” of the other (Hand, 1996; 66).

## **1.5 THE COMPLICITY OF ETHICS WITH ART**

This complicity of ethics with art steers the thesis into the vicinity of Jacques Derrida’s rigorous philosophical development of *deconstruction* as an “exorbitant method” (Derrida; 1976, 162) that constitutes thinking (consciousness) as the “scene of writing” (Derrida, 1976; xxxix). Deconstruction is a thorough investigation of Western metaphysics and the privilege it accords to rationality.

Tearing down and building on the structural theory of language developed by Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida proposes a theory of language in which wor(l)ds do not refer to anything other than different wor(l)ds. These “words”

are held together by a playful referentiality in a network or “text”. Derrida makes the radical claim, often misunderstood by both his defenders and detractors, that “there is nothing outside the text” (Derrida, 1976; 158).

Much of the misunderstanding, I will argue, stems from a misinterpretation of the function that “word” and “text” retains in deconstruction. Deconstructive “writing” operates as a de-organizing of privileged, or conventional, static semantic forms of knowledge and meaning in a performance of “parergonality”, also called “framing”. The movement of “writing” contextualises semantic meaning within a “double-bind”, simultaneously affirming and placing under “erasure” the privilege of semantic meaning by introducing the writer, creator of meaning, to the reader, the interpreter of meaning.

As an example of how deconstruction proceeds Derrida (1993b; 223) turns to an example, the “mystic writing pad” used by Sigmund Freud to illustrate the way in which memory comes to be inscribed on the brain. This “writing pad” is a child’s toy, still available today, with which it is possible to write legibly, using a stick or other stylus, onto a clear film covering a dark wax tablet underneath. To remove the writing from the film the latter needs only to be lifted away from the wax. “Traces” of the writing is left in the soft body of the wax, however, and can influence the legibility of subsequent writing on the film.

In this thesis I will not engage with Freud to any substantial degree. His thought deserves an essay that deals with psychoanalysis exclusively, a responsibility that I cannot fulfill in the space allowed here. In other words, Derrida, thoroughly informed by Freud, engages in the exorbitant method of deconstruction to illustrate the formation of memory as the generation of meaning over a period of time by focusing on the play of “différance” in a “text”.

Derrida’s strategy consists in stimulating “différance”, spelt with an “a”, in the reading of certain philosophical and literary texts. By discovering the unique “binary oppositions” of the conceptual structures belonging to each text, it is

possible to establish the identity of the privileged term in each binary pair. The privileged term is always used in a “positive” form against the “negative” of its relative. Derrida produces a reading that “mimics” the innate “logic” established in each text by these privileged terms. In the process the privileged term is reversed taking the place of its marginalised partner. The marginal term, now operating in the privileged place, allows for a different reading that displaces the dominant or privileged reading.

“Différance” is inherent to any text and makes reading possible. It carries both the meaning of “to differ”, to take an opposing position and also “to defer”, to place elsewhere in space and time (Culler, 1994; 97). Hence, it has the third active feature of opening up a *space* for the new text that is inevitably generated through reading (Cilliers, 1998a; 45).

This place that is opened up, I will argue, is the position of the “subject”. The writing that takes place there, and the signature placed there, is not an unproblematic identity (Critchley, 1996; 22) that can claim an absolute presence as “being here where I sign and nowhere else”. Rather, the place of the “subject” is itself subject to deconstruction.

## **1.6 AN ETHICS TO COME**

By tracing the strategy of deconstruction through the work of Drucilla Cornell (1992), Linda Hutcheon (1995) and Paul Cilliers (1998), I hope to show the value of Levinas and Derrida’s poststructuralist approach, engaging both law and politics through ethics seen as a complex system. In doing so, I hope to address any claim that poststructuralism is unable to contribute meaningfully to the establishment and protection of a just democracy because it is merely the aesthetic indulgence of an elitist few who enjoy reading in luxury.

Poststructuralism, I will conclude to the contrary, can never indulge in triumphalist rhetoric and self-satisfied backslapping. It can never be satisfied with justice dispensed or democracy claimed.

In South Africa, where our fledgling democracy still struggles to find its way towards a practical notion of justice for all its citizens, regardless of cultural heritage, race or gender, it is necessary to be clear about ethical values.

This does not mean, however, that the desired clarity on values must take the form of a blinding epiphany presenting the one and only true path of ethics at last. The value of this study lies not in deducing hard and fast rules to be followed, but rather in laying bare or clearing a space for the acceptance of the difficult road each individual has to travel, often alone, towards ethics, justice and doing right. This acceptance is beset on all sides with the temptation to abandon the overwhelming weight of this task.

## **1.7 SUMMARY**

Chapter Two contains a review of selected readings on Modernity and provides a “snapshot” of an ethical system that is essentially rule based and privileges rationality. Some of the problems with such a system, such as inflexibility, tolerance based on superiority and force and the privileging of male gender is explored.

Chapter Three peruses some literature on postmodernism and explores the notion of an open ethical system in which values are free floating and lists of rules are constantly produced and disregarded in a dizzying ethical free for all in which “anything goes”. No value is considered more worthwhile than personal survival.

In Chapter Four Levinas is used to introduce a radical perspective on ethics that can be read as a condemnation of postmodern morality. He relates an ethics in which the survival of the “other” is more important than the survival of the self. However, he does not ground the metaphysics of such a privilege in rationality or knowledge and hence does not turn it into an ethical rule, but rather, subtly shifts the responsibility for the other person to an ultimate responsibility for the Other as God.

This radical responsibility is rejected by deconstruction and is explored in Chapter Five. Derrida’s deconstructive turn is an attempt to think through the limits of rule-orientated rationality, free-play and mystical metaphysics to produce an ethical awareness that has a sensitivity for the complexity of context. Through the notion of “writing”, the peculiarities it displays and the objections it attracts, Derrida seeks to establish a uniquely ethical writing that

is both a stable manifestation of ethics and a dynamic engagement with those subject to it.

Chapter Six sets out to establish a framework for poststructural ethics. It is an ethics based in the notion of friendship but does not ground itself in any guarantees. It re-evaluates rationality in terms of a sublime struggle for meaning and truth. This sublime struggle offers a unique perspective on political debates that strive towards responsible development for multicultural societies and also on a sociological approach to law and the ability to dispense justice without undue prejudice.

Poststructuralism does not suppose a grounding metaphysics in either rationality or responsibility towards God. However, its moral ambition cannot be satisfied by a self-indulgent nihilism or “anything goes” postmodernism. Thus, it depends on the notion of a “complex system” that “self-organises” and produces limits through spontaneous connections. Through the working of deconstruction complex systems and the apparent arbitrariness of self-organisation takes on a more human manifestation as a politics of friendship that has at its heart the notion of ethics.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In order to develop a poststructural ethics I will draw on the connectionist approach to complex systems developed by Paul Cilliers (1998) in his book *Complexity and Postmodernism*. As he (Cilliers, 1998; 141) explains:

It [a connectionist approach] focuses on the behaviour of collections of many interconnected, similar elements that do not have (atomistic) significance by themselves, but that obtain significance through a complex set of non-linear, asymmetrical relationships in a network. Important characteristics of these networks include distributedness, self-organisation and the operation on local information without central control.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida (1976; 158) explains the double movement of deconstruction in *of Grammatology*:

[The] moment of doubling commentary [based on a close or faithful reading] should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. To recognise and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this

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recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorise itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading.

<sup>3</sup>Simon Critchley (1993; 42) calls this ambiguity in deconstruction a “*philosophy of hesitation*” and “the ‘experience’ of undecideability”.

<sup>4</sup>Drucilla Cornell writes in *Philosophy of the Limit* (Cornell, 1992; 110 - 111): “The Good is beyond any of its current justifications. As a result, when we appeal ‘back’ to what has been established, we must *look forward* to what ‘might be’ “.

<sup>5</sup>As Zygmunt Bauman (1995; 7) explains: “What this new condition [(heralded by) the demise of the allegedly unified and ostensibly unique ethical code] does spell out, however, is a prospect of greater awareness of the moral character of choices; of our facing our choices more consciously and seeing their moral contents more clearly”.

<sup>6</sup>In this matter I have turned for solace to the words of Walter Benjamin as regards *The Task of the Translator* (Benjamin, 1992b; 71 - 72): “It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original”.

<sup>7</sup>“The awesome truth about morality is that *it is not inevitable, not determined* in any sense which would be considered valid from the ontological perspective; it does not have ‘foundations’ in the sense that perspective would recognise” (Bauman, 1994b; 75).

<sup>8</sup>“Privileging the philosophy of Plato is what Derrida means by ‘logocentrism,’ making the logic of the argument, the demonstrably true or false claims, the centre, while sending everything else off to the periphery as mere rhetoric or ornamentation, letting the logic lead the letter” (Caputo; 1997; 83).

<sup>9</sup>Jean Baudrillard (1993b; 130) notices that the transparency of postmodern reality has a paradoxical effect that he calls “disappearance” or “obscenity”. As he writes “Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparence and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication”.

<sup>10</sup>Derrida asks in the final footnote to *Violence and Metaphysics* (Derrida, 1993f; 320-321):

On this subject, let us note in passing that *Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymetry so far that it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. Its philosophical subject is man . . . Is not this principled impossibility for a book to have been written by a woman unique in the history of metaphysical writing?

## CHAPTER TWO

### MODERNITY

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Initially at least, the word modern may indicate any historical event that has changed conventional perceptions and beliefs. If this change has also led people to regard themselves as better off than before, the term modern gains connotations of *progressiveness*. The lasting effects of such a change give rise to a *contemporary modernity*. Contemporary, because throughout history examples of modernities can be identified. The discovery of how to harness fire, the replacement of human sacrifice by animal sacrifice, the invention of the wheel, the invention of writing, serve as examples. The French Modernist writer Baudelaire, using the example of portraiture, instructs the would-be student of modernity thus:

Every old master has had his own modernity; the great majority of fine portraits that have come down to us from former generations are clothed in the costume of their own period. They are perfectly harmonious, because everything - from costume and coiffure down to gesture, glance and smile (for each age has a deportment, a glance and a smile of its own) - everything, I say, combines to form a completely viable whole. This transitory, *fugitive element* [my emphasis], whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispersed with. By neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty... (Baudelaire, 1996: 142).

From these words, I deduce, at the outset of this study on ethics, that any new argument about ethics must take into account the *fugitive element* that allows a modernity not only to be rejuvenated, but also to remain relevant. If this can be accepted, a further implication can be drawn namely, that no

modernity can claim to be the final or ultimate Modernity<sup>1</sup> even if, initially, it does so in order to establish itself.

Today a battle rages over what exactly modernity has come to mean for people living at the close of the twentieth century. We regard ourselves mostly as Modern because of what we see as a civilization that has developed superior *technology*.

The use and/or abuse of our technology challenges the ethical principles of our civilization on a daily basis. Often, and I will argue mistakenly, we regard technology and the promises and problems it brings as an effect of the last *one hundred* years. I believe, but will not explicitly argue the point, that the psychological force of the birth of photography, mechanical flight, the motorcar, anti-biotics, the atom bomb and, more recently, the personal and network computer, has the ongoing effect of erasing from memory all the technologies of previous modernities and their possible significance for evaluating our own age. Hence, scholars may disagree about the exact inception date of our modern times, but my view is supported by Toulmin (1990; 6) when he argues that “whatever else is or is not clear, the *Modernity* around which controversy rages today clearly started long before 1890”.

## 2.2 THE RECEIVED VIEW OF MODERNITY

Toulmin (1990; 13) identifies what he calls the *standard account* or *received view* of Modernity. This account or view brackets the general belief system, which the late twentieth century has come to accept as the *truth*<sup>2</sup> about Modernity and which sets the scene for most of the debate about the so-called “end of Modernity”<sup>3</sup>. Hence, the standard account or received view is not only a “story” *about* Modernity but is itself a Modern story. As we shall see, it tells the story *of* Modernity by seeking to *temporalize* it, in other words, by identifying a single notion and placing it somewhere on a calendar without due consideration of the *timing* of the events. Thus, it tells the story of *when* and *what* but considers the *how* and *why* as intolerable or self-evident. The notions to be considered as possible keys in the story about Modernity, says Toulmin (1990: 7-8), are:

- the political claims of the modern nation-state,
- the end of Modernity linked with the eclipse of national sovereignty, and
- the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of industry.

On the one hand, the notion of the nation-state finds its roots in the seventeenth century. In this view, “the [M]odern era began with the creation of separate, independent sovereign states, each of them organized around a particular nation, with its own language and culture, maintaining a *government* that was legitimated as expressing the national will, or national traditions, or interests” (Toulmin, 1990; 7). If we accept that this is the start of a Modernity under which we still live today, the greatest threat to the continued existence of this Modern world order is *globalization*. The rise of multinational corporations and powerful wealthy individuals that are able to operate with efficiency, and often with impunity, anywhere in the world is creating great difficulty for the notion of a representative government ruling a country with well-defined and controlled borders.

On the other hand, the rise of industry does not take us back in time all that far, and if this is used as the benchmark for the Modern age, its beginning lies on either side of the year 1800 (Toulmin, 1990; 8). Modernity, from this point of view, has been battling, often against the power of the state, to establish itself for at least 150 years. The opponents of industrial society focused on the mechanistic “inhumanity” of Newtonian Science that regards the universe as a gigantic clock whose parts needed to be determined and made to run smoothly. One of the main opponents to the *deterministic* view was William Blake in England<sup>4</sup>. With the invention of the atomic bomb and the following Cold War this anti-determinist view again grew popular during the 1960’s and 1970’s (Toulmin, 1990; 7), forming the basis for many counter cultures, such as the “beat” and “hippie” sub-cultures, spreading from America, to seek alternative ways of living and experiencing. More recently “liberal” and “Luddite”<sup>5</sup> critiques of the so-called “post-industrial” and “information” society has continued this opposition.

Toulmin admits that deciding on how to date and which notion to use for constituting Modernity leaves the verdict far from unanimous and brings to bear numerous objections. But, for most compilers of chronology the starting point eventually reaches back to the early decades of the “seventeenth century” (Toulmin, 1990; 8) and the rise of the nation state. The specific significance of this period resides in the philosophical ingenuity of Rene Descartes’ *Meditations* and *Discourse on Method* (Descartes, 1960), and the discoveries of Galileo, regarded as the founder of Modern physics (Toulmin, 1990; 8).

According to standard account, the intellectual originality of both these thinkers makes the 1630s the most plausible starting date for Modernity. The originality of this time lay in the fact that scientific inquiries became “rational” thanks to Galileo’s astronomy and mechanics, Descartes’ logic and epistemology (Toulmin, 1990; 9) and Thomas Hobbes’ political philosophy. The conception of “rationality” that was established in the seventeenth century promised intellectual certainty and harmony (Toulmin, 1990; 9). This rational approach to the world of things and forces provided the engine that generated an unsurpassed optimism about the ability of science and industry to set human beings free from the bonds of ignorance. The feeling of the time was that:

[e]verything that is possible is permitted. In this way the experience of Nature and Society would gradually get the better of any exteriority. A miracle of modern Western freedom unhindered by any memory or remorse, and opening onto a ‘glittering future’ where everything can be rectified. Only by death is this freedom thwarted (Levinas, 1994a; 78).

So, the received view will have us believe that no significant influences shaped the “Modern” commitment to rationality in human affairs other than the intellectual changes in the mid-seventeenth century. Toulmin argues that this is probably the result of a reluctance amongst scholars to strike a balance between the *costs* and *benefits* of the new *optimism*. There seems to be agreement that the self-styled “new philosophers” of the seventeenth

century, with Descartes as favoured example, were responsible for new ways of thinking about nature and society. They committed the modern world to thinking about nature in a new, “scientific” way, and to the use of “rational” methods to deal with the problems of human life and society (Toulmin, 1990; 9).

What is rarely questioned, Toulmin maintains, is the *timing* of these *significant* changes. Why did these changes occur at this specific time and not sooner or later? The chronology is usually marked off between the prime of Galileo in the early 1600s, and the appearance of Newton’s *Principia* in 1687. But, the fact that most earlier historians agreed with each other, it seems, has been the result of their borrowing from each other’s narratives instead of returning to the original texts (Toulmin, 1990; 13).

Hence, for much of the twentieth century, people in Western Europe and North America have generally accepted two statements about the origins of Modernity:

- that the Modern age began in the seventeenth century, and
- that the transition from medieval to Modern modes of thought and practice rested on the overnight adoption of rational methods in all serious fields of intellectual inquiry (Toulmin, 1990; 13).

### **2.3 CHALLENGES TO THE RECEIVED VIEW**

If we are to understand something of the late twentieth century, both these assumptions should be challenged. The traditional picture of a medieval world dominated by theology that suddenly yields to the Modern world, which is committed to rationality, must be reconsidered (Toulmin, 1990; 12). When the pre-occupations of “Modern philosophers” is contrasted with earlier intellectual endeavour, it becomes apparent that the changes were neither sudden, nor devoid of contact with what it tried to “leave behind”. Rather, transformation was subtle and insidious.

#### **2.3.1 The Seventeenth Century**

One aim of seventeenth century philosophers was to frame all their questions in terms that rendered them *independent of context* (Toulmin, 1990; 21). So, instead of expanding the scope for rational or reasonable debate, seventeenth century scientists actually *narrowed* it. This development contrasts sharply with the view held by Aristotle for instance.

The latter considered rationality to include both Theory and Practice in an ongoing search for *eudaimonia*<sup>6</sup> and *phronesis*<sup>7</sup>. For him rationality had to devise different strategies for inquiry in each different field of study. He recognized that the kinds of argument relevant to different issues depend on the nature of those issues, and differ in degrees of formality or certainty so that what is considered “reasonable” in law or ethics, for instance, is judged in different terms from what is “logical” in geometrical theory.

Following Plato instead, seventeenth-century philosophers and scientists limited “rationality” to theoretical arguments only that achieve a quasi-geometrical, logical, certainty or *necessity*. Instead of pursuing a concern with “reasonable” procedures *of all kinds*, Descartes and his successors hoped eventually to bring all subjects, including ethics and law, into the ambit of some formal “scientific” theory with universal truth value. As a result, being impressed only by formally valid demonstrations, they ended by changing the very language of Reason - notably, key words like “reason”, “rational”, and “rationality” - in subtle but influential ways (Toulmin, 1990; 20). They could achieve this by removing any concern for the influence that the practical implication, or effect, of the theory might have held for the theory itself. Hence, whatever was unknown was forced to adhere to a theory that would make its features explicit by forcing it to conform to pre-established parameters held by the theory to be unchanging. In this way everything was considered knowable.

### **2.3.2 Feminist “Insight”**

Luce Irigaray (1996) argues, that the “unknowable”<sup>8</sup> is systematically *repressed* and dominated by a myth of formal rationality that reduces everything to what is seen in the clear light of understanding. For her, what is

seen is identified with the “phallus”<sup>9</sup>, which she equates with the penis. To contrast her idea of a more “fluid” (Gallop, 1986; 127) thinking, she uses female genitalia to demonstrate<sup>10</sup> the site of the “irrational” or “unknowable”. She (Irigary, 1996; 462) writes:

Woman’s desire most likely does not speak the same language as man’s desire, and it probably has been covered over by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks. In this logic, the prevalence of the gaze, discrimination of form, and individualization of form is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Woman finds pleasure more in touch than in sight and her entrance into a dominant scopic economy signifies, once again, her relegation to passivity: she will be the beautiful object. Although her body is in this way eroticized and solicited to a double movement between exhibition and pudic<sup>11</sup> retreat in order to excite the instincts of the “subject”, her sex organ represents the horror of having nothing to see. In this system of representation and desire, the vagina is a flaw, a hole in the representation’s scopophilic objective.

Hence, according to Irigary, this logic of the gaze cannot tolerate what it cannot see. Everything in nature that remains hidden is regarded as in some way flawed and lacking the light and spirit of understanding. As Susan Bordo (1996; 643) writes in *The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought*: “By Descartes’ brilliant stroke, nature (*res extensa*) became *defined* by its lack of affiliation with divinity, with spirit. All that which is God-like or spiritual - freedom, will, and sentience - belong entirely and exclusively to *res cogitans*<sup>12</sup>. All else - the earth, the heavens, animals, the human body - is merely mechanically interacting matter”. In this, she shows that Man’s Reason has literally become the measure of all things. For Descartes this meant that he had stopped speaking like a child, and if we follow Bordo, had become a god. To be a reasonable adult, a reasonable god, means that one has to be a *reasonable man*. In this regard Bordo (1996; 639) maintains that:

... childhood was commonly associated, as Descartes associated it, with sensuality, animality, and the mystifications of the body. For Descartes, happily, the state of childhood *can* be revoked, through a deliberate and methodical reversal of all the prejudices acquired within it, and a beginning anew with reason as one's only parent. This is exactly what the *Meditations* attempts to do. The mind is emptied of all that it has been taught. The body of infancy, preoccupied with appetite and sense-experience, is transcended. The clear and distinct ideas are released from their obscuring material prison. The end-result is a philosophical reconstruction to secure all the boundaries that, in childhood (and at the start of the *Meditations*), are so fragile: those between the "inner" and the "outer", between the subjective and the objective, between self and world.

This insight provided by feminist critique sets the scene for the problems faced in confronting the Modern project from an ethical vantage point. The change brought about in the language of reason providing the opportunity for a divine masculine science of rationality to take root is so subtle that no amount of clear-minded analysis will ever be able to provide a full inventory of the slippages that make up the dynamic of this change.

### **2.3.3 Modern Optimism**

The change in the language of reason facilitated the view that the political, economic, social, and intellectual condition of Western Europe radically *improved* from 1600 in ways that encouraged the development of new political institutions (Toulmin, 1990; 16). For the European, Modernity has unquestionably been a "Good Thing". To be able to throw off the debilitating irrationality of "feminine" and "childlike" obsessions with the body, with the grand gesture of a self-confident rationality, which would allow nothing to thwart its plans, has been very appealing in the light of European history. For the sake of the rest of humanity, the Moderns hoped - and actively laboured at the Imperial civilizing duty - that the whole world would soon become as "Modern" as themselves (Toulmin, 1990; 13).

## 2.4 SHIFTING THE PREOCCUPATION WITH THE RECEIVED VIEW

### 2.4.1 Doubling the Origin

The standard account is, in many respects, still correct. As Toulmin (1990; 17) argues, however, it needs to be drawn away from the preoccupation with the beginning of the seventeenth century in order to question more directly why, at this time, it became so lucrative to be born again in one's own rational male image. Hence, when we compare the spirit of seventeenth century thinkers and the content of their ideas with the emancipatory ideas of sixteenth century writers, we find seventeenth century innovations in science and philosophy beginning to look less like revolutionary advances, and more like a "defensive counter-revolution".

The received view has always carried inside of it the subtext of prosperity and leisure, in a word, *progress*. The notion that Modernity is a "Good Thing" has led many interpreters to believe that it is also indicative of "Good Times". However, Toulmin (1990; 19) seeks to expose the contrary. He argues that the narrowing of the focus of rationality that took place at the start of the seventeenth century can be seen as a reaction aimed at curbing the "Apocalyptic" visions that were part of everyday existence during the sixteenth century.

Toulmin's broadening of the received view hinges on identifying a *double origin*. He (Toulmin, 1990; 43) argues that Modernity had the following two distinct starting points, chronologically 100 years apart, which were in effect the parental couple of what has become known as Modernity or the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*). These are:

- a humanistic beginning grounded in classical sixteenth century Renaissance literature, and
- a scientific beginning rooted in seventeenth century philosophy.

At the outset this may not seem like a very radical diversion from the received view, but it does open onto a more unpredictable horizon. Literature, by its

very nature, has a much larger tolerance for the free play of the imagination than a calculating rationality that seeks universal laws.

#### **2.4.2 An Uncanny Congruence between Medieval Scholars and Modern Thinkers**

For medieval, pre-Renaissance scholars the diversity of human affairs conducted in all their fallible and sinful ways were not worth writing about. These human frailties were considered uninteresting compared to the theological contemplation of the glory of God. The different theological conceptions were based on the premise of being perfect, and encountering the *perfect being*<sup>13</sup>. “In Christianity, the most personalized of the three [religions: Jewish, Christian, Muslim], the relationship with God is characterized by love” (Armstrong, 1995; 244). For Christians, this insistence on perfect love went hand in hand with the need for exclusivity, perpetuating the “religious warfare that was gathering intensity throughout the sixteenth century, as antagonism between the two branches of Christianity, Reformation and Catholic, deepened (Toulmin, 1990; 25).

This need of medieval religious scholars for certainty about the nature of God is strangely congruent with seventeenth century philosophers’ need for certainty about universally valid Laws. While the first claimed to have found certainty in the demonstrable existence of the one true God, the latter sought it in the secular realm of indubitable thought.

In contrast with scholars and philosophers in Medieval and Modern times, writers of the Renaissance were informed by a feeling for the *limits* to the practical and intellectual powers of human beings. They therefore discouraged the intellectual dogmatism of Christianity, arguing that human modesty alone should teach reflective Christians how limited their ability to reach unquestioned Truth and unqualified Certainty over all matters of doctrine was (Toulmin, 1990; 25). Thus, the novelists and writers of the Renaissance saw in the peculiarities of the human condition the very stuff that their readers would find fascinating and enjoyable. In the eyes of Renaissance scholars, who were greatly influenced by Aristotle’s *Ethics*,

*Politics*, and *Rhetoric* (Toulmin, 1990; 26), the “circumstantial” character of practical issues, as they figure in the problems of medical diagnosis, legal liability or moral responsibility, were much more important than identifying an eternal or universal Truth.

## **2.5 RENAISSANCE ATTITUDE**

### **2.5.1 The Renaissance as Broad-Mindedness**

For writers of the renaissance the *rhetorical* analysis of arguments, the presentation of cases and the character of audiences were as philosophical as the formal analysis of the logic involved. Rhetoric and Logic were considered complementary disciplines. Hence, writers who fed the appetite of a vast lay readership characterized the Renaissance. This appetite consisted of theoretical speculations with overtones of neo-Platonism, or “natural magic”, abstract issues of ethical theory, descriptions of concrete experience, empirical studies of natural phenomena, and the branches of natural history (Toulmin, 1990; 27). In her book *Worldly Goods - A New History of the Renaissance* Lisa Jardine (1996; 179 - 180) gives an exhaustive analysis of the environment which fed this appetite and at the same time made it possible. She argues that:

The book was ... first and foremost a piece of merchandise, produced to earn its manufacturer a living, even when he was a scholar and intellectual ... [T]he impact of book culture on the Renaissance depended upon the fact that the staggering escalation in book production in the course of the sixteenth century was consistently driven by commercial pressures. It was market demand as understood by the printer and his backers which determined choices of texts and strategies for distributing them.

### **2.5.2 Montaigne and Renaissance Literature**

One of the most prolific writers of this time Michel de Montaigne, encouraged the accumulation of a rich perspective both on the natural world and on human affairs as we encounter them in actual experience for “[a]ll *universal* judgments are lax and *dangerous*” (De Montaigne, 1991; 1069). He

encouraged a respect for the rational possibilities of human experience but also had an, often humorous, intuition about the *limits* of personal knowledge. As he playfully warns, “*Stercus cuique suum bene olet*”<sup>14</sup> (De Montaigne, 1991; 1053). This is a worldly point of view devoid of the bitterness that follows on the heels of utopian disappointment and its hypocritical vicissitudes. Montaigne counsels that we should not regard our disappointments too seriously and that:

...we must live among the living and let each man follow his fashion without our worrying or without making ourselves ill about it. A hundred times a day when we go mocking our neighbor we are really mocking ourselves; we abominate in others those faults which are most manifestly our own, and, with a miraculous lack of shame and perspicacity, are astonished by them (De Montaigne, 1991; 1053).

The Renaissance saw an explosion in taste for the exotic and alternative ways of life that acted as the counterpoint to much of the later philosophical argument about *national identity* (Toulmin, 1990; 27). Montaigne argued that “included among public events are popular rumors and opinions. [The role of all good “historians”] is to give an account of popular beliefs, not to account for them.” (De Montaigne, 1991; 1068). The latter task he reserved for Theologians and Philosophers as the “directors of consciences”.

Growing access to the diversity of cultures put to the test the commitment of Renaissance writers to an honest reporting of first-hand experience. Exotic populations can be viewed, by a mind made up in advance, as primitive, savage, or marginally human, their ways of thinking and living as heretical, pagan, or chaotic. Instead the Renaissance writers endeavoured to open their minds and add these fresh and exotic discoveries to the pool of testimony about Humanity and human life and so enlarge our sympathy and framework of understanding (Toulmin, 1990; 28).

### 2.5.3 Skepticism: Renaissance and Modernity

While the Renaissance writers and their readers were celebrating the complexity and diversity of human life, philosophers, like religious thinkers before them, found themselves in a difficult position. Confronted with the profusion of difference the prospects for constructing comprehensive systems of physical theory in human experience faced disappointment. Philosophers of this time, like Socrates before them, adopted attitudes of outright *skepticism* (Toulmin, 1990; 28). In his book, *Truth - A History and a Guide for the Perplexed*, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (1997; 215) contrasts the Western skeptical tradition with the “value quietness” of Zen Buddhism “in which one has no wandering desires at all but simply performs the acts of . . . life without desire . . . [achieved by] . . . just sitting, a meditative practice in which the idea of a duality of self and object does not dominate one’s consciousness”. The difference between the Western skeptic and the desireless indifference of Zen Buddhism he contends lies in the “Western skeptic’s professed contentment with things as they seemed, on the grounds that appearances could do duty for truths no one can know” (Fernandez-Armesto, 1997; 216).

Renaissance humanist writers saw philosophical *questions* as reaching beyond the scope of experience in an indefensible way. Faced with abstract, universal, timeless theoretical propositions, they saw no *sufficient* basis in experience, either for asserting, denying (Toulmin, 1990; 29) or ignoring them. From their point of view tolerating the resulting plurality, ambiguity, or the lack of certainty is no error, let alone the sin of desire that should be conquered by “just sitting”. “Honest *reflection* shows that [ambiguity] is part of the price that we inevitably pay for being human beings, and not gods” (Toulmin, 1990; 30).

Since Descartes, however, skepticism has been thought of as destructive nay-saying, the skeptic *denies* whatever the philosopher would *assert* (Toulmin, 1990; 29) which opens up the problematic of *tolerance*. In such an environment, where skepticism is seen as an attack, the practice of tolerance would depend on the *power* to tolerate. An attack can only be tolerated (not taken seriously), if the thesis attacked is strong enough to withstand it.

Hence, 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, the Modern philosophers according to the standard account, set aside the pre-occupations of Renaissance humanism and focused on the *necessary* preconditions for knowledge. In particular they disclaimed any serious interest in four different kinds of practical knowledge:

- the oral
- the particular
- the local
- the timely (Toulmin, 1990; 30).

#### **2.5.4 The Power to Tolerate**

The research program of Modern philosophy, very much like its theological predecessors, “set aside questions about *argumentation* - among particular people in specific situations, dealing with concrete cases, where varied things were at stake - in favour of *proofs* that could be set down in writing, and judged as written” (Toulmin, 1990; 31). This narrowing of focus can be summed up in four fashion statements:

- formal logic was in, rhetoric was out (Toulmin, 1990; 31).
- general principles were in, particular cases were out (Toulmin, 1990; 32).
- abstract axioms were in, concrete diversity was out (Toulmin, 1990; 33).
- the permanent was in, the transitory was out (Toulmin, 1990; 34).

This change in intellectual fashion reflected a historical shift from *practical* philosophy, whose issues arose out of clinical medicine, juridical procedure, moral case analysis, or the rhetorical force of oral reasoning, to a *theoretical* conception of philosophy. In other words, Modern philosophy favoured the *theory-centered* idealised approach of Plato over the *practical-minded* contextual approach of Aristotle. In practical disciplines, questions of rational adequacy are timely instead of timeless, concrete instead of abstract, local instead of general, particular instead of universal. In this dualistic way Modern philosophers ignored the particular, concrete, timely and local details of everyday human affairs and instead moved to a more stratospheric plane

on which nature and ethics conform to abstract, timeless, general, and universal laws (Toulmin, 1990; 35).

In order to understand this shift from the practical to the theoretical we must, Toulmin argues, ask a practical question with a rhetorical nature, exactly the kind of question that Descartes ruled out of Modern philosophy: “Why did educated people in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century find the Quest for rational certainty so attractive and convincing?” (Toulmin, 1990; 36). This is a question about the *audience* for philosophy in that particular context. Further more, did Descartes commit an error, achieving nothing more than an intellectual “dead end”? If this is so, why did such an error carry special conviction with readers from 1640 onwards?

Toulmin argues that exactly this is the philosophers task: to show why we are tempted into potential intellectual “dead ends” (Toulmin, 1990; 36). So what did this Cartesian temptation (Meditation) look like? Descartes (1960; 132) writes:

From the very fact that I know with certainty that I exist, and that I find that “absolutely” nothing else belongs “necessarily” to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking being, I readily conclude that my essence consists solely in being a body which thinks (or a substance whose whole essence or nature is only to think). And although perhaps, or rather certainly, as I will soon show, I have a body with which I am very closely united, nevertheless, since on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself in so far as I am only an extended being which does not think, it is certain that this “I” (that is to say, my soul, by virtue of which I am what I am) is entirely (and truly) distinct from my body and that it can (be or) exist without it.

It is clear that the Cartesian temptation lies in favouring one half of the duality he imposes between “thought” and the “world”, over the other. After Descartes it was considered incorrect to refer to nature in *anthropocentric* terms because it was regarded as totally devoid of mind and thought. For

Descartes the possibility of a cool, impersonal, distanced cognitive relation to the world overcomes the specter of infantile subjectivism that projects intelligence into the world of objects. At the same time, the nightmare landscape of the infinite universe becomes the well-lighted laboratory of modern science and philosophy. Hence, the world can be tolerated by a male subject because of the power gained over it through a superior consciousness, that of Rationality.

## 2.6 MODERN POWER AND CULTURAL ANXIETY

Susan Bordo identifies a certain anxiety that infuses the *Meditations* (Bordo, 1996; 641). This anxiety, she argues, is a *cultural* anxiety arising from discoveries, inventions, and events that are major and disorienting.

She ascribes the disorientation to a *parturition* or separation from the more organic universe of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance. From this separation emerged the Modern categories “self”, “locatedness” and “innerness”. Initially the separation was experienced as *loss*, meaning estrangement, and the opening up of a chasm between self and nature. Epistemologically this estrangement expresses itself in combative skepticism and in a pathological anxiety over the possibility of reaching the world as “it” is. In spiritual, or existential, terms this anxiety is expressed over the closedness of the individual self and the devastating uniqueness of each individual in time and space, as well as over the arbitrariness and incomprehensibility of the individual thrown forth by an alien, indifferent universe. Bordo prompts us in a psychoanalytical direction by suggesting that this anxiety is a “*cultural* separation anxiety” (Bordo, 1996; 641).

She argues, expanding the notion of a feminine logic earlier established by Irigaray, that Cartesian “objectivism” and “mechanism” should be understood as a *reaction-formation*, as a denial of the “separation anxiety”, facilitated by an aggressive intellectual *flight* from the female cosmos<sup>15</sup> and “feminine” orientation towards the world. That orientation had played a formidable role in Medieval and Renaissance thought and culture. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was decisively purged from the dominant intellectual culture, through the

Cartesian “rebirthing” and restructuring of knowledge and the world as *masculine*.

The Cartesian hierarchy of epistemological values, and its scopic prejudice, holds as its central values *clarity* and *distinctness*. Contrary to this, argues Bordo, the key term in the pre-separation, Renaissance scheme of things was, however, *sympathy*. “Sympathetic” understanding seeks knowledge through “union” with the object. To merge with that which is to be known means granting personal or intuitive response a positive epistemological value, even (perhaps, especially) when such response is contradictory or fragmented<sup>16</sup>.

Bordo uses the notion of “dynamic objectivity” to flesh out further the nature of sympathetic understanding as a *re-visioning* of object orientated thought. She derives this notion from Bergson’s<sup>17</sup> “intellectual sympathy”. This entails “placing oneself within the full being of an object”, as Bergson puts it, (at which point it ceases to be an ‘object’ in the usual sense), and allowing *it* to speak . . . the objective and subjective *merge*, participate in the creation of meaning” (Bordo, 1996; 644). In contrast to this, Descartes’ ideal is to render any such continuity between subject and object *impossible*. The scientific mind must be cleansed of all “sympathies” toward the objects it tries to understand. It must cultivate absolute *detachment*. This project generated a whole cavalcade of binary conceptual hierarchies in which the “feminine” term was invariably suppressed: head versus heart, domination over/versus merging with the object, purified versus erotic orientation towards knowledge etc.

Bordo’s psychoanalytic approach urges us to examine that which is denied or repressed, for the *shadow* of a loss we mourn. She suggests that Descartes’ masculine “rebirthing” of the world and self (thought) as decisively separate appears not merely as the articulation of a positive new epistemological ideal, but as an active repression of the organic female cosmos of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. She likens the Cartesian reconstruction of the world to a “fort-da”<sup>18</sup> game which aims ultimately at control.

It is a defiant gesture of independence from the female cosmos, which at the same time has to compensate for a profound loss. In the Cartesian project the pain experienced over this loss is brought under control by the paradoxical movement of a more definitive separation, one that is chosen and aggressively pursued. Because it is chosen on the basis of rational criteria it is therefore experienced as *autonomy* rather than helplessness.

Bordo identifies the mechanism of such self-assertion in the fantasy or dream of becoming the parent of oneself. This dream-state, or goal orientated *metonymy*, envisages the role of active parental figure, possessing an omnipotence of thought, rather than passive, helpless child plucked this way and that on the currents of emotion. This is achieved through vicariously identifying with the parent by means of “transitional objects”. These objects function, symbolically, as the child himself. In cuddling and scolding the object, the child is actually playing at self-parenting, at being his own baby. This manifests in the Oedipal desire to sexually possess the mother as a fantasy of becoming the father of oneself instead of staying the helpless child of the mother.

The breaking of all organic ties between person and nature, originally experienced, as we have seen, as epistemological estrangement, as the opening up of a chasm between self and world, is reenacted, *this* time with the human being as the engineer and architect of separation. Descartes as prime architect envisages a *new world*, one in which all generativity and creativity fall to a rational God, the spiritual father, rather than to the female “flesh” of the world. The formerly female earth becomes inert matter and the objectivity of science is insured.

Bordo suggests that the anxiety evoked by the success of such a rational rebirth is not over loss any longer, but over the “memory” or suggestion of *union*. “Sympathetic”, associational, or bodily response obscures objectivity and a feeling for nature muddies the clear lake of the mind. For the reconstructed reasonable man nothing is more frightening than having to return to an infantile state. The “otherness” of nature, being whatever is *not* rational or male, is now what allows it to be known (Bordo, 1996; 649). “She”

is *Other*. And “otherness” itself becomes dreadful. Like the infinite universe, which threatens to swallow the individual “like a speck”, the female, with her strange rhythms, long acknowledged to have their chief affinities with the rhythms of the natural (now alien) world<sup>19</sup>, becomes a dreaded reminder of how much lies outside the grasp of man (Bordo, 1996; 652).

The project that fell to both “empirical” science and “rationalism” was to tame the female universe. Empirical science did this through aggressive assault and violation of her “secrets”. Rationalism tamed the female universe through the philosophical neutralization of her vitality. The Modern philosopher progresses more or less as follows: thought may be subject to many errors of thinking but I cannot doubt that I am thinking. Hence, as long as I am still thinking I can always correct errant thoughts. This is an optimism I cannot have about the world. But, that I am thinking assures me that the world has no necessary principle that cannot be discovered and scrutinized by my thought and upon which doubt cannot be laid by thought. There is *guaranteed* access to thinking but not to the world. Luckily guaranteed access to the world is unimportant because guaranteed access to thinking can systematically shape it to what I think it is.

## **2.7 A MODERNIST ATTEMPT TO RETURN TO RENNAISANCE LITERATURE**

It was this guarantee, this control, that 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophers facing infinite skepticism, found irresistible in Descartes’ reduction. With such a guarantee one could face any complex set of circumstances fully motivated that one will be able to control it. With the correct rational procedures all flux must inevitably surrender to the understanding. In other words, Cartesian rationality *promised* a better future, a future of Rational control made manifest as an empirical law-abiding universe.

Control, however, comes at a high price. *Feelings* are the very first *contaminant* of solipsistic thought and have to be suppressed in order for the rational process to remain efficient. Thus, philosophers who are drawn to dualism are simultaneously drawn into a battle against the discomfort of their

corporeal natures. The reality the Cartesian *cogito* finds so hard to face is “the fact that feelings are not something *we do*: They are what *our bodies do to us*” (Toulmin, 1990; 40). A large part of our humanity consists in accepting responsibility for our bodies, our feelings and the effects of the things we do, given those bodies and feelings.

Modernity had a terrible time taking responsibility for bodies and their erratic influence. The Modernity of Descartes and the rational philosophers depended on the making of rules and laws of conduct that drew hard and fast lines between what was acceptable and what unacceptable behavior. The line always drew the distinction between the bodily process (“material”) and voluntary activities (“mental”). Because the mental was seen as voluntary, it was also the center of *choice*. Hence, rational responsibility for behavior boiled down to *thinking correctly* and making the choice that proved to be the best universally. The law had only one function, to ensure correct thinking procedures, stipulating choice and making sure that the stipulation was carried out (Toulmin, 1990; 41).

These procedures were regarded as perfect and only those who were *legitimized* by internalising the procedures of correct thinking gained the authority to change these laws or procedures by exercising their proven, in rational terms, *genius*. As Baudelaire says:

...genius is nothing more nor less than *childhood recovered* at will - a childhood now equipped for self-expression with *manhood's* capacities and a power of analysis which enables it to order the mass of raw material which it has involuntarily accumulated (Baudelaire, 1996; 139).

Here was the “free” genius of the legitimate, rationally proven, *subject* who, armed with analytic reason “lives very little, if at all, in the world of morals and politics” and for whom “the mainspring of his genius is *curiosity*” seeing everything in a state of childlike “newness”, being always and perpetually *drunk* (Baudelaire, 1996; 138). For Baudelaire this “new man” needs to feel no doubt that he can conquer any multiplicity however, “fugitive or infinite”.

He is the perfect example of the ultimate artist/creator for whom the *flaneur* acts as a model, “the passionate spectator” for whom it “is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement . . . Thus, the lover of *universal* life enters into the crowd as though it were an “immense reservoir of electrical energy” himself a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness”. There is no doubt that he is an “I” with an insatiable appetite for the “non- I” who has the undoubted capacity to “at every instant” render and explain “it in pictures more living than life itself, which is always unstable and fugitive” (Baudelaire, 1996; 140).

As in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd* (Poe, 1986; 187) the belief that “unstable and fugitive” life, here modeled by that great example of all modernities *the city*, can be understood and solved, is the guiding force. The city is characterized by those who would try to read its history in a “glance”. But, in so, doing they miss the complex web of relations and practices unfolding there. “The urge to define and fix the city as a single thing, like the original and eternal desire to plan and control the life of the city, is suggested here in the actions of the narrator and then rapidly countered by the eruption of ‘the man of the crowd’ who presents an insoluble dilemma” (Campbell and Kean, 1997; 170). Poe describes it as follows:

And here, long, amid the momentary increasing confusion, did I persist in my pursuit of the stranger. But, as usual, he walked to and fro, and during the day did not pass from out the turmoil of that street. And, as the shades of the second evening came on, I grew wearied unto death, and stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face. He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation (Poe, 1986; 187 - 188).

Poe’s *flaneur* finds that the man he follows exhibits no recognizable behavior, making him impossible to classify, and condemns him as “the type and the genius of deep crime”. Because he had been daunted by the inexplicableness of the man’s behavior the rational man knows only one alternative: judgment and outright condemnation. Thus, he imagines that the

“worst heart of the world” cannot compare to the grossest book ever written and praising God for his great mercy concludes that “*es lässt sich nicht lesen*”<sup>20</sup> (Poe, 1986; 188).

The conclusion is inevitable from the point of view of the legitimate subject for he has no way to establish what the stranger desires. And he cannot accept that the stranger merely desires to keep on walking (*planktos*) and “not to be alone” even in his obvious singular loneliness.

### **2.7.1. The *flaneur* paradox**

The paradox lies in the fact that the *flaneur* understands that as a citizen he has to proclaim his desire for justice and the laws that guarantee his freedom with more commitment than his desire for freedom. The stranger, however, enjoys his freedom without claiming it. The *flaneur* has a desire for the absolute freedom and anonymity of the stranger, but he fails to understand it because the stranger does not enter into discourse and allows no interrogation of his secret. The best solution the *flaneur*, as a participant in civil society can come up with is freedom that is guaranteed against the claims of others in society by laws. But, laws do not only entrench rights, like the right to freedom but also demands responsibility. The *flaneur* as a citizen is guaranteed freedom only as long as he remembers his duty to the community. He thus has to judge the stranger a criminal because he does not respond, he has no sense of duty and thus no rights. The *flaneur's* problem is that he can only have what the stranger has if he compromises what he most desires in a *freedom that only exists where the possibility of its interruption is excluded by laws and where the citizen willingly consents to their restrictions*. Adhering to the restrictions of the law creates the paradox with regards freedom and never allows it the absolute reign that is a criminal desire. Lyotard (1991b; 35). puts it thus:

The *subject* is concrete, or supposedly so, and its epic is the story of its emancipation from everything that prevents it from governing itself. It is assumed that the laws it makes for itself are just, not because they conform to some outside nature, but because the

legislators are, constitutionally, the very citizens who are subject to the laws. As a result, the legislator's will - the desire that the laws be just - will always coincide with the will of the citizen, who desires the law and will therefore obey it.

This is a good description of the Kantian "knower", who like Baudelaire's *flaneur*, is transcendental. He is able to transcend the moment by taking recourse in a *universal law*. In a similar way a single threefold aspiration characterized Modernity after 1630:

- "that of deriving everything from an *original principle*" (corresponding to scientific activity),
- "that of relating everything to an *ideal*" (governing ethical and social practice), and,
- "that of unifying this principle and this ideal in a *single Idea*" (ensuring that the scientific search for true causes always coincides with the pursuit of just ends in moral and political life) (Lyotard, 1991b; 33).

### **2.7.2 The End of the Metanarrative**

Rationality and the philosophy it spurned are to this day known as *Platonism*. Philosophy as "speculation" had the task of restoring unity to learning. It could "only achieve this in a language game that links the sciences together as moments in the becoming of spirit, in other words, which links them in a rational narration, or rather *metanarration*" (Lyotard, 1991b; 33).

The rational instruments, *metanarratives*, developed to ensure correct thinking, created a narrowing of scope for freedom of discussion and imagination on the social plane with an insistence on "respectability" in thought and behavior on the personal plane. This personal respectability took the form of alienation, familiar to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, expressing itself as *solipsism* in intellectual matters, and as *narcissism* in emotional life (Toulmin, 1990; 42).

But, in asserting the activity of the subject a door is opened, paradoxically, to a more historical and contextual understanding of knowing. The knower, not the known, can now come under scrutiny.

## 2.8 Summary

In summary then, Modernity reacted against a world that it regarded as chaotic and threatening, a world the Renaissance attempted to celebrate through literature. It did its very best to hide or repress what it had left behind. But, the fear of complexity represented in literature and femininity turned, firstly, into anxiety felt over the loss of something very dear and, secondly, into an anxiety over the inability to return and create union. Perhaps the contemporary feminist emphasis on the *insufficiency* of any ethics or rationality, “feminine” or “masculine”, that operates solely in one mode without drawing on the resources and perspective of the other is a way through this Modern anxiety. Thus, Bordo suggests that:

Romanticizing “the feminine” within its “own” sphere is no alternative to Cartesianism, because it suggests that the feminine has a “proper” (domestic) place. Only in establishing the scientific and philosophical legitimacy of alternative modes of knowing in the *public* arena (rather than glorifying them in their own special sphere of family relations) do we present a real alternative to Cartesianism (Bordo, 1996; 655).

There is a clear connection here with the Renaissance, in the cultural reawakening to the multiplicity of possible human perspectives, and with the role of culture in shaping those perspectives. There is a recognition not merely of the undiscovered (future) “other” but of the *repressed* (past) other.

However, Modernity is characterised by the drive to rationalise ethics and lay down strict rules and codes of conduct. In the next chapter we will look at postmodernism as a contemporary manifestation of the Renaissance *attitude*/. The question whether a new Modernity is the only response to postmodernity will occupy us throughout the thesis.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Modernity, in the name of which a universal finality is claimed, will be indicated in this thesis with a capital M. This measure will have the double function of indicating the philosophical tradition known as Platonism and narrowing the philosophical pursuit of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to focus exclusively on “rational” means of inquiry.

<sup>2</sup> It is my contention that having a sense of what “truth” is, is what makes us human. This chapter is throughout concerned with the status and possibility of truth but it will not explicitly analyze truth as a concept. We can, however, make use of four signposts to help us on our way.

- *The truth you feel* - truth understood as registered emotionally or by non-sensory and non-rational kinds of perception.
- *The truth you are told* - can succeed or supplement the first from a “truth world” existing as sources of authority.
- *The truth of reason or the truth you think for yourself* - this usually originates as a reaction against earlier-prevailing concepts of truth, and of techniques of reasoning which are commonly called logical.
- *The truth you perceive through your senses* - the belief we have in the reliability of our sense perception (Fernandez-Armesto, 1997; 6 - 7).

To claim that something is “The Truth” one will have to bring all four the above forms of truth into alignment. But, even if such a feat is possible, excluding all contradiction, it will largely depend on the *timing* of this Truth whether or not it will have a significant impact on consciousness. One could probably call such a timely alignment an *event*. Its significance, however, still largely depends on its being experienced and correctly reported on for it to become more than just a “something happened”. And this is a matter of *mediation* via technique and method coupled with technology, all of which adds or subtracts to a certain degree from “what happens”.

<sup>3</sup> The end of Modernity is closely linked to what Heidegger has called the “end of philosophy” or the “completion of metaphysics”. He says that “[m]etaphysics is in all its forms and historical stages a unique, but perhaps necessary, fate of the West and the presupposition of its planetary dominance. The will of that planetary dominance is now in turn affecting the center of the West. Again, only a will meets a will from this centre” (Heidegger, 1973; 90). It will be fruitful to keep in mind as we progress through this thesis that “end” in this context is an indicator of de-centering a thought that has become obsessive, rather than a sign of nihilism.

<sup>4</sup> In William Blake’s most often recited line of poetry he refers allegorically to the Church who have begun to produce followers in the same conveyor-belt fashion as the factories mass producing goods and foaming clouds of smoke, destroying everything held sacred.

And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here

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Among these dark Satanic Mills? (Sampson, 1995; 239)

<sup>5</sup> The liberal critique is more optimistic and “stresses the importance of choice, and therefore of value, priorities and democratic participation” but ignores the fact that technologies are never neutral and always “express [the] particular values and priorities” of the “dominant interest groups, above all . . . the power of capital . . .”. Lyon argues that “the Luddite is correct to temper this by drawing attention to the ways in which choice is limited, often severely and systematically, by social, political and economic definition. But, the negative image of Luddism is hard to live down. Luddism can be as pessimistic as the popular information society pundits are optimistic. Their future may be similarly foreclosed” (Lyon, 1995, 69 - 70). In America Neo-Luddite activity has unfortunately become synonymous with Theodore Kaczynski. He is more widely known as “The Unabomber” because of the letter bombs he sent to pro-technology academics over a seventeen year period. Luddism has its roots in England (Pynchon, 1984; 40 - 41) however, and it is possible that “The Unabomber” has more in common with the “Agrarian” critique from the American South “which warned of the threat to individualist and humanist values in a world dominated by the developing power of an economic and political order which linked centralized government to a productive system based on the machine and the cash nexus” (Campbell and Kean, 1997; 145).

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word mostly translated as “happiness”. We must, however, take care with the connotations that are attached to the word in English. In English the word “happiness” refers primarily to a psychological state, a state of feeling. Whether one *is* happy is then largely a matter of whether one *feels* happy.

*Eudaimonia* on the other hand, is more the objective condition of a person, and there exists room for contrast between *feeling* happy and genuinely *being* happy as expressed by connotations such as “well-being” and “flourishing” (Norman; 1990; 39).

<sup>7</sup> Practical wisdom or moral knowledge is what Aristotle calls *phronesis*, the kind of knowledge possessed by the *phronimos*. The essential feature of practical knowledge is that it is concerned with particulars, not with universals. It is not a matter of appealing to rules and general principles, not a matter of logical argument or intellectual ability. It consists simply in knowing, in a particular situation: this is what I should do. One’s moral education consists in being told in particular situations that one’s behaviour is appropriate or inappropriate (Norman; 1990; 54 - 55).

<sup>8</sup> Jane Gallop relates in a footnote (Gallop, 1986; 127) that Freud often used the term “dark continent” to refer to female sexuality. Ironically, it seems that the reference strangely mimics what it refers to for as Gallop admits: “I have not yet succeeded in locating this term in Freud’s text, but that may be my blind spot”.

<sup>9</sup> Irigary reads Lacan as a representative of the rational male bias and as such her critique is significant here. There are other feminists, however, who make a strong case against her connotation of the phallus with the penis. Gallop writes: “Lacan is at least explicit as to what the phallus is not. Not a fantasy, not an object, but least of all an organ, least of all the penis. It does . . . clearly have a relation to the penis: the phallus symbolizes the penis. But, even this link does not constitute a special relation between phallus and penis, for the phallus also symbolizes the clitoris” (Gallop, 1986; 136).

<sup>10</sup> It would be incorrect to think that Irigary is using female genitalia here as a *metaphor* to present a stable image of the “unknowable”. It is rather a *metonymy*

which is closer to the elliptical movement of dreaming that “serve as allusions to matter that cannot be represented in any other way” (Freud quoted in Gallop, 1986; 119).

<sup>11</sup> **pude'nd/um** *n.* genitals, esp. of woman, **pu'dic**, *adjectives* from classical Latin *pudenda* (*membra* parts), neutral plural of the gerundive (from gerund stem having the sense of “that should be done”) of *pudere* be ashamed (The Concise Oxford Dictionary).

<sup>12</sup> *Res cogitans* is a thinking and unextended thing and *res extensa* is an extended and unthinking thing.

<sup>13</sup> At this time the three religions, Jewish, Christian and Muslim had a profound influence on each other. Christianity tended to stress the genius of the intuitive individual on a quest for perfect love. This had the effect of producing an excessively egotistic search for personal enlightenment culminating in resentment and intolerance towards others who might discover different revelation. From the point of view of Muslim clergy at this time, says Armstrong:

[p]eople had forgotten that all true individuality derived from God. The genius of the individual could be used to dangerous effect if allowed absolutely free rein. A breed of Supermen who regarded themselves as Gods, as [later] envisaged by Nietzsche, was a frightening prospect: people needed the challenge of a norm that transcended the whims and notions of the moment. It was the mission of Islam to uphold the nature of true individualism against the Western corruption of the ideal. They had their Sufi ideal of the Perfect Man, the end of creation and the purpose of its existence. Unlike the Superman who saw himself as supreme and despised the rabble, the Perfect Man was characterized by his total receptivity to the Absolute and would carry the masses along with him (Armstrong, 1995; 419).

<sup>14</sup> “*Everyone’s shit smells good to himself*”. The footnote to this expression credits it to Erasmus who links it to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and to the complementary adage, “*Suum cuique pulchrum*” (one’s own is beautiful to oneself) and acts as a condemnation of *philautia* (self-love).

<sup>15</sup> Bordo here uses as the central theme of her argument the notion of “*khora*” found in Plato’s *Timeaus*. I will later show that this is also a central notion in deconstruction. Bordo introduces it as follows: “the formless “receptacle” or “nurse” provides the substratum of all determinate materiality. (It is also referred to as “space” - *khora* - in the dialogue.) The “receptacle” is likened to a mother because of its receptivity to impression; the father is the “source or spring” - the eternal forms which “enter” and “stir and inform her”. The child is the determinate nature which is formed through their union: the *body* of nature” (Bordo, 1996; 642).

<sup>16</sup> This is a point that is hardly lost on Freud. In his essay on *Femininity* his writing style consciously mimics the subject matter he aims to address and he concludes the paper thus:

That is all I have to say about femininity. It is certainly incomplete and fragmentary and does not always sound friendly. But do not forget that I have only been describing women in so far as their nature is determined by their sexual function. It is true that that influence extends very far; but we do not overlook the fact that an individual woman may be a human being in other respects as well. If you want to know more about

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femininity, inquire from your own experiences of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information (Freud, 1991, 432).

<sup>17</sup> Bergson (1910) makes use of two key notions in his philosophy. The first, relevant here, is *élan vital* (a sort of life force) that governs the processes of constant change and uses effort and subtlety to overcome the resistance of matter but is not directed by some pre-envisaged end. The second, which is more relevant to Section Two and will be further discussed there, as Levinas draws extensively on it to establish his notion of "Ethics as First Philosophy" (Levinas, 1994c; 81), is *duration*.

<sup>18</sup> Freud describes this game in which the young boy tries to gain control over the appearance and disappearance of his mother in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1991; 220 - 268). Freud writes:

This good little boy, however, had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o', accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and the writer of the present account were agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection but represented the German word '*fort*' ['gone']. I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play 'gone' with them. One day I made an observation which confirmed my view. The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied around it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful '*da*' ['there']. This, then, was the complete game - disappearance and return. As a rule one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act (Freud, 1991; 225).

<sup>19</sup> How much reproductive differences between the sexes influence the way we reason is not altogether clear. Bordo bases the distinction she makes on a historical cultural bias that need not hold sway much longer. A change, and change in general, favours what has traditionally been called feminine logic for it cannot be adequately predicted or calculated. As Bordo writes:

The association of cognitive style with gender is nothing new. We find it in ancient mythology, in archetypal psychology, in philosophical and scientific writings, and in a host of enduring popular stereotypes about men and woman. For example, that women are more "intuitive", that men are more "logical", etc. What is new in the recent feminist exploration of gender and cognitive style is an emphasis on gender as a *social construction*, rather than a biological or ontological given (Bordo, 1996, 653) . . . There has perhaps been cultures in which (using *our* terms now, not necessarily theirs) men thought more "like women", and there may be a time in the future when they do so again. In our time,

many women may be coming to think more and more “like men” (Bordo, 1996, 654).

<sup>20</sup> “it does not permit itself to be read”.

## CHAPTER THREE

### POSTMODERNITY

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this essay postmodernity will indicate both the notion of a *contemporary modernity* as put forward in the previous chapter and a *revision* of Platonic Modernity and the Cartesian Rational bias. For Lyotard postmodernism implies an “incredulity toward *metanarratives*” (Lyotard, 1991b; xxiv), the rational mechanisms developed by Modernity to ensure “correct” thinking. To avoid becoming a metanarrative itself, postmodernity resists its own identification as something that has surpassed or supplanted Modernity. This resistance against attracting any kind of ultimate label has given rise to a contemporary scene that is in fact *rewriting* Modernity. For Lyotard “rewriting means resisting the writing of that supposed postmodernity” (Lyotard, 1991a; 35).

Hence, postmodernity is not one theory or world view that is to be brought under the umbrella of a general theory. Rather, the form of writing most consistent with the requirements of this scene is that of the essay, “micrologies” or “passages” (Lyotard, 1991a; 32). Because modernity, modern temporality<sup>1</sup>, seeks to go beyond itself, to change, and not only to exceed itself, but to resolve itself into a sort of ultimate stability, the literary origin of Modernity, as identified by Toulmin, suggests that the “postmodern” is always implied in what is considered modern. Modernity and postmodernity are therefore inseparably part of the same thing. While modernity acts as a historical *stabilizer*, creating metanarratives, postmodernity acts as a historical *vitalizer* producing singular essays. The straightforward political project implied in the grand narratives of emancipation, which was driven by a myriad of small narratives, is a case in point.

Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with postmodernity, which ensures it against ever reaching its goal of ultimate stability, equilibrium or death. The postmodern impulse is what keeps Modernity modern. As soon as the postmodern is identified, it is immediately the modern that has given birth to the postmodern in its phenomenal (“free form” given to sensibility) sense.

### 3.2 THE PRINCIPLE OF REVOLUTION

What I call “The Principle of Revolution”<sup>2</sup> here, is one of the cardinal features of Modernity with a capital letter, the Modern that oppressively denies its postmodernity. The latter, unlike the former, has no interest in the periodisation of its own scene. Historical periodisation belongs to an obsession that is characteristic of Modernity. It is an attempt to situate events in a *diachrony* (Lyotard, 1991a; 25). Diachrony proceeds by claiming and cleansing the period between two *exact* dates, one marking the starting point and one the end point. The period or *epoch* can be distinguished as significant, as having nothing in common with what precedes it, and ditto for what comes after, due to the unique events that transpired on the dates in question. To surmise: the events are claimed to be unique and can subsequently be cleansed of all remnants that might detract from the clarity of its features. It is imperative that the points or dates demarcating such an epoch are characterized by a quantifiable event. Hence, Modernity’s obsession with *revolution*. The latter provides a concept by which to think an event so out of the ordinary that it drives a stake into the “bland” progression of day to day existence and promises something absolutely new. Hence, Modernity progresses and reflects on its progress by creating and recording only extraordinary events, such as “revolutionary” discoveries in science and technology. The day to day frivolity of life holds no lure for the Modern historian.

Postmodernity, on the other hand, does not progress along the way of the Principle of Revolution. Rather, as Lyotard (1991a; 34) writes, “[p]ostmodernity is ... the rewriting of some of the features claimed by [M]odernity,

and first of all [M]odernity's claim to ground its legitimacy on the project of liberating humanity as a whole through science and technology".

### **3.3 THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES**

In Modern terms science legitimated technology by means of a metanarrative. Since postmodernity does not legitimate technology in general, each technology generates its own language game. The spectacular introduction of "new technologies," otherwise known as Information Technologies, into the production, diffusion, distribution and consumption of cultural commodities has sparked the transformation of culture into an *industry*<sup>3</sup>.

#### **3.3.1 Culture of the Inhuman**

The change in culture brought about by Information Technologies is most vividly characterized by the obsessive remaking of classic stories that erases all traces of previous connotation in a text by preempting any unexpected and "fantasy" associations that might be brought to a reading by an audience. A good example would be the efforts of the Walt Disney empire to retell the classic Greek myths and tragedies in a contemporary way. It renders culture as an obsessive fascination with the *new*.

The new technologies have therefore given the cult of the new a considerable impetus. They are able to provide exact (digital) calculation in every form of inscription (lines of computer code) producing a seamless montage of visual and sound images, speech, musical lines, and, finally, writing itself. This is the culture of the *inhuman* if we accept that to be human is more "messy" and cannot ultimately be codified. Inhuman techno-culture however, is hard-pressed to acknowledge anything that escapes its powers of codification. "What is really disturbing is the importance assumed by the concept of the *bit*, the unit of information. When we're dealing with bits, there's no longer any question of free forms given here and now to sensibility and the imagination" (Lyotard, 1991a; 34). The *bit* is highly seductive because of its cool ability to store a unit of information perfectly so that retrieval is guaranteed and instantaneous. By comparison the human capacity for memory storage and retrieval starts to pale.

### 3.3.2 Bodiless Thought

In these technologies Descartes' temptation of a perfectly accessible "bodiless thought" has found its most feverish manifestation to date. Some would argue that the disappointment humans feel when confronted by these inhuman organs of bodiless thought resides in the fact that they operate on a binary logic.

Human thought does not depend on binary oppositions. It doesn't work with units of information (bits), but with intuitive, hypothetical configurations. It accepts imprecise, ambiguous data that does not seem to be selected according to pre-established codes of readability. Consciousness becomes aware of a "horizon", aims at a "noema" (the undifferentiated parts of a phenomenon as yet un-quantified), a kind of object, a sort of non-conceptual monogram that provides it with intuitive configurations and opens up "in front of it" a field of orientation and expectation, a "frame" or "scheme".

Thought moves towards what it looks for by "choosing" (using among other things rational criteria), that is, by discarding and recombining the data it needs, but none the less *without making use of pre-established criteria determining in advance what's appropriate to choose* (Lyotard, 1991a; 15). A human, in short, is a living organization that is not only complex but *replex*.

Replexivity means that a human being is equipped with a symbolic system that's both arbitrary in terms of semantics and syntax, letting it be less dependent on an immediate environment, and also "recursive", allowing it to take into account, above and beyond raw data, the way it has of processing such data. Replexivity can be described as a "sense of self". According to Lyotard (1991a; 12 - 13) this "sense of self" is situated in a human's ability to understand itself on four different levels. In terms of medicine it understands itself as a "medium" through which healing can take place. In goal directed activity it acts as an "organ" that performs a specific function. It can also regard itself as an "object" for aesthetic as well as speculative thought. In

logic and mathematics it can even abstract itself from itself and take into account only its rules of processing.

More and more this reflex human self is dependent on the technologies of information and processing in order to complete the tasks of thinking. For the human to think, at the very least, it has to breathe, eat, etc. At the very least, it is still under an obligation to “earn a living” (Lyotard, 1991a; 13). Technology has none of these obligations. The human thought process, because it does not depend on pre-established criteria but can actually place such criteria into question, is a much richer process of becoming aware. It also takes much longer and has unpredictable results. Due to its lack of reflexivity the inhuman completes tasks much faster and more efficiently, with calculable results. It does not waste time trying to “find itself”. Hence, the watchword in postmodernity is “performativity”. As Lyotard says: “Technology became important to contemporary knowledge only through the mediation of a generalized spirit of performativity” (Lyotard, 1991a; 12 - 13).

For humans to compete with the inhuman they have to disregard the inefficiency of self-consciousness. Questions as to why they as specific individuals are busy completing a task becomes subordinated to completing the task in as little time as possible. Of course for the inhuman such questions are not subordinated because it cannot ask them at all.

### **3.4 PERFORMATIVITY: A LEGITIMISING POWER-PLAY**

In the absence of a legitimising metanarrative, technology provides the tools with which one claim to truth outperforms another and increases a claim's chances of survival.

In a similar way as classical skepticism the breakup of the Modern metanarrative of emancipation, promising freedom through Rationality, into an infinitude of essays, generates problems for legitimisation. Where Descartes could fence off the skepticism of humanists with an appeal to guaranteed access to thought, scientists after 1950, in the wake of Hiroshima and the Nazi rise to power on a metanarrative that found “scientific” legitimisation of the use of technology in the “destiny” of the German people as

a “historico-spiritual people” lived out through the three services of “labor”, “defense” and “knowledge”, could not. Scientists have increasingly been asked to legitimize their legitimization, in other words their Rational method. Science has become one more *language game* among so many others.

### 3.4.1 The Dilemma of Rational Science

The Enlightenment’s distinguishing characteristic is that it grounds the legitimization of science and truth in the autonomy of interlocutors involved in ethical, social and political praxis. As we have seen, there are immediate problems with this form of legitimization. The problem becomes apparent when we look at the way language functions in statements constructing such a legitimating narrative.

A *denotative* statement with cognitive value describing a thing or situation only leads to a *prescriptive* statement with practical value on the grounds of relevance. Establishing the relevance of a description to act as a prescription therefore, depends on the competence of the person judging what is relevant and what not. The problem, however, is that *there is nothing to prove that if a statement describing a real situation is true, it follows that a prescriptive statement based upon it (the effect of which will necessarily be a modification of that reality) will necessarily be just*, no matter how competent the judge is. Here, the effect of dividing reason into cognitive or theoretical reason on the one hand, and practical reason on the other, is to attack the legitimacy of the discourse of science as a metanarrative. In effect it says that science has no special calling to supervise the game of praxis or the game of aesthetics, for that matter. The game of science is thus equalised with the others (Lyotard, 1991b; 40).

### 3.4.2 The Production of Proof

In postmodernity the production of proof thus falls under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth, but performativity. In other words, proof does not mean that something has to be true but is calculated through the most effective possible input/output equation. Hence, once again, similar to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “in the discourse of

today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power" (Lyotard, 1991b; 46). Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power<sup>4</sup>. Lyotard (1991b; 46) identifies three distinct language games in this power play:

- denotative game (in which what is relevant is the true/false distinction)
- prescriptive game (in which the just/unjust distinction pertains)
- technical game (in which the criterion is the efficient/inefficient distinction)

Gaining power in the postmodern context means that the first two are largely ignored or paid scant lip-service and the third is made to act as a *de facto* metanarrative that has to breach all incredulity by sheer domination. "Force" appears to belong exclusively to the last game, the game of technology. It remains a game, however, and excludes all force operating by means of terror. Force operating as terror establishes, what Lyotard (1988; 9) calls, the *differend*, that is, an indication of what lies outside the realm of language games or play of differing opinions. As he (Lyotard, 1988; 9) says: "I would like to call a *differend* [*différend*] the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim". The efficacy of such force is based entirely on the threat to eliminate the opposing player, not on making a better "move" than he. Whenever efficiency (that is, obtaining the desired effect) is derived from a "Say or do this, or else you'll never speak again," then we are in the realm of terror, and the social bond is destroyed.

### **3.4.3 Controlling the Context or Being Right**

Performativity, the technical language game coupled with the efficiency provided by superior technology, increases the ability to produce proof, and subsequently also increases the ability to be right. The technical criterion, introduced on a massive scale into scientific knowledge, cannot fail to influence the truth criterion. The same can be said of the relationship between justice and performance. The probability that an order would be pronounced just is said to increase with its chances of being implemented, which would in turn increase with the performance capability of the prescriber. Hence, in postmodernity the "normativity of laws is replaced by

the performativity of procedures" (Lyotard, 1991b; 46 - 47) which has "context control" as its ultimate goal. In other words, the most efficient language game in a given context gains *de facto* legitimation and does not have to explain itself any further. And as we have seen neither the denotative game that has truth as its aim or the prescriptive game that has justice as aim is regarded as efficient in postmodernity. They have to be either supplemented or entirely supplanted by the technical game.

The technical language game creates a virtual reality of jargon that describes the existence and operation of certain technologies. Because this is the most efficient language game it drives out any contenders. The way it describes a context is the way "reality" will look. By merely adopting the jargon one is already speaking the "truth" and because the operating procedures are so efficient they are considered to be just by default. The reality of the technological language game is narrowed down to include only "what works", whatever that might be.

Technology has a way of promoting itself. Through information technology a world in which technology in general provides the best solutions to problems is propagated. Those individuals who are most skilled at making use of the technologies on offer are celebrated as heroes and rewarded accordingly. The exorbitant amounts of money attracted by sports stars, the ultimate skilled performers, testify for this claim. A world, and any possible context in that world, is propagated where all problems disappear through technological solutions, whether that is a pill for impotence, or mass-manufacturing of hamburgers. The only criteria to which proof of technological success has to adhere in postmodernity is that it works. Often, the limited sense in which it worked and possible side effects are disregarded. We have to look closer at what it means for something to have worked as a solution. For this reason we have to look closer at what it means to "prove" something.

#### **3.4.4 Proving the Proof**

Lyotard (1991b; 24). provides three criteria to which a statement acting as proof has to adhere in order to be considered legitimate:

- the sender should speak the truth about the referent (reality).
- it should be possible for the addressee validly to give (or refuse) his assent to the statement he hears.
- the referent is supposed to be “expressed” by this statement in conformity with what it actually is.

The *rule of adequation* (law of identity) becomes problematical. What I say is true because I prove that it is but what proof is there that my proof is true? The scientific solution of this difficulty, says Lyotard (1991b; 24), consists in the observance of two rules:

- a referent is that which is susceptible to proof and can be used as evidence in a debate. Not: I can prove something because reality is the way I say it is. But: as long as I can produce proof, it is permissible to think that reality is the way I say it is, and,
- the same referent cannot supply a plurality of contradictory or inconsistent proofs.

Thus science and its laws are legitimised on the basis of their efficiency in producing referents that can be used as proof. In turn this efficiency is legitimised on the basis of science and law. It is precisely this context control, establishing the context by efficiently producing proof of its limitations, that a generalized computerization of society may bring.

The performativity of an utterance, be it denotative or prescriptive, increases proportionally to the amount of information about its referent (reality) one has at one's disposal. The relationship between science and technology is reversed. Science no longer provides the truth about a referent rather technology provides an abundance of information that allows one to force less informed opinions out of consideration. The quest for more information necessitates greater sophistication in the means of obtaining proof, and that in turn benefits performativity in accordance with this “logic of power growth based on the acquisition of more efficient technology” (Lyotard, 1991b; 47).

### 3.4.5 Skills in the Performativity Driven Environment

The sophistication of a performativity driven environment necessitates two kinds of skill identified by Lyotard (1991b; 48). The first kind is more specifically designed to tackle world competition. “Specialities” in different fields are created to sell on the world market as expert skills for high and middle management executives. “Telematics”, operation of information technology, such as computers, receive priority in education, medicine and biology.

The second kind fulfills society’s own needs, maintaining its internal cohesion. It implies the formation and dissemination of a general model of life, most often legitimated by the emancipation narrative

The question now asked is no longer “Is it true?” but “What use is it?” In the context of the mercantilization of knowledge, more often than not this question is equivalent to: “Is it saleable?” And in the context of power-growth: “Is it efficient?” Having competence in a performance-orientated skill does indeed seem saleable in the conditions described above, and it is efficient by definition. What no longer makes the grade is competence as defined by other criteria like true/false, just/unjust, etc. and, of course, low performativity in general.

### 3.5 POSTMODERN REALITY

A near all-pervasive notion in postmodernity is that reality is *mediated*, produced, by technology and that this has brought on a crisis in representation (Hutcheon; 1991; 31). In a society where performativity is ubiquitous and technology is used to establish and control reality it is no surprise to find that images proliferate and compete voraciously for attention. The idea that reality is a *simulation*, that our environment has become a *virtual-reality* is the extreme thesis that Jean Baudrillard attempts to work out. For him this is nowhere more apparent than in the realm of television.

### 3.5.1 Reality as a Television Screen

The faster the flow of pictures on the TV screen and the greater the amount of channels the happier the postmodern individual considers himself to be. Scanning images and channels is considered the height of entertainment. It provides a fascinating variety of experience, at a breath-taking pace in an endless play of simulation. It also provides freedom from responsibility for anything seen. Baudrillard identifies a *flâneur* that is tied to an armchair in front of the TV set. The stroller does not stroll any more rather it is the TV images, TV commercials, the goods and joys they advertise who stroll, and run, and flow in front of the hypnotized viewer. Viewing is the only activity left to the former stroller. "Baudelaire's stroller has turned into Baudrillard's watcher" (Bauman, 1994a;155).

The *scoptophilic flâneur* is transfixed before the seduction of the television set that promises a total overall picture. It is within this promise of omnipotence that the watcher seeks to find the one thing that characterizes postmodern reality: *disappearance*.

For Baudrillard the Television set is a desert of images in which can be found "*an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance*" (Bauman, 1994a; 154). The most bizarre disappearance of all is that of death, the principle of Evil. "Rather than a mortal mode of disappearance, a fractal mode of dispersal" (Baudrillard, 1993c; 4). This disappearance of evil, itself evil in the sense of dispersing ignorance as "anything goes", provides an opportunity for an anarchic ethics. Over-stimulated by images of possible ethical configurations the watcher is tempted to try out ever changing forms of ethical interaction without the burden of memory tying him to any one option. In postmodernity ethics can be changed like fashion.

### 3.5.2 A Fractal Seduction

The image of a television in every house shaping its occupants view of life according to a programmed code recalls for Baudrillard the notion of a *fractal*. Fractals provide a geometry that can deal with more complicated needs for

representation but still makes distinctions between useful and useless information in an arbitrary way. It is a more powerful calculation and for that reason very seductive, but is not for this reason less indifferent to human needs. This fractal dispersal has the cold quality of an unbreakable mathematical object. It generates itself infinitely and perfectly by feeding the results of its equation back into the variables of its algorithm in an infinite unbreakable loop that creates ever more complicated patterns. It is the statistical calculation of the ratio with which things disappear in order to reappear in a mutated or digitally “morphed” form elsewhere in the system. This is the promise of perpetual reappearance, reversability, eternal life, the end of death. The alternative, “fragility, which belongs to the realm of appearances” (Baudrillard, 1990; 122), itself disappears leaving appearances under perfect control of the fractal. This promise of the end of death is what gives TV the power to fascinate the viewer more completely than the cinema. “Television knows no night. It is perpetual day. TV embodies our fear of the dark, of the night, of the other side of things. It is the incessant light, the incessant lighting, which puts an end to the alternating round of day and night” (Baudrillard, 1990; 169).

TV is inherently conservative because it depends on “soundbites” to get its message across. In the same way that fractal mathematics is used to factor out unnecessary information and free up more bandwidth in the transmission of digitised images via the internet, “soundbites” factor out free play and excess meaning. Fractals seduce with its apparent complexity and ability to be self-perpetuating in a systematic way. The television is seductive in a similar way, it also promises complexity and everlasting life but in a controlled way that never lets the watcher experience his actual powerlessness to live up to the standards set by the medium. In actuality the watcher has a body that takes time to heal after being punched and cannot get up again after its been shot through the heart. Also, the situations in which this body might find itself always has an unpredictable quality and cannot be negotiated with the cool detachment of a consciousness that later edits the bits that don't fit.

### **3.5.3 Disappearance or the Deterioration of Sign and Image**

In order to create a scenario for the phenomenon of disappearance in postmodernity Baudrillard works with the deterioration of two key concepts, the *image* and the *sign*. Baudrillard thinks that the difference between “original” and “copy” is “entirely redundant”. This is in keeping with his belief that the only way to prevent the social system from imploding according to the law of entropy, is to take up an extreme theoretical position. He suggests that an extreme position aims to “[p]lay out the end of things, offer a complete parody of it . . . even if things are not really at their end, well! Let’s act as if they were. It’s a game, a provocation. Not in order to put a full stop to everything but, on the contrary, to make everything begin again” (Baudrillard, 1993a; 133).

The deterioration of image and sign leaves reality to be explained in terms of a “single brutal sign which exists in its purest state and which goes through the universe, simply reproducing itself, constantly and forever” (Baudrillard, 1993a; 141). This brutal sign is the *simulacrum* of which the fractal is the mathematical metaphor. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.

Baudrillard (1983; 11) provides a synopsis of the progression that led to this state of affairs. The deterioration follows the successive phases of the image and the sign:

- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the *absence* of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum

In the latter instance the simulacrum, having no relation to any basic reality, is reproduced (produced as an “original” that has no original) by means of different *codes*. Simulation and models are the exemplars of pure reproduction. By means of the “code” reality can be bypassed and a

simulacrum can mark the place of its disappearance. Bypassed reality allows a curious potential to emerge: *reversibility*.

Given that the origin in reproduction is the principle of generation, and not the object generated, complete reversability is possible: the last “original” produced can be perfectly reproduced. Difference between the real and its representation is erased. Reversability implies that death does not really happen because an exact copy merely takes the place of the previous copy and no one knows, or cares, if the “previous” “copy” might have been the original.

Generalised simulation and reverseability is accompanied by the death of all essentialisms. One of the symptoms of this is that opposites begin to collapse and “everything becomes undecideable”: the beautiful and the ugly in fashion, the left and the right in politics, the true and the false in the media, the useful and the useless at the level of objects, nature and culture, all these become interchangeable in the era of reproduction and simulation. All finalities disappear; nothing is outside the system, which becomes a tautology.

Baudrillard (1983; 83) identifies three kinds of simulation that developed at stages during history:

- counterfeit - classical Renaissance
- production - industrial era
- simulation by means of the code - post-industrial era

The “code” Baudrillard (1983; 103) has in mind refers not to a single master code but to the principle of generation that produces copies perfectly and is triggered by the ubiquitous codes that pervade our society, for example:

- binary code of computer technology
- DNA code in biology
- digital code in television and sound recording
- code in information technology (“bar code”)

The reign of the simulacrum as the sign (non-sign) into which all other signs flow means that no human economy can be reduced to a putative utilitarian base, with equilibrium being its normal state. Waste is inevitably generated in the drive for prestige as the sign becomes a symbol of *status*.

In postmodern socio-economic reality human beings do not search for happiness or equality but by means of the consumption of codes differentiate themselves through systems of signs. Life-styles and values, not economic need, is the basis of social life in postmodernity. Analogous to Lyotard's observation an analysis of consumption in terms of signs and symbols undermines the validity of the distinction between true and false, artificial and real needs. Because signs can be infinitely produced and manipulated they cannot be withheld from circulation as the aspect of their performativity forces them onto the scene. The object itself has no inherent value but can be made to play, signify in *relation* to other objects. "In order to generate the meaning of a sign, not only *that* sign, but the whole system, is involved - the meaning is *distributed* . . . In a system of distributed semiotics the sign is constituted by the sum of its relationships to other signs" (Cilliers, 1998a; 81).

In such systems signs and images have no scarcity value. There is a constant production, overproduction of signs. There is a constant threat of *deflation* of prices in a postmodern market. But there is not necessarily a concomitant overproduction of meaning. Meaning becomes a scarce commodity which experts, the envois of modernity, dispense at ever inflating prices. As Lyotard has pointed out, the expert will be more believable if he can back his claims up by means of technology or if he has access to information technology, as all the guests who flaunt their books and knowledge on the *Oprah Show* will undoubtedly attest. The importance of the content of the programming has to play second fiddle to what is considered of utmost importance namely the "technological fix" (Bauman, 1994b; 187). The mere fact that information is delivered by means of the coolest new gadget permeates the contents with a sense of meaningfulness.

In other words, the work of the expert is to calculate, by using the most sophisticated technology available, the "sum" of the relationships one sign

has with another. This can only be done if all information about the sign's relationships are available. The quest for maximized *surveillance* and statistical data is a characteristic of the modern search for meaning, the search for reality. In a postmodern environment the notion of a search is abandoned and meaning and reality is produced by surveillance and information in the form of statistics.

Individuals lose their uniqueness and become mere statistics. This process leads to a deterioration in the individuals ability to take personal responsibility for his actions. In a world where nothing is real and death and economic need has disappeared behind the efficiency of technology driven lifestyles the individual cannot relate to the seriousness of his actions. This inability to identify personal responsibility presents a challenge to the very core of ethics.

### **3.6 THE ARTIST POLITICIAN: OBJECTIVE IRONY**

It is not a matter of taking up a critical position outside of the discourse of consumption. That is to say, if it is at all possible to imagine an outside. All discourses and all dialectics are in principle consumable, in larger quantities and less, and inevitably generate revenue, including capital.

Instead Baudrillard suggests an artistic approach that he borrows from Baudelaire's idea of the "absolute commodity". Baudrillard suggests that "the modern artist should not try to revalorize, resacrilize traditional art or aesthetics, but go further into the commodity . . . the modern artist owes it to himself to give the commodity a heroic status . . ." (Baudrillard, 1993b; 148). Thus, an anti-discourse must be achieved within the sentimental discourse of consumption. The exalted discourse of abundance must be duplicated by a critique of consumer society, even to the point where advertising intentionally parodies advertising. The society of consumption can then also be the society of the denunciation of consumption in the form of *objective irony*. This form of criticism resides inside the object or commodity itself and is produced with it. Baudrillard (1993a; 143) writes that:

. . . today we have a form of *irony which is objective* . . . It can no longer be exercised as if from outside of things. Instead, it is the objective irony which arises from within things themselves - it is an irony which belongs to the system, and it arises from the system itself because the system is constantly functioning against itself.

Baudrillard suggests two political strategies in which the idea of objective irony takes on a political force. Firstly, what he calls *fatal theory* seeks to rediscover the subject's death and destiny, by implementing secondly, the notion of *Seduction* in the sense that the subject is dominated by the ungraspable irony of the object, which fascinates it completely and to which it is both morbidly attracted, in spite of itself, and at the same time repulsed.

The irony of the object lies in the fact that it never delivers what it promises. It seduces by promising but never delivering satisfaction. In this sense the consumer is caught up in a game where sooner or later he has to realise the extent to which he has exhausted his powers in pursuit of satisfaction and that the promise of satisfaction is empty. For Baudrillard this reintroduces a consideration of death and of evil. It is a strategy that forces consideration of the fatal consequences of our actions into the sphere of television, fractals and the simulacra. The objects that we use in order to deceive ourselves into believing that we will not die and that the individual has no responsibility for the fragility and death of the other is brought into plain sight by Baudrillard's strategy that exposes the futility of consumer driven happiness.

Baudrillard demonstrates, by way of pushing consumer phenomena to the extreme, the very real consequences of changes in symbolic and material forms, and this is important in a world increasingly dominated by media hype and obfuscation.

What the artist politician understands and has to use to her advantage, is that to conceive of a utopian society based on communication is an impossibility. Communication results, precisely, from a society's inability to set for itself new goals and to transcend itself by achieving them. Information shares this characteristic. Excess knowledge is dispersed arbitrarily in every direction on

the surface of screens. But this information is not subject to a pre-established law of meaning. Instead it is only subject to *commutation*.

In a communication society participants in dialogue interface each other through a connection. The simulacrum of the other interlocuter can only be rooted in reality as an electric plug in a socket. People are replaced by screens and terminals. It is almost as if dialogue takes place between different terminals or between different media. In a way the medium converses with itself in an intense circulation, an auto-referentiality of media which incorporates us in its network. Baudrillard (1993b; 146) calls this network an "integrated man-machine circuit". Communication "occurs" by means of a sole instantaneous circuit of electronic media mutating as it goes along. For it to be "good" communication it must take place fast and without pause in order to mutate constantly into ever refreshed versions of itself.

Silence is banished from the world inhabited by screens; it has no place in communication. But silence, as a form of objective irony, is exactly that blip in the circuitry, a minor catastrophe, a slip which, on television for instance, becomes highly meaningful. "It is a break laden with anxiety and jubilation, which confirms the fact that all this communication is basically nothing but a rigid script, an uninterrupted fiction designed to free us not only from the void of the television screen but equally from the void of our own mental screen" (Baudrillard, 1993c; 13).

For Baudrillard, all figures of otherness in the end, boil down to just one: that of the Object. All that is left is the "inexorability of the Object, the irredeemability of the Object" (Baudrillard, 1993c; 172). Baudrillard suggests a politics of the Object. As we have seen, power, the ability to be tolerant, exists solely by virtue of its symbolic ability to designate the Other, the Enemy, what is at stake, what threatens us, what is Evil. For Descartes this power lay in the certainty of rational thought. Lyotard described how power is gained through performativity. But, performativity makes no real distinctions between "enemy" and "friend", it takes whatever it needs to improve its own efficiency from whomever has it on offer. In other words it disregards the object as something that holds surprise in itself.

For Baudrillard however, the Object is exiting, because the Object is the point at which the subject vanishes. “The object is what theory can be for reality not a reflection but a challenge. This, potentially, is the way to go in search of otherness” (Baudrillard, 1993c; 173). Baudrillard’s strategy might restore a sense for the need for personal responsibility in the face of an object that challenges the subject to move beyond itself and consider ethics but he does not provide a way of dealing with the return of evil, dealing with death. He provides nothing more than the starting point, the realisation of a need for postmodern ethics. Zygmunt Bauman (1994b) attempts to think the possibilities opened up by such a beginning.

### **3.7 POSTMODERN ETHICS**

As we have seen Modernity regulated moral conduct by subsuming it to a large extent under the legislative and law-enforcing activity of global societal institutions (The Church and the University) responsible for correct thinking. “This condition does not hold anymore; ethical discourse is not institutionally pre-empted and hence its conduct and resolution (or irresolution) must be an organic part of any theoretical model of postmodernity” (Bauman, 1994a; 201).

The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised. Ethical tasks of individuals grow while the socially produced resources to fulfill them shrink. Moral responsibility comes together with the loneliness of moral choice (Bauman, 1994a; xxii).

#### **3.7.1 A Difficult Ethics**

Bauman (1994a; 202) says that the distinctly postmodern ethical paradox arises primarily from two features of the postmodern scene:

- *pluralism* of authority, and
- the centrality of *choice* in the self-constitution of postmodern agents

An authority that (attempts to) conforms to the logic of “passages”, in other words, an authority without universalizing and globalizing ambitions, has a two-fold effect:

First, it rules out the binding norms that each “agency” must (or could be reasonably expected to) obey. Rules emerge mostly as reactions to strife and consequences of ensuing negotiations. However, the already negotiated rules remain by and large precarious and under-determined, while the need for new rules keep proliferating.

Secondly, in the absence of a “principle of coordination” the negotiation of rules must assume a distinctly *ethical* character. What is expected is non-utilitarian self-constraint on the part of autonomous agencies. Both non-utility and autonomy define *moral* action as distinct from either self-interested or legally prescribed conduct.

Thus, the pluralism of authorities is conducive to the resumption by agents of moral responsibility. Moral responsibility tend to be neutralized when agencies (subjects?) are subordinated to a unified, quasi-monopolistic legislating authority. “Having become perforce subjects of a *dialogue*, they must now refer to principles wide enough to command authority of the sort that belongs solely to ethical values” (Bauman, 1994a; 202).

In the absence of Absolute Law the enhanced autonomy of the agents has a twofold effect for ethics:

Firstly, postmodern ethics is characterised by a preoccupation with self-determination. Autonomy is the defining trait of the postmodern agent. This autonomy manifests as self-monitoring, self-reflection and self-evaluation and are the mechanisms synonymous with self constitution.

Secondly, the limits of the agent whose autonomy is to be observed and preserved turn into a most closely guarded and hotly contested frontier. How far are the autonomous powers of the agent to extend and at what point is their limit to be drawn?

On the postmodern scene, the agent is not just an actor and decision-maker, but a *moral subject*. As Bauman (1994a; 202) says: “Only ethical principles

offer such criteria of value-assessment and value-choice as are at the same time supra-individual (carry an authority admittedly superior to that of individual self-preservation), and fit to be used without surrendering the agent's autonomy". Postmodern existence, in the sense that it is an ironic objectivity, demands "*that the agent be a morally competent subject*" (Bauman, 1994a; 203). There is no way out of this responsibility. There is no legislating authority that can take the blame for making bad rules. There is no excuse like "I was just doing my job" or "I merely followed orders".

### 3.7.2 Practical Tolerance

This ethical dialogue cannot depend on any obvious social agencies that may guide the choice between indifference and solidarity, the two sharply opposed versions of postmodern *tolerance*. The choice will eventually have to be *practical* and do without the support of philosophical assurances. Which form the postmodern tolerance will take is in no way guaranteed in advance (Bauman, 1994a; xxiii).

Behind the postmodern ethical paradox hides a genuine practical dilemma: acting on one's moral convictions is naturally pregnant with a desire to win for such convictions an ever more universal acceptance however, every attempt to do just that smacks of the already discredited bid for domination. The "moral law" that prescribes conduct to which every individual must conform at the expense of autonomy leads, paradoxically, to indifference in ethical matters (Bauman, 1994a; xxiii).

It is not easy to find the golden mean between colonizing temptations (fundamentalist faith and fascistic expansionism) and the selfishness of tribal self-closure (the gang and patriotism). None of the alternatives seem to be an attractive proposition, yet none of their mixtures promises to be foolproof and, above all, stands a chance of persevering (Bauman, 1994a; xxiv).

On the postmodern scene ethics can only stand a chance of achieving any form of credibility if it becomes a strategy of "radical antagonism", a "play upon reality", the "issuing of a challenge to the *real*" an attempt to "put the *real*, quite simply, on the spot" (Baudrillard, 1993a; 140).

This means that the simulacrum itself must be confronted. The system of signs must be infiltrated and made to signify ethically. If reality is the effect of the “sign and the system of reference is only the result of the power of the sign itself” (Baudrillard, 1993a; 141) then the sign itself must be interrupted by ethics.

In working out a program for ethics one should however, not lose sight of the moral character of the individual. The anarchic ethics of postmodernity may be too much to bear in the long run but, reason alone cannot replace the spontaneous action that a good deed requires. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Reason has come to be closely connected with Modernity and the narrowing effect it implies. Bauman (1994b; 247) unfortunately works with the notion of reason as a Modernist construct and is thus unable to think of reason as being of ethical and moral significance: “Reason is about making correct decisions, while moral responsibility precedes all thinking about decisions as it does not, and cannot care about any logic which would allow the approval of an action as correct”.

In chapter six the argument will be made that reason has to return in order to produce good moral judgment. One cannot merely depend on an emotive “unfounded, non-rational, un-arguable, no-excuses-given and non-calculable urge” (Bauman, 1994b; 247) to provide appropriate moral conduct.

### **3.8 SUMMARY**

Postmodern ethics does not provide a system of rules by way of which each individual knows how to act responsibly. It provides an anarchic environment in which differing notions of ethics compete with each other. It is a situation that is complicated by the proliferation of technology and its enhancement of performativity. This situation provides a unique opportunity, the most redeeming aspect of postmodernity, for individual responsibility to take effect. However, it is not an easy endeavor because the guarantees of rule following are absent. If Modern ethics is considered a rule based system, postmodern ethics tends towards absolute chaos and an “anything goes” approach in which the one with the most sophisticated technology calls the shots.

Neither of these approaches to ethics is satisfactory. In the following chapters we will look at the complex possibilities that present themselves if an attempt is made to think about ethics as residing between absolute rules of conduct on the one hand and absolute chaos and moral amnesia on the other hand.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Modern temporality is that which under Modernity with a capital "M" turns malignant in its megalomaniac attempts to make time stand still.

<sup>2</sup> It is my contention that Modernity is the tyranny of the same that allows no change and resists it with force. This principled resistance is met by a counter force directly opposed that is intent on change, The Principle of Revolution.

<sup>3</sup> I will not use the term "culture industry" here to express what the Frankfurt School regarded as the "capitalist" attempt at "hegemony". This I believe is a facile conclusion. That "capitalism" is able to guarantee the stability of the capitalist system by imposing a "system of values" aimed at "ensuring a conformity upon its recipients and driving out all oppositional, resistant ways of thinking" (Campbell and Kean, 1997; 283) depends on a simplistic notion of what a system is. It does not take into account the many ways in which the system adapts to the activities that feed into it and changes because of it.

<sup>4</sup> This is an external power. Once again it is a power aimed at dominating what is perceived as a threatening and chaotic world.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### EMMANUEL LEVINAS

#### A “RADICAL” ETHICAL POSITION

##### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The Jewish scholar Franz Rosenzweig was interested in bringing the traditions of Philosophy and the Old Testament into conversation with each other and was for this reason one of Levinas' most prominent early influences. Rosenzweig arguably provides the best introduction to Levinas' work. The following provides a good common sense description of his personal standpoint on the possibility of thinking:

I really believe that a philosophy, to be adequate, must rise out of thinking that is done from the personal standpoint of the thinker. To achieve being objective, the thinker must proceed boldly from his own subjective situation. The single condition imposed upon us by objectivity is that we survey the entire horizon; but we are not obliged to make this survey from any position other than the one in which we are, nor are we obliged to make it from no position at all. Our eyes are, indeed, only our own eyes; yet it would be folly to imagine we must pluck them out in order to see straight (Glatzer, 1972; 179).

This chapter follows Levinas as he complicates matters for the personal standpoint by introducing the notion of an association with the “proximity” of the *other*. The inquiry focuses specifically on the question of *justice* regarding the position of an “I” or *ego* in relation to what Levinas calls the “other”, my neighbour, and also the “Other” as the world in general or God<sup>1</sup>.

For Levinas it is “[s]peaking, rather than ‘letting be,’ [that] solicits the Other<sup>2</sup>” (Levinas, 1994a; 195). This solicitation into face-to-face discourse opens a site where ethics, through the responsibility of interlocutors for each other, can take place.

Levinas is convinced that this meeting of faces is the expression of a *desire* for that which transcends self-centred categories of understanding. For him, categories, the pigeon-holes in which acquired knowledge are ordered to make sense, merely seek to assimilate the other and make use of him, in the process disrespecting the fact that the other always remains, in some way, outside the sphere of what can be known. Hence, ethics manifests as the desire to break with these categories of prejudice in the *instant* of meeting, face-to-face.

However, the ethical desire awakened in the instant of meeting is *infinite* and does not meet with satisfaction in any simple sense. By way of analogy it might be compared with the desire of an artist to express an object in a rendering. The desire to know the other as object is caught in a sublime double movement between melancholy and *jouissance*.<sup>3</sup> It is the desire to take part in the contingency of the concrete world of which the mind carries only a reflection. As Levinas explains:

The basic difference is between a mode of thought which tries to gather all things around the mind, or self, of the thinker, and an externally oriented mode which attempts to penetrate into what is radically other than the mind that is thinking it. This difference emerges with peculiar clarity in the case of my meeting with the other person (Levinas, 1994b; 16).

This entails an ethics that relies on the use of senses and metaphors in human relationships that supplement those of sight. An ethics that urges an exploration with eyes closed, unafraid of the dark relying on a “[s]peech [that] cuts across vision” (Levinas, 1994b; 195).

This chapter will look at the way in which Levinas thinks of philosophy and the old testament tradition respectively. Having surveyed the territory, the notion of “Ethics as First Philosophy” can be introduced. The most important aspect of Levinas’s ethics is the face-to-face relation. Without this complex interaction there can be no ethics or subsequent justice. We will look specifically at what Levinas means by “face”.

For Levinas, language and rationality are linked and makes it possible for faces to interact. We will look at his claim that neither language nor rationality establishes or grounds ethics but rather, that the relationship is reversed. We will also look at Levinas’s attempt to overcome his own ontological language use, threatening to end the ethical relation, by focusing on the notions of “said” and “saying”. The ethical relationship depends on the singular individual substituting himself for the other in language. We will look at what this means for the identity of the “self”. This leads to a consideration of the social context, designated by Levinas as “the third party”.

Lastly this chapter will consider criticism of Levinas on three fronts. Firstly, that he attempts to ground ethics in a mystical religious metaphysics. Secondly, that he denies a place to woman as significant participants in an ethical relation. And thirdly, that he denies the artificiality of his own project.

#### **4.2 BETWEEN TWO TRADITIONS: PHILOSOPHY AND THE OLD TESTAMENT**

*Hebraism and Hellenism, - between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them (Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy) (Derrida, 1993f; 79).*

The quote above is placed at the start of Derrida’s essay on Levinas called *Violence and Metaphysics*. It acts to illustrate what Levinas considers the Western world to consist of. It is this oscillation that Levinas tries to come to

grips with in his ethics. Of the Western world, as reflected in the traditions of the Bible and the Greeks, Levinas says: “[d]espite the end of Europocentrism, disqualified by so many horrors, I believe in the eminence of the human face expressed in Greek Letters and in our own, which owe the Greeks everything. It is thanks to them that our history makes us ashamed” (Nemo, 1985; 117). And further: “though it’s a dangerous thing to say publicly, . . . humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest - all the exotic - is dance” (Mortley, 1991; 18).

These are highly problematic statements if one considers that Levinas wants to break with prejudice to allow specifically the “exotic”, the “rest”, to furnish the individual with a concrete experience. Levinas seems to be saying that concrete experience can only be regarded as “experience” if it is translated back into an understandable idiom.

Literature, for Levinas, has the right quality, unlike the hard, neutral, concepts of philosophy, to attempt the translation of experience, and specifically the unique experience of a “face”. As he says: “Across all literature the human face speaks - or stammers, or gives itself a countenance, or struggles with its caricature” (Nemo, 1985; 117).

An archetypal scene in Western literature describes the misunderstanding between two lovers engaged in a relationship so possessive that it attempts to exclude all interference. In the ever hopeful story of *Romeo and Juliet* the lovers inevitably meet with their death. The irreducible face-to-face relationship of the lovers, one-on-one, excludes the world-of-faces in which their relationship has no place, to privilege only each other’s face. Inevitably the exclusion turns violent because the encryption of the relationship is untenable for a responsible life within society as a whole. As Levinas says: “there is a sense in which my relationship with another is in conflict with my relationship with a third party . . . I cannot live in society on the basis of this one-to-one responsibility alone” (Mortley, 1991; 18).

The analogy of the lovers serve to illuminate a tendency throughout the tradition of philosophy to favour only the rational and the purely theoretical. Theory cannot risk being disturbed by the messiness and unpredictability of concrete social interaction. In this sense philosophy is obsessed with the purity of its theory in the way two lovers would be about the exclusivity of their love. As Levinas says:

In western philosophy, sociality is regarded almost as a coincidence, which is a failure. A coincidence which failed to realise its potential: and there's a whole theme of western philosophy, and western literature as well, which is devoted to disappointment in love. Lovers misunderstand each other. They don't coincide, they are alien to each other. In my view sociality should be regarded as the excellence of the human species: sociality is worth more than solitude (Mortley, 1991; 20-21).

For Levinas, the interruption of theory, as with the lover's relationship, is exactly what can save it from having to resort to violence. Hence, he characterises the ethical relationship as marked by infinite interruption. Whereas philosophy seeks to close itself up in a perfect theory the tradition of the old testament always seeks to deal in one way or another with failure. For Levinas "the Jewish contribution in philosophy always comes with the appearance of the ethical as being of prime importance" (Mortley, 1991; 20). Thus, the old testament tradition interrupts the perfect theories of philosophy by introducing the notion of "society" as being of prime importance.

The flux of interruptions, of faces presenting themselves, are brought under some control through words offered to the other. The *proximity* of the face is not only about understanding the other, but also means *association* with him. This association is not a Rational endeavour that aims to put the other into submission or forces him to acknowledge my superior knowledge. In this sense it does not take its cue from Plato or Aristotle but from something older.

Aristotle reverts to an appeal to reason, albeit sensitive to context, on which to base ethics. For him reason is what is essential to the individual, as he says:

Indeed this Principle (pure philosophical contemplation) would seem actually to *be* (the “Self” of) each man, in that it is the authoritative (sovereign) and better (supreme in goodness) part of him. So it would be strange (absurd) if he were to choose not the life of his own self, but that of something else (of some other). . . . everything finds best (proper) and pleasantest what is truly (naturally) its own. For men, therefore, the life of reason (pure intellect) is the best and pleasantest (since reason more than anything else is man) - and consequently the happiest also (Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, chapter vii<sup>4</sup>).

However, something has to be capable of this thought *before* it becomes a self, conscious of its own sovereignty. For Levinas reason is not what fosters man’s happiness. On the contrary reason is tainted with guilt because it distracts man from ethical interaction that precedes consciousness and seduces him away from society into a fabricated world of the mind. Hence, “individuals exist; cognition yields only generalities. The operations of the understanding are in and of themselves tainted with guilt. It is not difficult to detect the biblical origin of the view that the appearance of knowledge portends a loss of innocence” (Wyschogrod, 1974; 91). Guilt arises out of not partaking in the actuality of the world. In order to contemplate, to reason, one has to remove oneself from practical matters. This can be done in absolute solitude. According to Aristotle happiness can be slowly attained through this process of awakening Reason and theory. As Levinas says:

The culmination of this sort of philosophy lies in contemplation . . . of pure essence. Transcending the otherness of the world, and its alien character, through a kind of knowledge which makes it accessible to human thought. Happiness itself, the aspiration of

man, is thought to lie in understanding and the peace of truth (Mortley, 1991; 20).

Later in this chapter it will become clear how reason's resolution of this guilt takes the form of a theoretical identity, of which nationalism is the most extreme example, that allows theory an uninterrupted participation in the world. Not only is Aristotle's theory of being through knowledge a "totalising" structure that admits to nothing outside, it is also an insular theory that holds the wise man to be one that can practice contemplation by himself. Aristotelian Reason is insular, dependent only on the being who thinks it, an activity that is disinterested and self-sufficient. It needs no other<sup>5</sup>.

Levinas acknowledges that the progression of Reason is subtle, and that it does initially admit to an outside, *alterity* or other, but by progressing rapidly it seeks to close in, to *grasp* (*fassen*) onto the "unknown" and force it down to understanding. Levinas (1994b; 42) describes this progression as follows:

Knowledge designates first a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation ... [but] theory ... designates comprehension (intelligence) - the *logos* of being - that is, a way of approaching the known being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes.

Levinas makes a distinction between "thinking" and "knowledge". Thinking is a vital process of dealing with the world and survival. It flows forth from a living being, whereas knowledge is stagnant and forces the movement of life into a pre-packaged form. This force is compared with grasping or gripping something tightly. Levinas is adamant that the process of understanding is an alienation from the realities of life and that "this [grasping] is not something applied like a form of magic to the 'impotent spirituality' of thinking, nor is it the guarantee of certain psycho-psychological conditions" (Levinas, 1994a;76). Rather, it is the

product of a sustained denial of sociability. The consequent lack of respect for that which is other and will always escape from insular contemplation and theory is then made manifest in the violence needed to secure the insulated theory against the disruptive forces of being (otherness), that is always unpredictable.

Insulated theory, pure reason, has the ability to give the individual the feeling of freedom, unconnected to anything outside of the sphere of reason. This sphere is characterised by two features:

- knowledge that re-presents the presented, fragmented lived world as a whole, a totality, and,
- independence from the lived world, solitude of a self divorced from any other.

These features sustain the notion of a pure theoretic of thought's freedom. Socrates spoke of the inner voice or *daemon* that led him and on whom he has always depended. For Socrates an equivalence can be drawn between wisdom and freedom that continues throughout Western tradition. This can be described as the partial coincidence of the divine life with the human domain. Reason is an attempt to bring the divine into an understandable form, make man divine, a god, and also closed and self-similar without need of anything outside of it. Thus Levinas says:

The primacy of the same was Socrates' teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside - to receive nothing, or to be free. Freedom does not resemble the capricious spontaneity of free will; its ultimate meaning lies in this permanence in the same, which is reason. Cognition is the deployment of this identity; it is freedom. That reason in the last analysis would be the manifestation of a freedom, neutralising the other and encompassing him, can come as no surprise once it was laid down that sovereign reason knows only itself, that nothing other limits it. The neutralisation of the other who becomes a

theme or an object - appearing, that is, taking its place in the light - is precisely his reduction to the same (Levinas, 1994b; 43).

In the whole of western philosophy, contemplation or knowledge and the freedom of knowledge, the domain of the "free thinker" is inspiration for the mind (l'esprit). As Socrates (Plato, 1956; 130) says in his dialogue with *Meno*:

All nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, so that when man has recalled a single piece of knowledge - *learned* it, in ordinary language - there is no reason why he should not find out all the rest, if he keeps a stout heart and does not grow weary of the search; for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection

Knowing for the Socratic tradition, is the psyche or pneumatic force of thought, even in the act of feeling or willing. According to Levinas it has come to dominate the whole of human lived experience, in the period up to, and above all, including the present. And this knowing cannot tolerate, or even admit to, anything that escapes it. It has to experience and convert experience into accepted doctrine, teaching, sciences. The sociality of the Old Testament, the contribution of the Jews according to Levinas, is unthinkable in this sense for it is experience that allows for what cannot be explained.

#### **4.3 ETHICS AS FIRST PHILOSOPHY: THE WISDOM OF LOVE**

Levinas' article *Ethics as First Philosophy* (Levinas, 1994a; 75 - 87) can help us to formulate the following questions: Can thought be understood as possibly having a meaning beyond the representative structure of knowledge and its hold on being, a more urgent form of thought, that of pre-reflective, non-intentional, non-self-conscious wisdom? And how does this give meaning to ethics?

He starts the investigation with the notion of *intentionality*. Intentionality is generally regarded as the directedness of consciousness towards objects and the world. It consciously sifts through a myriad of options and chooses some

while discarding others. Intentionality, in this sense translates as the direction which the pursuit of knowledge takes.

What is of interest here is not the workings of such a self-conscious directedness but, on the contrary, whether or not there can be talk of an originary, non-theoretical intentionality preceding the active emotional (sensational) life of consciousness.

Levinas turns to Husserl as an example of someone who has been able to isolate non-theoretical intentionality, but who then bases his explanation on representation, the objectivising act, dragging it into some form of intellectualism again. Not that Levinas is “anti-intellectualist” (Levinas, 1994b; 109) but, he is concerned with what makes intellectualism possible.

Husserl’s theory unpacks as follows: he assumes without question that the world contains two sorts of *phenomena*, physical and psychical, and seeks to find,

- some feature or features which will distinguish psychic phenomena from physical phenomena and,
- certain basic classes into which psychic phenomena may be divided.

The difference between physical and psychical phenomena, Husserl concludes, is that the latter exhibits,

- intentionality or directedness towards objects and,
- direct and inerrant revelation to “an inner perception”, which is one with the act perceived.

Intentionality, directed towards objects and internally perceived, is revealed by the fact that most “mental verbs” are senseless (or only elliptically significant) in the absence of appropriate object-expressions, which state what the mental activity expressed by the verb is concerned with. Examples of such mental verbs are: doubt is *about*  $2+2 = 4$ ; pleased *with* etc. These mental verbs have no meaning by themselves and depend on the action and the object which they

combine for relevance. However, neither the act or object will signify meaningfully if the correct mental verb does not bind them.

Thus for Husserl psychological intentionality exercises a hold on being, (being that has no intention or consciousness without this hold and merely *is*), that constitutes it as a specific object with a specific orientation or function in the world. This filling out of being gratifies a longing for being to be accessed as an object. Intentionality directs being towards objects in the world and through returning again from the objects in the world a difference is established and being is experienced as a specific object amongst objects.

This movement of consciousness as intentionality, control and directedness, is the *transcendental ego* the unique identity of the individual. It is established by a "Transcendental Reduction that suspends all independence in the world other than that of consciousness itself, and causes the world to be rediscovered as *noema* [intended given]" (Levinas, 1994a; 79). Against Husserl, Levinas maintains that the transcendental ego is a reduced consciousness that cannot be said to encapsulate the whole of reality. It leads, or ought to lead, to full self-consciousness affirming itself as absolute being and confirming itself as an "I". This "I" is thought to maintain its identity (self-similarity) against all possible differences and is considered master of its own nature and of the universe, able to illuminate the darkest recesses of resistance to its powers.

However, Levinas argues that the "I", supposed to encapsulate the world and understand it, comes up against a contingent sphere in which it is, by its very flesh, implicated. This flesh, the world, implicates the "I" from the outset in what the transcendental ego would like to reduce from complexity and control as simplicity. The flesh is heir to all the vicissitudes of contingency, and so is implicated in the world. It is the pool of impure consciousness from which the reduced consciousness of the transcendental ego is distilled and crystallised into an object. Levinas is specific:

This reduced consciousness - which, in reflecting upon itself, rediscovers and masters its own acts of perception and science as objects in the world, thereby affirming itself as self-consciousness and absolute being, also remains a non-intentional consciousness of itself, as though it were a surplus somehow devoid of any wilful aim. A non-intentional consciousness operating, if one may put it like this, unknowingly as knowledge, as a non-objectivising knowledge (Levinas, 1994a; 79).

Intentional consciousness, having established being as the transcendental ego, an object amongst other objects, sets about to seek its own *reflection* in the objects of the world. Hence, along with its own mental acts and states, it also *thematizes* and seeks to grasp supposedly implicit modes of the non-intentional lived experience and attempts to show it explicitly, thus again reducing it to the control of the known. For Levinas this provides the counterpoint of what he is aiming at:

One may ask, however, whether, beneath the gaze of reflected consciousness taken as self-consciousness, the non-intentional, experienced as the counterpoint to the intentional, does not conserve and free its true meaning (Levinas, 1994a; 80).

This "true meaning", a meaning that escapes or dives under consciousness does not simply refer to a formal notion of potentiality. In other words, one cannot say that the non-intentional is merely the realm from which all possibilities may appear and come to fruition. For Levinas this would be equivalent to saying nothing at all which will leave only Husserl's reduction. Hence, he seeks to radicalise the notion of possibility. For this purpose two notions of the non-intentional may be pitted against each other: the non-intentional may find its true meaning in the

- potentiality of what is considered possible within a context, on the one hand, and,

- the intimacy of the non-intentional within what is known as pre-reflective consciousness and which is duration itself, on the other hand.

The first notion is a limited notion of possibility, because the context is marked off and only within this space can a consideration of what is possible take place. The second notion, the non-intentional coupled with the pre-reflective raises the question whether any knowledge, particular, implicit, potential, non-intentional or otherwise, of pre-reflective, consciousness can really be said to *know* anything?

Two possible answers to the latter question present themselves. In the first, knowledge is available albeit as a confused or scrambled code waiting to be deciphered. In the second, the more radical notion, no knowledge can be said to be apparent and is consciousness without aim or goal.

In both instances the word *know* can be more profitably substituted for the word *awareness*. Levinas seems to indicate that “awareness” comes closer to what he means by “originary intentionality”:

It is less an act than a pure passivity. Not only due to its being-without-having-chosen-to-be but also because of its fall into a confusion of possibilities already realised even before any choice might be made. It is a ‘consciousness’ that signifies not so much a knowledge of oneself as something that effaces presence or makes it discreet (Levinas, 1994a; 80).

Awareness suggests a pure duration that in phenomenology is still described as intentionally structured by a play of *retentions* and *protentions*. Following Bergson, what Levinas suggests, is not another *sort of time* but a duration that is not marked in space by the hands of a mechanical clock or any *protention* or *retention* of any form, which remains free from the sway of the will, absolutely outside all activity of the ego as the symbolical substitute for the real and concrete self (Bergson, 1910; 193). This pure duration, of which Bergson says, when he casts a look about him, “these objects . . . like myself they have lived, and like myself they have grown old” (Bergson, 1910; 130), is like the ageing

process which he considers a perfect model of passive synthesis, a lapse of time that no act of remembrance or reconstructing the past, could possibly reverse. He adds:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then, on the contrary, it would no longer *endure*. Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that, in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another (Bergson, 1910; 100).

Duration and experience, the *living* of life in the moment without marking it with the will, the intention of objectifying it as if such a moment belongs to myself alone and no other, is also the spiritual access to a realm beyond being<sup>6</sup>. "Pure duration or non-intervention as being without insistence, as being that dare not speak its name, being that dare not be; the agency of the instant without the insistence of the ego, which is already a lapse in time, which is 'over before its begun!'" (Levinas, 1994a; 81) is a realisation that allows an awareness of the fleeting nature of all life and knowledge. The implications of such a non-intentional consciousness is a return to *mauvaise conscience* (unhappy conscience).

The latter supposes an existence without any intentions, or aims, that cannot avail itself of the protective mask of a character contemplating in the mirror of the world a reassured and self-positing portrait. It has no name, no situation, no status. It is stripped of all qualities and identity recoils before its affirmation, for it dreads the return to self that is a necessary part of identification.

This is either *mauvaise conscience* or timidity. It is not guilty, but accused and responsible for its very presence. It has not yet been invested with any attributes, nor has it been justified in any way (Levinas, 1994a; 81). Because it is a consciousness that is accused and responsible for its presence, it is unhappy. It possesses no knowledge of how or as what to respond. It has to become singular and affirm itself as an “I”, a self that can take responsibility. Immediately upon doing so, it enters into ethics, into the need for justification and for doing right.

#### 4.4 THE FACE-TO-FACE RELATION

As we have seen, Levinas radicalises the notion of consciousness and thought to a point that he calls “originary”, in other words, he needs to show that something exists before any thought or consciousness in the Cartesian sense. It is something so old and original that it cannot even be doubted. He needs to make this move to establish his most fundamental point which is that ethics, and nothing else, allows consciousness to develop. Whatever comes out of the place of origin is already in confrontation with that which it differentiates itself from, the other. Thus, the first moment of consciousness is also the first problem for ethics. The first moment is already a discourse, even before any notion of formal language. It is, he argues,

apperceiving in discourse a non-allergic relation with alterity, toward apperceiving Desire - where power, by essence murderous of the other, becomes, faced with the other and “against all good sense,” the impossibility of murder, the consideration of the other, or justice (Levinas, 1994b; 47).<sup>7</sup>

For Levinas the non-allergic relation is always from the start established between two faces that regard each other. He describes the opening of ethical discourse between faces as follows:

... its critical intention leads it beyond theory and ontology: critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls

into question the exercise of the same. A calling into question of the same - which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same - is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics (Levinas, 1994b; 43).

This initial meeting is the reserve of the stranger or sojourner who walks the earth without claiming an identity. The "homeless" person who is not welcome for he is not known. For Levinas we are all initially in this position and can return there at any time. A return to this initial meeting is always apparent to those who travel to a foreign country for instance.

For Levinas mental interiority, the theoretical attitude of philosophy, that shuns contact with an exterior world exhibits an insufficient courage to assert oneself in one's being as a body of flesh and blood. This courage awaits the moment when it has enough knowledge about a situation so that it can act with control. The lack of courage dooms existence to the realm of being in general, the *il y a*<sup>8</sup>. Breaking free from the *il y a* involves violence for which no amount of theoretical speculation can prepare and for this reason involves others. Hence, one comes not into the world as such, but into question.

In "memory" of this violence, having the question of this violence posed to it, the ego (*moi*) has to remain ambiguous enough to recognise itself as potentially hateful to others in the manifestation of its identity. It is a hateful manifestation in the sense that it attempts to exclude all others in its drive to satisfy its appetite. The face of the other places a question mark over the priority of  $A=A^9$ , the principle of identity. Hence, "the principle of intelligibility and meaning, this sovereignty, or freedom within the human ego, is also the moment when humility occurs" (Levinas, 1994a; 81).

This moment of humility questions the affirmation and strengthening of being found in the famous and superficially rhetorical quest for the *meaning of life*. Humility suggests that the absolute ego, having used its vital, psychic and social

forces seen as its transcendental sovereignty, returns humbly to its *mauvaise conscience* and contrasts its identity with its previous state of non-identity or equivalence.

Pre-reflective, non-intentional consciousness, would never be able to return to a moral realisation of this passivity. For one cannot suppose that in non-intentional consciousness one could already see a subject postulating itself, assured of its right to be and “dominating” the timidity of the non-intentional like a spiritual infancy that is outgrown. Morality is the domain of a humbled ego, one that has been placed into question, returning to its *mauvaise conscience* at the very moment when it identifies itself as distinct from it.

The position of being in the ontological sense, a distinct and identifiable ego that asserts itself as an “I”, depends on the following notions in order to work its guarantee:

- intentional thought
- knowledge and,
- a grasp of the here and now.

All three these notions can carry on undisturbed according to the tradition of Western metaphysics. There need to be no questioning except the solipsistic development of the self as it delves deeper into the pit of its own Reason. Against this tradition Levinas argues that the humble and moral character is established by a questioning that comes to rationality from the outside. As he says:

What one sees in this questioning is being as *mauvaise conscience*; to be open to question but also to questioning, to have to respond. Language is born in responsibility. One has to speak, to say I, to be in the first person, precisely to be me but from that point, in affirming this me-being; one has to respond to one’s right

to be. To this point is it necessary to think through Pascal's phrase, "the I (moi) is hateful" (Levinas, 1994a; 82).

In responding to one's right to be, one need not refer to some abstract and anonymous law or judicial entity. One responds out of *fear* for the other. Questions are put to an "I", questions like: my being-in-the-world, place in the sun, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom "I" have already oppressed or starved, driven out into a third world. Are the claims of the "I" not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? If not, why not?

Levinas quotes from Pascal's *Pensees*: ". . . 'my place in the sun', marks the beginning of the image of the usurpation of the whole earth" (Levinas, 1994c; 82). For Levinas it is exactly this place in the sun that shapes the fear for the other:

- A fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate, in spite of its conscious and intentional innocence.
- A fear which reaches back past my "self-consciousness" in spite of whatever moves are made towards a *bonne conscience* by a pure perseverance in being.
- It is a fear of occupying someone else's place with the *Da* of my *Dasein*; but it is also the inability to occupy a place; a profound utopia, without coming up against the resentment of others.

The other presented to me in a face-to-face encounter addresses my fear and holds me responsible. I need to answer for my place, need to justify myself in the eyes of the other. The other is always close, in my *proximity* or vicinity. As Levinas says:

The face of the other being the original site of the sensible, is the description of the irruption of the face into the phenomenal order of appearances. The proximity of the other is the face's meaning,

and it means from the very start in a way that goes beyond those plastic forms which forever try to cover the face like a mask of their presence to perception, but always the face shows through these forms (Levinas, 1994a; 82 - 83).

The face has many expressions, joy, sadness, astonishment, etc. But, prior to any particular expression and beneath all particular expressions there is the nakedness and destitution of the expression as such, that is to say, extreme exposure, defencelessness, vulnerability itself.

This extreme exposure - prior to any human aim is like "a shot at point blank range" (Levinas, 1994a; 83). The face-to-face steadfast in its exposure to invisible death that, for Levinas, is the other regarding me prior to confronting me. Before any knowledge can be gained about death or anything is revealed by the face mortality is engraved in the other.

For Levinas no code of conduct or morality can substitute the effectiveness of this extreme exposure. Encountered as the nakedness and defencelessness of a human face, it encourages and directs the violence of the first crime. Murderous intent in its self-confident manifestation is particularly effective in expressing the fragility of human countenance. Since this is a difficult position, it has to be understood that Levinas does not encourage experimentation with murder in order to reach awareness or enlightenment, on the contrary he says:

The first murderer probably does not realise the result of the blow he is about to deliver, but his violent design helps him to find the line with which death may give an air of impeachable rectitude to the face. But in its expression, in its mortality, the face before me summons me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the other, pure otherness separated, in some way, from any whole, were my business (Levinas; 1994a; 83).

The other man's death, the death that stares me in the face, therefore calls me into question, as if, by my possible future indifference, I had already become the

accomplice of the death to which the other, who cannot see it (his death through my indifference), is exposed. Exercising non-indifference would be to accompany the other in his mortal solitude. Responsibility for the other is responsibility for the naked face of the first individual to come along.

This non-indifferent responsibility goes beyond any act of injury or fortitude that I may or may not have caused or exhibited to the other, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself.

It is as if the other established a relationship or a relationship were established whose whole intensity consists in not taking the idea of community for granted. The face of the other places the "I" face-to-face with its responsibility and the *for* of the "for the other", the fear for my own death is turned around and the "I" hears the death of the other approach. My fear becomes the fear for the other, the fear for harm or death coming to the other. I am called by this awareness into a position of *care*.

#### **4.5 LANGUAGE AND RATIONALITY**

Levinas is concerned with the concrete situation in which human beings find themselves when their bodies, expressed by him as faces, come into proximity with each other. For him it is the moment of sound rather than sight. It is the moment in which speech becomes possible. "Language is exceptional in that it attends its own manifestation. Speech consists in explaining oneself with respect to speech; it is a teaching" (Levinas, 1994b; 98). We teach each other the ways in which we can be together without violating the proximity. The appearance of the other next to me is something that "I" do not understand and is not even sure of but through speech the other is made to *signify*. As Levinas says:

Apparition reveals and conceals; speech consists in surmounting, in a total frankness ever renewed, the dissimulation inevitable in every apparition. Thereby a sense - an orientation - is given to every phenomenon. ... Speech introduces a principle into this anarchy [of

the apparition]. Speech disenchant, for the speaking being guarantees his own apparition and comes to the assistance of himself, attends his own manifestation. His being is brought about in this *attendance*. ... The entry of beings into a proposition constitutes the original event of their *taking on signification*; the possibility of their algorithmic expression itself will be established on this basis. Speech is thus the origin of all signification ... (Levinas, 1994b; 98).

Speech for Levinas is the ultimate form of language because the speaker is present and can correct the manifestations of what is said. Speech can defend itself and correct misinterpretation. Unlike writing, which is left as it is and manifests as the dead letters of the philosophical "Said". In contrast with this, ethics is a living "Saying" that has to be considered as the greatest responsibility. "Saying is not a game" (Levinas, 1981; 5) says Levinas, rather "the gravity of this response is beyond the measure of being" and contrasts with the "fallacious frivolity of play?" (Levinas, 1981; 6).

For Levinas the ontology of being, is as dead as the "Said", established and guaranteed by the rules of the philosophical game. "Being is play or détente, without responsibility, where everything possible is permitted. But, is play free of interest? Right off a stakes, money or honour, is attached to it" (Levinas, 1981; 6). Levinas therefore reminds us that, although a game might have given rules the outcome is unpredictable and winning can sometimes exceed an acceptable margin.

The philosophical game is the game of reason. Once it establishes itself as a system there can be no further outside to it. What Levinas calls into question is the initial moment of freedom in which reason establishes itself, makes a beginning. He asks where reason gets the right, the freedom, to establish an edifice or system? He explains:

Reason is sought in the relationship between terms, between the one and the other showing themselves in a theme. Reason consists in

ensuring the coexistence of these terms, the coherence of the one and the other despite their difference, in the unity of a theme; it ensures the agreement of the different terms without breaking up the present in which the theme is held. This coexistence or accord between different terms in the unity of a theme is called a system . . . Reason, in which the different terms are present, that is, are contemporaneous in a system, is also the fact that they are present to consciousness inasmuch as consciousness is representation, beginning, freedom (Levinas, 1981; 65).

“Theme” is used by Levinas as another word for “concept”. A concept is the third neutral term into which that which is different from each other is taken up in order to signify or agree. The uniqueness, *alterity*, of the other is compromised in this process and the other is taken up in an abstraction. He clarifies as follows:

This mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, which itself is not a being; in it the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened. This third term may appear as a concept thought. Then the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought. The third term may be called sensation, in which objective quality and subjective affection are merged (Levinas, 1994a; 42).

The neutrality of philosophical reason that has been established in writing, is always revitalised by the encounter with the other that leads us into speech, a speech that has to reason on account of the difference between an “I” and the other. For Levinas “this difference in proximity between the one and the other, between me and a neighbour, turns into non-indifference, precisely into my responsibility. Non-indifference, humanity, the-one-for-the-other is the very

signifyingness of signification, the intelligibility of the intelligible, and thus reason” (Levinas, 1981; 166).

For Levinas this is not the reason of logic but the reason of ethics. Logic is the threat that would make an end to the face-to-face relationship and give rise to the violence of an indifferent politics. “The interlocuter that does not yield to logic is threatened with prison or the asylum or undergoes the prestige of the master and the medication of the doctor: violence or reasons of state or an approach ensures to the rationalism of logic a universality and to law its subject matter” (Levinas, 1981; 170). Hence, for Levinas logical reasoning is not reasoning at all and writing, which would constitute the most logical thing, cannot be said to be language. For Levinas, therefore, both language and reason can only be truly said to exist in the moment of the face-to-face.

#### **4.6 SAID AND SAYING: THE RETURN OF SKEPTICISM**

Levinas recognises that his writing itself becomes what we have previously referred to as the “Said”. This is the dead letter of the Law and of philosophy. The realisation of difference brings an end to indifference which is a dead state of equilibrium. This equilibrium is disturbed by the ethical “Saying” a revitalising force that gets the conversation going again and opens up a place for the unique experience of individuals. This movement of the “Said” and “Saying” Levinas relates to the old philosophical schema of *skepticism* and the *refutation of skepticism* (Levinas, 1981; 167). “It is as though skepticism were sensitive to the difference between my exposure without reserve to the other, which is saying, and the exposition or statement of the said in its equilibrium and justice” (Levinas, 1981; 168).

For Levinas the return of skepticism is the return of saying and is the undeniable outcome of all attempts at totalising structure. The ultimate relation is not with a concrete other but with the Other as an *audience*. This audience, or “existent” represents what could be called a “collective conscience” and it is to this collective, also called God, that saying turns. Levinas says that, “[t]his ‘saying to

the Other' - this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an *existent* - precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in being" (Levinas, 1994a; 48).

Philosophy seeks to understand this saying by studying the audience and pulling it apart. Calculating and counting heads to establish exactly who is saying, what the saying is saying and who is on the receiving end. And as soon as it does so and has refuted the resistance against its previous said, it establishes another in its place. Levinas describes this movement of philosophy as follows:

Philosophy serves justice by thematising the difference and reducing the thematised to difference ... Philosophy, in its very diachrony, is the consciousness of the breakup of consciousness. In an alternating movement, like that which leads from skepticism to the refutation that reduces it to ashes, and from its ashes to its rebirth, philosophy justifies and criticises the laws of being and of the city, and finds again the signification that consists in detaching from the absolute one-for-the-other both the one and the other (Levinas, 1981; 165).

This movement, the rebirth of skepticism from the ashes of refutation is made possible by the *trace* of it that is inevitably carried forward into the next refutation. This trace is not in itself a presence but an obligation that carries no force. "[T]he trace of saying, which has never been present, obliges me; ... This trace does not belong to the assembling of essence. Philosophy underestimates the extent of the negation in this 'not appearing,' which exceeds the logical scope of negation and affirmation" (Levinas, 1981; 168). The said cannot be forced open by the trace of saying that is within it but, is caught unawares by it. It is a memory that returns without being invited and refuses to accept the present state of things as the only way it can be (Levinas, 1981; 168 - 169).

If everything in time were recallable the return of skepticism would be pure nonsense. But, because it is not, skepticism is a challenge to any system that holds itself out to be foolproof. Thus,

saying, is a relationship with what is not understood in the together, the out-of-the-series. A subversion of essence, it overflows the theme it states, the “all together,” the “everything included” of the said. Language is already skepticism. ... Coherence thus dissimulates a transcendence, a movement from the one to the other, a latent diachrony, uncertainty and a fine risk (Levinas, 1981; 170).

The important notion here is Levinas’ conviction that language and skepticism is one and the same. Skepticism would thus be bound up with speech and not with writing. This presents a problem for Levinas if he wants to have a consistent theory. How is writing a sceptical book, an ethical book, one that does justice both to philosophy and the old testament tradition, at all possible?

#### **4.7 SINGULARITY AND SUBSTITUTION**

For Levinas the proximity, the intimacy and the desire to be with the other is not sexual. It is, however, also, not a gender blind, non-differentiated proximity. The sexual proximity, instead, is subordinated as pretence to the more originary proximity, a Good, of an other for whom I fear. Intimacy is “a non-erotic proximity, ... a desire of the non-desireable, a desire of the stranger in the neighbour. It is outside of concupiscence, which for its part does not cease to seduce by the appearance of the Good. In a Lucifarian way it takes on this appearance and thus claims to belong to the Good, gives itself out to be its equal, but in this very pretention which is an admission it remains subordinated” (Levinas, 1981; 123).

“Proximity is a difference” (Levinas, 1981; 166), the very realisation of the difference between myself as a being and that which is outside of the limits of who “I” am. A problem exists, however,

...about how to relate this proximity and the transcending of the otherness of material reality. It doesn’t take place through knowledge but through a relationship with the other, in love of the

other. This irreducible love of the other cannot be contained in terms which are expressible in philosophy (Mortley, 1991; 20).

As we have seen, Levinas regards the logic of philosophical thinking as non-vital or dead intelligence. So he says that “[t]o intelligibility as an impersonal logos is opposed intelligibility as proximity” (Levinas, 1981; 167). This intelligibility carries a responsibility stemming from a time before my freedom (for freedom presupposes the restrictions of community and the struggle to break from them) - before my beginning, before any present. A fraternity existing in extreme separation. One may ask the question: Before any present, but in what past? It is better to quote Levinas for the argument becomes nearly mystical at this point. He says:

Not in the time preceding the present, in which I might have contracted any commitments. Responsibility for my neighbour dates from before my freedom in an immemorial past, an unrepresentable past that was never present and is more ancient than consciousness of . . . (Levinas, 1994a; 84).

Levinas plays on the impossibility of curbing the infinite regression to which any epistemology is heir in its attempts to build universal criteria of validity, a foundation, for knowledge. Starting with what seems like a logical progression from a point somewhere in the past, knowledge seeks to show the first thought, it invariably ends up with a thought that precedes it *ad infinitum*. Confronted by this endless moving away of the origin farther and farther into the abyssal depths of a collective human amnesia that is unable to remember or even imagine a satisfactory explanation to its own beginning, the individual vomits in despair. Levinas suggests that in taking up our responsibility for the neighbour the fear that the infinite engenders, is addressed. He says:

A responsibility for my neighbour, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner, to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me - nothing in the order of the thing, of the something,

of number or causality ... It is the responsibility of a hostage which can be carried to the point of being substituted for the other person and demands an infinite subjection of subjectivity. Unless this anarchic responsibility, which summons me from nowhere into a present time, is perhaps the measure or the manner or the system of an immemorial freedom that is even older than being, or decisions or deeds ... This summons to responsibility destroys the formulas of generality by which my knowledge or acquaintance of the other man re-presents him to me as my fellow man (Levinas, 1994a; 84).

In the face of the other man I am inescapably responsible and consequently the unique and chosen one. By this freedom, this summons to responsibility that frees me from the reign of the formulas of generality, frees me from the pigeonholes of knowledge, humanity in me, that is, humanity as me, signifies as infinite vigilance. In spite of being's ontological contingency as finitude and mortality, the anteriority, absolute otherness, and uniqueness of the non-interchangeable drags being out of itself.

This is the anteriority of an excellence that cannot be reduced to the features or qualities distinguishing or constituting individual beings in the order of their world or people, or to the role they play on history's social stage, as characters, that is, in the mirror of reflection or in the mirror of self-consciousness.

Fear for the other, fear for the other man's death, is my fear, but in no way is it "I" who take fright. It is not an individual, closed up in *logos*, who by his fear is banished to an alienated life. It is not fear as a "state-of-mind". It is a fear that reaches out and establishes contact and community. Thus, Levinas holds, it stands out against the phenomenological analysis of *Befindlichkeit* found in Heidegger's (1995; 172) *Sein und Zeit*.

Levinas argues that *Befindlichkeit* is a reflective structure expressed by a pronominal verb in which emotion is emotion for something moving you, but also

always emotion for oneself. According to this state of mind emotion consists in being moved, being scared by something, overjoyed by something, saddened by something, but also in feeling joy or sadness for oneself. Hence, emotion always, in the final analysis, returns to the *me being*, where it is given its true meaning expressed as *angst*.

Levinas recognises that Heidegger's notion of *Befindlichkeit* treats fear as that which only holds repercussions for my *being-towards-death*. Against this, Levinas places *fear for the other's death*: Fear for the other man's death does not turn back into anguish for my own death, it cannot be reversed for it is not a state of mind. It extends beyond the ontology of the Heideggerian *Dasein* and the happy conscience of a being that is identified by the approving acknowledgement given to it by its own ego. The ethical awareness and vigilance of fear for the other does cause emotional unease issued in by the realisation of the fragility of the other's life, but does not return as *angst*.

This doubt or emotional unease is the hidden human face behind perseverance in being. The human face lies hidden behind the affirmation of being persisting in its analytical vivisection of the world. A being that, through the ideal vigour of identity, identifying, affirming and strengthening itself, is the life of human individuals struggling for vital existence, whether, conscious or unconscious or rational. But, the miracle of the ego vindicated in the eyes of the neighbour, or the miracle of the ego (*moi*) which has gotten rid of self (*soi*) and instead fears *for* the other, is like the suspension of the eternal and irreversible return of the identical to itself and of its logical and ontological privilege. Levinas is convinced that what is superseded is the ideal priority of the Self, which wipes out all otherness by murder or by all-encompassing and totalising thought.

To summarise, the question of this study should be asked again: Where is ethics to be found?

This question has no need of theoretical reply in the form of new information. Rather, it appeals to responsibility, which is not a practical stop-gap measure

designed to console knowledge in its failure to match being. This responsibility does not deny knowledge the ability to comprehend and grasp; instead, it is the excellence of ethical proximity in its society, in its love without concupiscence. The human is the capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assumes it. It is the question of the meaning of being, not the ontology of the verb as a program for efficient action, but moving beyond ontology, accepting that it always already *is*, the ethics of its justice. According to Levinas, the question *par excellence*, the question of philosophy is not, “why being rather than nothing?” but, rather, “how does being justify itself?”

This need of justification is an order that comes to me from a height. The other makes an almost impossible demand on me. But, I can only respond in language. The first language is not structured or bound, it is sounds, vowels for which consonants have to be found. It is the act of signification. The response called forth is that of a signifier. “There is an ambiguity of the order that orders to me the neighbour who obsesses me, for whom and before whom I answer by my ego, in which being is inverted into a substitution, into the very possibility of gift ” (Levinas, 1981; 162).

The possibility is the very possibility of a gift, a gift of language. A gift of signification. This possibility is called forth by the “I’s” difference from the other as the “I” breaks with itself, substitute itself in language, in the gift, as that which moves outside of itself, a signifying substitute that seeks to communicate with the other and to warn him. “The one in the-one-for-the-other is not a being outside of being, but signification, evacuation of Being’s essence for the other” (Levinas, 1981; 164).

For Levinas substitution is filled with ethical gravity. It is the very sombre responsibility for the gravest of possibilities, the death of the other. “Signification, the for-the-other, will not be an act of free assumption, will not be a for-itself that denies its own resignation, nor ludic gratuity in which the gravity

of alterity goes off in smoke, in cheerfulness and ecstasy (of him who only hides himself) as a 'nothing at all' in the equivalence of everything and nothing. Signification is the ethical deliverance of the self through substitution for the other" (Levinas, 1981; 164).

Against the anarchy of the self who uses signification to amuse itself, to play and to return to itself satisfied with its own aesthetic achievements Levinas places the signification of substitution. The possibility of the self giving itself up, taking the place of the other and suffering the other's death onto itself. This for Levinas is the hallmark of patience. "The self before any initiative, before any beginning, signifies anarchically, before any present. There is deliverance into itself of an ego awakened from its imperialist dream, its transcendental imperialism, awakened to itself, a patience as a subjection to everything" (Levinas, 1981; 164).

Peace is the outcome of such patience. But it is never perpetual and never guaranteed. It is a risk that one takes, the risk of ethics. But, it is only a risk in so far that I have knowledge of an outcome. In terms of infinite, radical possibility it is a risk that summons forth the Good. "Peace then is under my responsibility. I am a hostage, for I am alone to wage it, running a fine risk, dangerously. This danger will appear to knowing as an uncertainty, but it is transcendence itself, before certainty and uncertainty, which arise only in knowledge" (Levinas, 1981; 167).

#### **4.8 THE THIRD PARTY: OTHERS AND THE STATE**

Thinking through what the proximity of the other means can now be placed into perspective. It is necessary to grapple with the impossibility of fully understanding the face-to-face relationship and what I will call the quasi-concept of "proximity". The other by himself does not present "me" or "him" with any problems. We have a common bond that precedes us and can overcome any difficulty. "The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third

party enters" (Levinas, 1981; 157). There is a certain symmetry in the face-to-face that is broken up by the third party. It is this dissymmetry that introduces a schema of problems. As Levinas says:

The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneity, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and intellect, and ... the intelligibility of a system (Levinas, 1981; 157).

The third party's appearance is the demand for a system. An "I" has to calculate the attention given between the other, in a direct face-to-face relation and all Others as possible face-to-face relations. For Levinas, the obsession, the specific situation of a face-to-face relation with an other, has to be balanced with the responsibility that in general to all possible others. These possible others are what Levinas refers to as the "third party". He explains:

It is not that the entry of a third party would be an empirical fact, and that my responsibility for the other finds itself constrained to a calculus by the "force of things." In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice, demands measure and knowing, is consciousness. A face obsesses and shows itself, between transcendence and visibility/invisibility (Levinas, 1981; 158).

The system to which the third party binds me calls for calculation and a redress of the asymmetry of my attention, but again it calls me out towards the Other and does not allow a return to the self. This system is not a hermeneutics or an ideal speech situation. It is constantly working to correct and to balance itself:

The relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at. There is weighing, thought, objectification, and thus a decree in which my anarchic relationship with illeity is betrayed, but in which it is conveyed before us (Levinas, 1981; 158).

A rational peace is one in which the possibility of irrationality as asymmetry is confronted on an ongoing basis. All the energies of the system have to be put into play. This is an adventure and a complex system, that also confronts that which is supposed to ground it, the very rules that make it possible. The very authority that legitimises it. "Responsibility for the others or communication is the adventure that bears all the discourse of science and philosophy. Thus this responsibility would be the very rationality of reason or its universality, a rationality of peace" (Levinas, 1981; 160).

In this way the search for justice and the ongoing reappraisal of that which makes the system possible is what binds us to responsibility. "The apparition of a third party is the very origin of appearing, that is, the very origin of an origin. ... The foundation of consciousness is justice" (Levinas, 1981; 160).

This system of justice does not guarantee that I am protected against being an other. I have rights but also duties and must remember to exercise the one and fulfil the other. Thus, justice demands two things. A situation,

where subjectivity is a citizen with all the duties and rights measured and measurable which the equilibrated ego involves, or equilibrating itself by the concourse of duties and the concurrence of rights. But justice can be established only if I, always evaded from the concept of the ego, always desituated and divested of being, always in non-reciprocable relationship with the other, always for the other can become an other like the others (Levinas, 1981; 161).

The demand of justice is that the awareness of responsibility, as residing in a singular individual, must not be forfeited to the neutrality of a third term or dead

concept. This will bring on the authoritarian State and bury democracy. "The State issued from the proximity of the neighbour is always on the verge of integrating him into a we, which congeals both me and the neighbour" (Levinas, 1981; 161) which will bring on an excuse once more for the "Principle of Revolution" discussed in the previous chapter. The problematic nature of judgements is also the point at which the need for justice is most apparent. "Judgements and propositions are born in justice, which is putting together, assembling, the being of entities. Here with a problem begins the concern for truth, for the disclosure of being" (Levinas, 1981; 161).

Levinas has to admit that the obsession with the other can turn into an unjust situation if the role of the third party is not acknowledged. But the overwhelming responsibility of the "I" for the other is infinitely multiplied in the third party or Other. There is a need for philosophy. The spiritual union of the "I" and the other, a union never consummated, must be assisted by the love of wisdom that philosophy brings with it. Spiritual union is the way, but is beset on all sides by problems. As Levinas says

The way leads from [absolute] responsibility to problems. A problem is posited by proximity itself, which, as the immediate itself, is without problems. The extraordinary commitment of the other to the third party calls for control, a search for justice, society and the State, comparison and possession, thought and science, commerce and philosophy, and outside of anarchy, the search for principle. Philosophy is this measure brought to the infinity of the being-for-the-other of proximity, and is like the wisdom of love (Levinas, 1981; 161).

Responsibility is an infinite demand but infinity is also that which overwhelms the individual. It needs to be calculated and measured in an ongoing process. It is not a place that by itself can be measured out but is paradoxically a place which makes all measurement possible.

#### **4.9 THE PROBLEM OF METAPHYSICS: THE IDEA OF INFINITY**

Metaphysics, like the metanarratives of Modernity, attempts to know everything about everything but in the process brings everything to a standstill. Needing to control the flux and contingency of what is perceived as a chaotic world, it wants to have the last word once and for all. However, Levinas says that “the enigma of the Infinite, ... separates the Infinite from all phenomenality, from appearing, thematization and essence ... as though it were an infinite object which subjectivity tries to approach, but misses” (Levinas, 1981; 154).

For Levinas, the problem of the infinite is the problem of a word that does not signify anything and yet exists, placing all significant words into question. It calls forth that which cannot be called forth. In the face of this overwhelming word Levinas falls back on the tradition of the old testament and introduces the notion of the “Other”, which he also designates as “God”. As he says:

The revelation of the beyond being is perhaps indeed but a word, but this “perhaps” belongs to an ambiguity in which the anarchy of the Infinite resists the univocity of an ordinary or a principle. It belongs to an ambiguity or an ambivalence and an inversion which is stated in the word God, the *apex* of vocabulary, admission of the stronger than me in me and of the “less than nothing,” nothing but an abusive word, a beyond themes in a thought that does not yet think or thinks more than it thinks (Levinas, 1981; 156).

Levinas does not return to this tradition in an unproblematic way. He recognises that “infinity, has been recognised as the Good by Plato” (Levinas, 1981; 19) but insists on talking of God as that which in society is called “aid” and “grace”. For Levinas this recognition by Plato means that God can now come to live within the society established by the calculation of philosophy. As we shall see in the following chapter, Derrida identifies *khôra* at the heart of Platonism in much the same way as Levinas recognises this possibility for the “gift” somewhere at the heart of the *polis*. A symmetry is established by this gift between the “wholly other” and “myself” as other. “It is only thanks to God that,

as a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached as an other by others, that is, *for myself* ... The passing of God, of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society” (Levinas, 1981; 158).

For Levinas “[a]ll human relations as human proceed from disinterestedness” (Levinas, 1981; 159), the coldness of finding oneself alone and unable to hold the attention of the others. From this is born a need to establish dependable relations. But, these relations may become too calculated and exclusive, too philosophical, hence, the need for God as sanctuary. Levinas insists on that which is for philosophy, as ontology, nearly impossible, because unthinkable:

... goodness is *other* than being. It no longer keeps accounts; it is not like negativity, which conserves what it negates, in its history. It destroys without leaving souvenirs, without transporting into museums the altars raised to the idols of the past for blood sacrifices, it burns the sacred groves in which the echoes of the past reverberate. The exceptional, extra-ordinary, transcendent character of goodness is due to just this break with being and history. To reduce the good to being, to its calculations and its history, is to nullify goodness (Levinas, 1981; 18).

Although Levinas comes so close to not falling into the trap of establishing a metaphysics himself, his insistence on the use of the word God instead of Other seems to indicate that he is attempting to do more than just point out a problem in philosophy. He needs to establish a certain religious aspect, a counter-metaphysics to the metaphysical projects of philosophy. In other words, philosophy itself is not “good” enough, organised religion must step in. But, organised religion in Levinas’ sense of ethics would be an oxymoron. Religion, is that which falls outside the calculations of philosophy, it cannot be philosophical and thus not organised. The only way to express what he is up to is to put it paradoxically, even mystically: he wants to organise without

organisation. This would leave only charisma and seduction with which to complete the foundation as a work carried out on an ongoing basis and at every instant.

In this sense how is one to understand what he means when he says: "to forget what is better than being, that is the Good" (Levinas, 1981; 19).

#### **4.10 FEMININE: THE INSISTENCE ON SPEECH AND PRESENCE**

A specific problematic that can be identified in Levinas' work is the resistance against imagination. This has to do with the notion of the fallen state in which man's creations come into existence. The notion of the good and evil *yetser* (Kearney, 1994; 39) places man's imagination under suspicion. The good imagination is the one with which God created the world and everything in it. The bad imagination is man's attempt to imitate God. The Adamic myth is clearly in evidence. It is this inheritance that gives Levinas such a hard time. His insistence on using this inheritance also brings him to the point of making the worst mistake. In his description of the feminine and of woman it becomes apparent that a woman is not considered to have a "face". He writes:

And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation ... It is comprehensible and exercises its function of interiorization only on the ground of the full human personality, which, however, in the woman, can be reserved so as to open up the dimension of interiority. And this is a new and irreducible possibility, a delightful lapse in being, and the source of gentleness in itself (Levinas, 1994b; 155).

This "discreet absence" is in itself problematic if one considers that it is the face-to-face relationship that establishes the ethical. But it becomes even more problematic if we consider again Levinas's insistence on speaking and speech that has to back itself up. As he says:

In human welcome the language that keeps silence remains an essential possibility. Those silent comings and goings of the feminine being whose footsteps reverberate the secret depths of being are not the turbid mystery of the animal and feline presence whose strange ambiguity Baudelaire likes to evoke (Levinas, 1994b; 156).

If Levinas is not able to grant the imagination room to explore creatively it is hard to see how he would be able to avoid becoming the first casualty of his own ethics. For Levinas' highly prized Hebraic tradition, and also that of the Greeks, has a shameful legacy of excluding other voices, especially those of woman. This makes Levinas' ethics vulnerable to the sort of questions Luce Irigaray (1991; 113-114) poses in her essay *Questions to Emmanuel Levinas*. She concludes one of the sections by saying:

To go beyond the face of metaphysics would mean precisely to leave the woman her face, and even to assist her to discover it and to keep it. Levinas scarcely unveils the disfigurements brought about by ontotheology.

Levinas grapples with this problem but he does not go far enough. It seems that the problem of the sexual dynamic that prevails between men and woman is something he would rather not consider. For instance, he uses only the pronoun "he," opening up the consideration of another sexual dynamic, that of homosexuality, but never addresses this explicitly. He does, however, try hard to allow for *any other* when he says: "the neighbour, *the first one on the scene*, concerns me for the first time (even if he is an old acquaintance, an old friend, an old lover, long caught up in the fabric of my social relations) in a contingency that excludes the a priori" (Levinas, 1981; 86).

The question is whether the neighbour can be a sister, a woman. Also, how would Levinas have to change his view on ethics if he has to allow the feminine to partake in the debate, to signify ethically, to have a face? He seems to be obsessed only with the brother and says so in explicit terms. "The neighbour is

a brother. A fraternity that cannot be abrogated, an unimpeachable assignation, proximity is an impossibility to move away without the torsion of a complex, without 'alienation' or fault. This insomnia is the psyche" (Levinas, 1981; 87). What he says is not wrong but surprisingly biased.

#### **4.11 IN COMPLICITY WITH ART: LEVINAS' BETRAYAL**

Levinas' problematic relationship with art bears a connection with the problem of imagination touched on in the previous section. For Levinas there can be no real relation with the other except in speech. Answering the call of the other directly, face-to-face. Even though a book may carry a preface that situates it in a time specific and congruent with reality the book itself is only a dead image in the same way as "the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden" (Levinas; 1994e; 138). For him the imagination has no real ability to establish contact with reality. It is significant that Levinas uses writing as a metaphor to explain this inadequacy of the imagination. He says: "In imagination our gaze then always goes outward, but imagination modifies or neutralises this gaze: the real world appears in it as if it were between parenthesis or quote marks" (Levinas; 1994a; 134).

But it is exactly at this point that it seems that the notion of the trace within the said becomes most prominent. It is exactly a word that has been placed between quotation marks that calls forth a memory, a trace, and interrupts the given meaning of the word. Levinas seems to understand this but cannot allow the reader to play any significant role. Eventually books have only one fate, in Levinas' view, and that is to become dead objects that art was unable to animate. He says:

In writing the saying does indeed become a pure said, a simultaneousness of the saying and of its conditions. A book is interrupted discourse catching up with its own breaks. But books have their fate; they belong to a world they do not include, but recognise by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and

getting themselves preceded with forewords. They are interrupted, and call for other books and in the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said (Levinas, 1981; 171).

Levinas never uses the term “reader” but it is clear that if he did introduce such a notion it would place his theory on a different level. It is the reader of a text, or image that interprets and animates it in imagination with the help of memory. The reader experiences the surprise of a saying in the text that makes the said come unstuck. Levinas himself uses the appreciation of the images of the painter Dufy. He says:

This modification by which the same comes unstuck or parts with itself (like the creaking of a piece of furniture in the silence of the night), undoes itself into this and that, no longer covers itself and thus is disclosed (like in Dufy’s paintings, where the colours spread out from the contours and do not rub up against them), becomes a phenomenon - is the *esse* of every being (Levinas, 1981; 30).

Levinas criticises art even more harshly than philosophy and in his fight against the atrophying effect of images has no qualms in employing the sacred tools, the enchanted rock on which philosophy stands, namely “concepts” which he calls the “muscles of the mind” (Levinas, 1994a; 143). For Levinas the concepts are eternal, as is God, able to revitalise life but the images of art, and most prominently the statue, is only “inert matter”. For this reason “the proscription of images is truly the supreme command of monotheism, a doctrine that overcomes fate” (Levinas, 1994a; 141).

Why should concepts expressed in Greek letters and words, be the only symbols invested with trust in the exercise of discourse? After all, does not a picture paint a thousand words and in any language?

For Levinas the problem of the image is that of the radical silence it carries as exteriority. The imagination is the best example of such a place. Radically interior and obscure, unreachable and off limits to the other. It is the exclusion

of the other, the living world, in preference of an atrophied inner sanctum that knows no outside. But what could he possibly mean then when he says: “then light presents itself in light, which latter is not thematic, but resounds for the ‘eye that listens,’ with a resonance unique in its kind, a resonance of silence” (Levinas, 1981; 30). Is this “eye that listens” not the best example of the workings of the imagination. Peters (1997; 15) makes the point most succinctly: “Levinas is right, then, when he claims that art ‘does not give itself out as the beginning of dialogue’, but it is precisely this insight which could have reminded him of the radical silence surrounding ethics, not least because the rhythm of alterity has such a silence as its source”.

In conclusion Levinas condemns the artistic approach in seeking out the Other perhaps too harshly. It may indeed be conceded that artists seek only to establish their own egos supremely, after all Hitler was an art student. However, when Levinas is called on to suggest ways in which to experience a return to the *mauvaise conscience* and, in so doing, to gain ethical and moral insight, his description of the face is vague, generalistic and metaphysical. While Levinas’ animosity towards art is well understood from the viewpoint of the Adamic myth and the fall of man, (the imagination (*yetser*) has a power for evil that was first dramatised in man’s defiance of divine prohibition), art also has a power for good which grows either good or bad dependent on whether the imagination is fed by good or bad. The question, therefore, has to be put to Levinas whether art, or more precisely, the artistic endeavour of confronting one’s own ideas by comparing them to those of others as creations operating in discourse, could not be regarded as infinitely able to open up an avenue towards the Other.

#### **4.12 SUMMARY**

Levinas provides a humanistic ethics that makes concern for the other person a priority of every individual. The greatest contribution is his insistence that life should be lived with respect and care for others. However, he does not consider any ethical relation towards the ecology or to animals which raises questions

about his consideration of the world as that which is merely at the disposal of human survival at any cost.

It is also an ethics that depends on the presence of interlocutors in a speech situation and in this sense does not break with the ontological tradition of philosophy in any real sense. A consequence of this is that he cannot admit to the fictional aspect of ethics and eventually has to ground it in the “reality” of a religious metaphysics. Such a metaphysics does not adequately address the ethical complexities encountered by contemporary democracy. Thus, in the following chapter we will look at “deconstruction” as it attempts to keep the humanist aspect of Levinasian ethics while at the same time broadening the scope of ethics to include questions about the environment, communications technology and globalisation.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Levinas is not consistent in his use of the capital letter to maintain the distinction as I have set it out but uses the terms “other” and “Other” at times interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Levinas uses the word other, with a small “o” to designate that which can be experienced of the world and which is outside myself. Using the word with a capital letter - Other - designates a relationship with something that is “wholly” different and falls outside of any sort of comprehension. It is the name of God that in its infinite unknowableness can never be spoken or written. The ethical relationship of responsibility with the other is for Levinas the gateway to experiencing the revelation of the Other itself. Responsibility is the hallmark of the divine life that is a constant filling up and overflowing. It also signifies the most human face that lies hidden behind the mask of being. In the Old Testament it is told that all humans were created in the image of God (Gen. 1: 27).

<sup>3</sup> The French term for orgasm or orgiastic but meaning also joy or pleasure. Here it is used in the sense of pleasure derived or given, a pleasure that at the height of its satisfaction is already descending into dissatisfaction.

<sup>4</sup>For the purpose of showing the different word usage between the translations of Aristotle I have quoted the passage from four individual translations. It helps, I believe, to situate readers of Levinas who might not be familiar with his word use and also shows the difficulty of translating any one text so that it forms one coherent meaning.

(Aristotle, 1949; 253)

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(Aristotle, 1902; 253 - 254)

(Aristotle, 1901; 341)

(Aristotle, 1934; 338)

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle does argue for a reason that is context sensitive. The rational man is educated by interaction with other members of the *polis* and is for this reason not uninfluenced by other members of the state. However, these members all share Aristotle's belief in reason and forms a community of educated thinkers. There is no confrontation or interaction with any "other" that falls outside this community of legitimate citizens in a radical way.

<sup>6</sup> It "is not an objective pulse; it is, rather, a rhythm where 'participation' takes the ego both outside of itself and away from an objective 'reality to be captured'. This is far removed from the sympathetic communion sought by Bergson, which, in the tradition of Kant's analytic of the beautiful, generates pleasure. Here it is more a question of 'horror', the horror of absolute passivity experienced as 'participation' in an alterity ontologically incapable of retention or protention" (Peters, 1997; 13).

<sup>7</sup> A poignant example of what Levinas is trying to get at here is given in Spielberg's film *Shindler's List*. The camp commander, Goetz, is told by Shindler that true power resides in being able to pardon someone for a wrongdoing. In a macabre scene where one can see Goetz struggling with his beliefs and the impossible situation he finds himself in, as a Nazi commander in charge of exterminating Jews, he flippantly pardons first his Jewish housekeeper for some domestic mishap and then his Jewish stable boy for leaving an expensive saddle on the ground. What he did not count on was the fact that such an act of pardon translates into an act of love towards another. A humane act of recognition of the other's right to life. A life with a face that can turn towards me with a "thank you" or a plea for help, or possible counter violence. Goetz starts to realise what his action of pardon actually means. This puts him in a terrible dilemma because as Levinas points out "the murdered people transported on the lorries . . . [was] referred to in neutral terms - *die Scheiss* - they weren't human bodies" (Mortley, 1991; 21).

<sup>8</sup> The *il y a* is the being-in-general that houses the unhappy consciousness. It is written in many forms but relates to the same basic sadness that lingers in creation due to the feeling of loneliness experienced by an awakened self-consciousness. "The God of the mystics yearned to be known by his creatures. The Ismailis believed that the noun *ilah* (god) sprang from the Arabic root *WLH*: to be sad, to sigh for" (Armstrong, 1994; 273).

<sup>9</sup> For Hegel the characterization of the Absolute and for Leibniz the law of Identity. No distinctions are real, and identity with itself is the only ultimate equivalence.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### JACQUES DERRIDA

#### A DECONSTRUCTIVE TURN REGARDING ETHICS

##### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The word *deconstruction* signals a development in the history of philosophy that places its most cherished concepts and assumptions under serious and rigorous scrutiny. Deconstruction poses the philosophical question, not only to the tradition of philosophical writing but also to the writing it produces in the process, namely, *What is it?* (Derrida, 1992c; 34). The ethical significance of this question is of primary importance. It is not accepted that deconstruction asks the question in the name of a specific group or of a specific politics. It aims at opening a discussion about what is not already understood as purely given. In this way dialogue is encouraged on topics that does not furnish ready made answers.

In this chapter we will proceed by firstly looking at the difficulty that presents itself in defining deconstruction. This process also serves as a demonstration of the difficulties encountered in providing definitions in general.

Secondly, the resistance of religious belief against ethics will be looked at. This is of utmost importance because a difference has to be identified between the self-closure of belief and the openness towards alternative points of view that creates a space for ethics.

Thirdly, a technical discussion on the importance of the philosophical notion of *khôra* attempts to show how deconstruction works toward creating an opening for ethics within philosophy that traditionally attempts to establish itself as a metaphysics that logically finalises all discussion.

Fourthly, the time for ethics as it attempts to utilise this space opened by deconstruction is explored. A few suggestions about topics that might merit the time of an ethical investigation is also suggested.

## 5.2 DECONSTRUCTION IN A NUTSHELL

Derrida relates an incident that occurred on the occasion at which he received an honorary degree from Cambridge University, where a journalist asked him: "Well, could you tell me, in a nutshell, what is deconstruction?" (Caputo, 1997; 16).

In answer to this, one could say from the outset that the idea of a nutshell or capsule or, for that matter, any other example of collection or gathering is a mistake in this context. The task deconstruction sets itself "is to mark *humbly and clearly* that things are still more complicated - and that the reader ought to be aware of it" (Derrida, 1992c; 429). Deconstruction is set on *opening up* and *complexifying* in an attempt to release unheard of and as yet un-dreamt of possibilities. Hence, deconstruction attempts to crack nutshells wherever they appear.

This makes the idea of the nutshell immediately problematic, for as soon as we think that we have slammed the door on deconstruction, it swings back to hit us in the behind. This hinged motion that allows deconstruction to be *at the same time* defined and already swinging against the limit of the definition can be called the "aporetics of the nutshell" (Caputo, 1997; 32).

It is exactly this motion that is the force of deconstruction. Deconstruction resists summary and yet we have to summarise if we are to make any sense of it and if it is to be of any use to us in making decisions in everyday life. The *aporia*<sup>1</sup>, however, confronts us with the utter paralysis and impossibility of delivering the final definition. It is exactly this formidable impasse that drives deconstruction, that gives it the energy to get up in the morning.

Derrida (1993a: 13) returns to Aristotle's *Physics IV* as the original place in which the word is found in terms of the "aporia of time": *dia tōn exoterikōn logōn*. It regards the problem of a "certain *impossibility* as non-viability, as

non-track or barred path. (*Diaporeō* is Aristotle's term here; it means 'I'm stuck [*dans l'embarras*], I cannot get out, I'm helpless'.) This is as much of a description as one can venture about that which defies description for "it is impossible to determine time both as entity and non-entity ... The now is and is not what it is. More precisely, it only 'scarcely' (*amundros*) is what it is" (Derrida; 1993a: 13-14). With the notion of the *aporia*, Derrida establishes a way of thinking through new events and challenges that does not disregard the past. It is a process of *mourning* in which what has gone before and has established certain barriers, limits and rules are remembered and acknowledged.

However, mourning indicates that an event already took place, *death*, for instance, that always comes as a surprise, necessitates the adjustment of boundaries and accepted spaces in order to live on, to start anew. These acts of mourning pertain "in all the domains where the questions of decision and of responsibility that concern the border - ethics, law, politics, etc. - are posed" (Derrida; 1993a: 15).

What we seek when suggesting a nutshell for deconstruction is to expose its *style* (Gallop, 1985; 23), or its *signature*, as Derrida (1982a; 328) prefers. Caputo (1997; 33) suggests that several *spirits* inhabit a deconstructive way of reading and writing, thinking and acting that appreciates the *aporia* into which (even tentatively suggesting) a nutshell leads us and the seemingly impossible task of escaping from it.

### 5.2.1 Experience as Language

Deconstruction is characterised by a specific notion of "experience". An impossible *thing* would be hard to experience in the traditional phenomenological sense that entails the perception of that which presents itself. So, Derrida looks for a way of describing experience that is not an explicitly visual metaphor. Firstly, he ties experience to *loss*, and specifically to the "very common experience" of the most "inconsolable" suffering, the loss of memory. As he (Derrida, 1995i; 207) says it is:

... as if an appeal for a witness had no witness, in some way, not even the witness that I could be for what I have lived. This for me is the very experience of death, of catastrophe.

The loss of memory acts as an experience of *cinders* or *traces* for Derrida which is not only the experience of forgetting, but inevitably also “the forgetting of forgetting, of the forgetting of which nothing remains” (Derrida, 1995i; 207). This marks the worst of all experiences that is also, at the same time, a “benediction”.

Secondly, Derrida turns to “maritime language” (an indication, perhaps, that experience is always also a sense of *being at sea*, cut adrift, so to speak) to furnish his description of experience with the notion of *parages*, which literally means vicinity. It is a metaphor for being in the proximity of something at a distance that is difficult to measure and designates that which is neither near nor far, a definite attraction or kinship, but without fusion. The image that presents itself, is of two boats hailing each other over the expanse of an ocean that lies between them. For Derrida to mention the word *experience*, to ask “what is experience?” immediately places the questioner in the vicinity of “philosophical experience, experience of language” (Derrida, 1992c; 373), an ocean of memory traces. He urges (Derrida, 1992c; 373) that,

[t]he philosopher has indeed to recognize that philosophy does not take place outside of a natural language. The so-called fundamental concepts of philosophy were tied to the history of certain languages, the Greek language, the German language, the Latin language; and there comes a moment in which one can no longer dissociate the concept from the word in some way. Sometimes this link between the concept and the word imports metaphors, tropes, rhetorical figures that, without being assimilable to the philosophical concept, continue nonetheless to haunt it, so that the philosophical critique may often consist in liberating oneself from the rhetorical figure ... and from the source in a natural language.

Further, experience supposes the interaction of something that experiences and something else that is experienced. But, when coming out of the aporia, when breaking through the limit of impossibility, the distinction is not immediately clear. As Derrida (1992c; 373) puts it,

[e]xperience obviously supposes a meeting, reception, perception, but in perhaps a stricter sense, it indicates the movement of traversing. To experience is to advance by navigating, to walk by traversing. And by traversing consequently a limit or border.

Thus, for Derrida experience is rooted in the language that relates the experience and constitutes memory. Memory and language are forever running up against the limits of what can never be present and passing the limits of the un-presentable and the un-re-presentable in a quest for the most desirable experience of all: *experience of the impossible*. In an ocean of memory the most impossible thing is to communicate clearly. To make meaning understandable. This is the impossible task that deconstruction sets itself. How does explanation and language work to gather traces and make an utterance mean something? This is a question that preoccupies deconstruction.

### 5.2.2 The Scene of Writing

Derrida works with a theory of language that is produced through a careful deconstruction of the work of Ferdinand de Saussure on the way language is structured. Saussure's theory operates with three key notions, *referent* (object-in-the-world), *signified* (mental picture; semantic meaning) and *signifier* (the "word" or "mark"). Firstly, Saussure makes a rigid distinction between *langue*, the structure of language, and *parole*, the use of language. *Langue* is supposed to precede *parole* as an exhaustive list of the rules of language to which *parole* must adhere if it is to be successful in expressing any meaning. But, as Derrida shows, which one of these is responsible for language in the first place, is not at all a made case. This is not only a problem for language in the common sense of this word, but for any system of signs in general. The question remains open: what constitutes language in

the first place, the rules or the use? Derrida describes an opening in this circle:

One must ... recognise, prior to any dissociation of *langue* and *parole*, code and message, and what goes with it, a systematic production of differences, the *production* of a system of differences - a *differance* among whose effects one might later, by abstraction and for specific reasons, distinguish a linguistics of *langue* from a linguistics of *parole* (Derrida, 1981b; 28).

Secondly, for Saussure distance, absence, misunderstanding, insincerity, and ambiguity are features of writing. In order to overcome these “problems” he distinguishes writing from speech in order to construct a model of communication that takes as its norm an ideal associated with speech. The latter seems to promise that “words bear a meaning and the listener can in principle grasp precisely what the speaker has in mind” (Culler, 1994; 101).

However, Derrida suggests that meaning is never simply present, as a referent or signified, but has to be found through a process of deconstruction, even, and perhaps especially, when the speaker is standing before us. According to Derrida this is a notion that has been suppressed throughout the history of Western philosophy. Ever since Plato metaphysics privileges “unity, identity, immediacy, and temporal and spatial *presentness* over distance, difference, dissimulation, and deferment” (Derrida, 1981a; vii). The “metaphysics of presence” privileges the spoken word over the written word, a phenomenon Derrida calls “logocentrism” (Derrida, 1976; 12). Extended it also reveals a privileged male subject in philosophy as a “desire to posit a ‘central’ presence at beginning and end” (Derrida, 1976; lxviii). Derrida calls this “phallogocentrism” (Derrida, 1976; lxix).

By way of deconstruction these privileges are placed in question. Deconstruction makes the point that both the *referent* and *signified* is subject to the *signifier* and that one can only speak or write by using *signifiers*. Signifiers only *refer* to other signifiers. Meaning is thus produced through the relationships in which *signifiers* find themselves, one to the other. These

relationships are rearranged constantly through an infinite playfulness, another word for *erasure*<sup>2</sup> by which signification proceeds.

Derrida introduces “writing” as the “signifier of the signifier” to be a model for the linguistic system. “In all senses of the word, writing thus *comprehends* language” (Derrida, 1976; 7). Derrida finds in writing a place from which the privilege of presence in all its guises can be interrogated and asked to justify itself. In literature and writing in general space for interrogation is opened up. As Derrida (1995b; 159) says:

My central question is: from what site or non-site (*non-lieu*) can philosophy as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner? Such a non-site or alterity would be radically irreducible to philosophy. ... In literature, for example, philosophical language is still present in some sense, but it produces and presents itself as alienated from itself, at a remove, at a distance. This distance provides the necessary free space from which to interrogate philosophy anew, and it was my preoccupation with literary texts, which enabled me to discern the problematic of writing as one of the key factors in the deconstruction of metaphysics.

The main characteristic of philosophy is to solve problems, to show how things are, or to untangle a difficulty. The aim is always to put an end to writing on a topic by getting it right. This is, however, not a characteristic exclusive to philosophy but pertains to any discipline. The latter must suppose the possibility of solving a problem, finding the truth, and writing the last word on a topic. The idea, that structures any discipline, or philosophy is the “idea of an investigation in which writing might be brought to an end” (Culler, 1994; 90). It is for this reason that “the philosophical text, although it is in fact always written, includes, precisely as its philosophical specificity, the project of effacing itself in the face of the signified content which it transports and in general teaches” (Derrida; 1976, 160).

All critics are inspired to write by this drive to get it right or to get to the truth. It is a desire that cannot meet with satisfaction because “paradoxically, the more powerful and authoritative an interpretation, the more writing it generates” (Culler, 1994; 90)

However, it is exactly the problem of *mediation* that Derrida explores. Neither reason nor truth is unmediated. It has to pass through language and by definition through writing. For Derrida, as Culler rightly says, “it is in writing that the unfortunate aspects of mediation become apparent. Writing presents language as a series of physical marks that operate in the absence of the speaker. They may be highly ambiguous or organised in artful rhetorical patterns” (Culler, 1994; 91). Even when philosophy admits this mediation it still holds out an ideal “to contemplate thought directly” by insisting that “language should be as transparent as possible” (Culler, 1994; 91). This ideal very easily slips into obscurity and becomes the invisible, unquestioned structure of philosophy. The ideal fiction of Unmediated Truth forgets that it is a fiction.

The term “transparent” here seems innocent enough. However, that which becomes transparent does not only allow us to see through, but also holds the possibility of leaving nothing to see. Language and that which it attempts to bring to light may just as easily disappear. By insisting on the privilege of a speaking subject, whose words could disappear as they make the meaning that supposedly resides in them come to light, philosophy can claim to ground the guarantee of meaning in a subject that can defend his words and stand in for their meaning, allowing no misunderstanding. This subject can immediately take control of any misappropriation of the intended referent or signified that his words, the successive signifiers, employ. His meaning can be defended in his presence and be made immediately accessible. This allows the subject to hide the use he makes of signifiers. The object, meaning (represented as signified and referent) is taken control of and appropriated by the subject. In a way, the subject swallows the object and becomes meaning incarnate. Hence, the only meaning is the meaning sanctioned by the speaking subject in full presence. The risk run in rejecting

the signifier, is that language loses its physicality, its body, and disappears like smoke.

This exclusion of writing, in Plato and elsewhere, Derrida calls “phonocentrism” “and does not depend on a choice that could have been avoided” (Derrida, 1976; 7). It is an attitude that treats writing as a representation or *supplement* of speech and puts speech in a direct and natural relationship with meaning. It is inextricably associated with the “logocentrism” of metaphysics, the orientation of philosophy toward an order of meaning (thought, truth, reason, logic, the Word) conceived as existing in itself, as foundation. Derrida (1993e, 279 - 280) explains:

The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix ... is the determination of Being as *presence* in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence - *eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia*, (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth”.

None of these concepts escape the notion of presence. Its figure pervades philosophical attempts to describe what is fundamental. All the above mentioned concepts have, at some time or another, been treated as a centring, grounding force or principle. As Derrida (1995a; 93) makes clear:

The enterprise of returning “strategically,” ideally, to an origin or to a “priority” held to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, ... have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical

exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.

Presence establishes itself as the ultimate authority. Its power of valorisation structures all our thinking. Conventional notions such as “making clear,” “grasping,” “demonstrating,” “revealing,” and “showing what is the case” all invoke presence. Culler (1994; 94) summarises two types of appeal to presence as typical:

- Firstly, that the “I” resists radical doubt because it is present to itself in the act of thinking or doubting, which is the appeal to presence Descartes uses to establish the *cogito*.
- Secondly, that the meaning of an utterance is what is present to the consciousness of the speaker as “intention”, that is, what he or she “has in mind” at the moment of utterance.

The metaphysics of presence is thus pervasive, familiar, and powerful. However, Culler (1994; 94) continues, it characteristically encounters the following problem:

... when arguments cite particular instances of presence as grounds for further development, these instances invariably prove to be already complex constructions. What is proposed as a given, an elementary constituent, proves to be a product, dependent or derived in ways that deprive it of the authority of simple or pure presence ... The presence of motion is conceivable, it turns out, only insofar as every instant is already marked with the traces of the past and the future.

Hence, the present instant can serve as ground only insofar as it is *not* a pure and autonomous given. By introducing motion, a movement from past through present to future, the claimed moment of pure presence must already be marked by difference and deferral. Presence is derived as an effect of differences.

A “subject” claiming pure presence in the moment is constituted as such only by the difference of that moment to another moment in the past or a moment that awaits. Hence Derrida (1976; lxii) “works, rather, with a ‘subject’ which can never be a ‘total personality,’ the ‘exercise of whose function’ is to be forever divided from the object of its desire ... and to constitute itself in the distortive play of metaphor and metonymy - displacement and condensation - that forever distances the other, the object of its desire, from itself”.

Absence, as an impure absence, is not the negation of presence. Instead absence makes presence possible in a non-symmetrical relation. To risk an even stronger formulation: *absence is the condition for any notion of presence*. Hence, we can treat “presence” as the effect of a “generalised absence” or, as Derrida calls it, of *différance*. The latter is Derrida’s solution to the tricky problem of avoiding any clearly marked theoretical opposition between absence and presence. The technical term *différance* is pronounced the same as difference and thus in spoken language the ambiguity is not apparent. It is only in the written form that a space seems to open up within the word itself allowing another interpretation. As Derrida (1981b; 27) says:

[*Différance*] is a structure and a movement that cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing [*espacement*] by which elements relate to one another. This spacing is the production, simultaneously active and passive (the *a* of *différance* indicates this indecision as regards activity and passivity, that which cannot yet be governed and organised by that opposition), of intervals without which the “full” terms could not signify, could not function.

The smallest unit in Derrida’s system is the notion of *trace*. Trace is not quantifiable as a singularity at a given point, it is rather unstable and tends to flicker in and out of existence. Its unpredictability is at the root of the

uncertainty of meaning in any linguistic system. Traces are present and absent from all forms of meaning suggesting that:

Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each "element" - phoneme or grapheme - is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system. This linkage, this weaving, is the *text*, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces (Derrida, 1981b; 26).

Hence, acts of signification depend on differences such as the contrast between "food" and "nonfood" that allows food to be signified, or the contrast between signifying elements that allows a sequence to function as a signifier. The sound sequence *bat* is a signifier because it contrasts with *pat*, *mat*, *bad*, *bet*, etc. The noise that is "present" when one says *bat* is inhabited by the traces of forms one is not uttering, and it can function as a signifier only insofar as it consists of such traces.

An account of language seeking solid foundation, will doubtless wish to treat meaning as something somewhere present for instance present to consciousness at the moment of the signifying event; but any presence it invokes turns out to be already inhabited by difference.

However, if one tries instead to ground an account of meaning on difference, one fares no better, for differences are never given as such and are always produced. A scrupulous theory must shift back and forth between these perspectives, of event and structure or *parole* and *langue*, which never lead to a synthesis "into that which is properly *dialectical* " (Derrida, 1993; 14).

The more rigorously Saussure pursues his investigations, the more he is led to insist on the purely relational nature of the linguistic system and also the arbitrariness of this relation. Indeed, he concludes that "in the linguistic

system there are only differences, *without positive terms*" (Saussure, 1974; 120).

The system with no positive terms is an instance of the paradoxical notion of the "exoteric aporia ... 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, an other concept, a non-vulgar concept, to the so-called vulgar concept" (Derrida, 1993a; 14).

For Saussure the model of a trace may very well reside in sound. He argues that sound itself cannot belong to the system but that "it permits the manifestation of units of the system in acts of speech" (Culler, 1994; 98). For Derrida this is true of writing more than speech because in writing the trace can be apparent as an etymological mark, for instance, within the unit or word. He (Derrida, 1976; 159) says:

... there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from the invocation of the supplement, etc. Nature, ... have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.

### **5.2.3 The Reader and her Reading**

Culler presents the case of woman readers as an example of "resistant reading". It is an important example for ethics in the sense that it illustrates why certain oppressed groups may not have the courage to enter into a debate about injustice. It is further an instance of an interpretation of Derrida by a critic that attempts to put deconstruction to practical use. Deconstruction is a resistant reading against the presence of the "intention" of the author as it presents itself in a text. The "case of woman" is not here treated as a special case, but as one among many.

The example presupposes that it has been expected of women since time immemorial to identify with male rationality. When a woman reads, she is required to identify with the pronoun "he". A similar shift in identity is not expected from male readers. However, "to ask a woman to read as a woman is ... a divided request. It appeals to the condition of being a woman as if it were a given and simultaneously urges that this condition be created or achieved" (Culler; 1994; 49).

Oppression in other forms (race, ethnic groups, disability, age) functions in the same way. Culler (1994; 50) comments that:

The most insidious oppression alienates a group from its own interests as a group and encourages it to identify with the interests of the oppressors, so that political struggles must first awaken a group to its interests and its "experience".

For deconstruction, as we have seen, experience is the experience of language and is thus closely bound to literature the soil of language. Culler attempts to illustrate what reading deconstructively entails by resorting to a founding fable of American literature, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. This is the story of protagonist Rip Van Winkle, the allegorical figure of the birth of the American imagination. It is the first successful "homegrown" American legend and it celebrates, however playfully, "the flight of the dreamer from the shrew". This legend sets up the archetype for the American novel if it is to investigate or articulate a distinctively American experience. The basic schema of this archetype typically has the male protagonist struggling against the constricting, civilising, oppressive forces embodied by woman. The protagonist is seen as embodying the universal American dream, it is the dream of "a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat - anywhere to avoid 'civilisation,' which is to say, the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility" (Culler, 1994; 51-52).

The effect of this archetype throughout American literature is to alienate the woman reader because "what is essentially a simple act of identification when

the reader of the story is male becomes a tangle of contradictions when the reader is female ... she is required to identify against herself" (Culler, 1994; 52). If a woman wants to continue reading as a woman she has to "become a resisting rather than an assenting reader" (Culler, 1994; 53). Instead of trying to identify with a protagonist that is constantly fleeing, not only from women in general but also from women who want to identify with it, women have to insist on protagonists that embody their concerns.

As we have argued, a group's oppressed interests can be brought to the group's attention by focusing on it's actual experiences. We suggested that the experience most likely to bring out the oppression of woman is an experience of reading that provides leverage for displacing or undoing the system of concepts or procedures of male criticism. However, " 'experience' always has [a] divided, duplicitous character: It has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced - an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there" (Culler, 1994; 63).

Derrida's insight that "experience is language" is valuable here because it is only as writing that we can truly come into contact with the body of experience. The act of reading and subsequently of writing asks of the reader/writer to assume certain roles in the way an actor would do. "To read is to play the role of a reader and to interpret is to posit an experience of reading. ... to read and interpret literary works is precisely to imagine what 'a reader' would feel and understand" (Culler, 1994; 67). It is a process that proceeds by the "suspension of disbelief".

The roles of reader/writer can be played out by bearing in mind three cues that vary but inevitably guide all stories (Culler, 1994 50, 69-73):

- the issue of control,
- the question of the content of the text,
- the ending.

On the question of control, it would be a mistake to think that "[t]he shift back and forth ... between readers' decisive actions and readers' automatic

responses" (Culler, 1994; 73) should be corrected. This indecisiveness is a structural necessity of a reading that is to produce another writing. The control that seeks to bring to an end this fluctuating motion in reading and force equilibrium also runs the risk of bringing reading and writing, hence language to an end. However, it is necessary to keep in mind that a

...reader who creates everything learns nothing, but one who is continually encountering the unexpected can make momentous, unsettling findings. The more a theory stresses the reader's freedom, control, and constitutive activity, the more likely it is to lead to stories of dramatic encounters and surprises which portray reading as a process of discovery (Culler, 1994; 72).

What is in the text is a matter closely related to control. If all control is abandoned, in other words, if a reader makes everything up, there can be no notion of a text that exists as an object for scrutiny. Thus, "interpretation is always interpretation of something, and that something functions as the object in a subject-object relation, even though it can be regarded as the product of prior interpretations" (Culler, 1994; 74). What is inside the text is thus not an authoritative meaning that needs to be found and followed but an object to be experienced, a world in which we may learn through imaginative interaction.

All stories have an end even if it is an end that promises a continuation or an end that opens up further reading. The question, however, can be put as to whether or not all stories end in *knowledge*.

At the end of the seventeenth century discovery was a process offering reassurances as regards the *certitudo salutis*, thus relieving the distress caused by the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. In the eighteenth century, instead of discovering that they were saved, readers discovered 'human nature.' In the nineteenth century the reader 'had to discover the fact that society imposed a part on him, the object being for him eventually to take up a critical attitude toward this imposition. In the twentieth

century, the discovery concerns the functioning of our own faculties of perception. ... The outcome of reading, it seems, is always knowledge (Culler, 1994; 78-79).

It seems that when it comes to legitimising the telling of a story, or interest in a story it must always be sanctioned beforehand by a promise that knowledge will be gained from it. The pure pleasure of listening to a story even if it does not guarantee any knowledge as an outcome seems to be an unfathomable risk. "It is as though what permits one to describe reading as misadventure is the happy ending that transforms a series of reactions into an understanding of the text and of the self that has engaged with the text. The text's manipulation of the reader makes a good story only if it turns out well" (Culler, 1994; 79). This is an idealised notion of reading that cannot hold under all circumstances. There is no guarantee that the subject who engaged with a text will not come away feeling fundamentally interrupted, its unity shattered, by what it has experienced in a text. And there is further no guarantee that the subject will ever be able to reunite all the shattered pieces into coherence. That is if it can still assume that any coherence exists at all. The American literary critic Harold Bloom "sees no escape or transcendence" as the necessary outcome of a reading. In his opinion "the best a reader can achieve is a strong misreading - a reading that will in turn produce others" (Culler, 1994; 79-80).

Hence, if a resistant reading is followed, it has to contend with these three things, namely that control of the reading is largely abandoned, that the authoritative meaning of the author is disregarded or not even admitted to exist and that the end does not guarantee a gain in knowledge. In this thesis such a resistant reading is not only suggested for the woman reader but seeks to go even further and expand these themes to a notion of what "ethical reading" might be.

#### **5.2.4 The Meaning of Iteration and the Iteration of Meaning**

From the treatment to which Derrida submits the language theory of Saussure and the notion of a resistant reading, it can be inferred that deconstruction

favours an anything-goes approach to meaning, that in effect deconstruction abandons all notions of meaning. This would surely suit those who would want to make deconstruction the ultimate nihilism. But that cannot be further from what deconstruction desires. Deconstruction is instead driven by an insatiable thirst for meaning. Meaning is approached through the notion of *iterability*. Something can be a signifying sequence only if it is iterable, only if it can be repeated in various serious and non-serious contexts, cited, and parodied.

The distinction between *using* an expression and *mentioning* it is of help here. Mentioning what someone else has said inevitably entails giving a slightly new meaning and force to the discourse. On the other hand, since everybody uses expressions, every use of language entails some element of mentioning. "*I love you*, is a case in point" (Culler, 1994; 120). Mentioning is thus not a *parasitic* form of utterance that attaches to use. Instead iteration depends on the fact that cases of use and mention are dependent upon each other.

In speech act theory Austin tries to give an exhaustive account of what a *performative* would be. A performative's illocutionary force is held to depend upon the intention of the performer. In order to account for meaning, the necessary features of the context, such as the nature of the words, the persons uttering them and the circumstances required, must all be exhaustively listed. But, as Derrida says: "Context is always, and always has been, at work *within* the place, and not only *around* it" (Derrida, 1995a; 60).

To illustrate this one can consider a scenario in which the requirements for a marriage ceremony were met, but one of the parties was under hypnosis, or in which the ceremony were impeccable in all respects, but was called a 'rehearsal,' or in which the minister were licensed to perform a marriage and the couple had obtained a license, but all three of them were on this occasion acting in a play. Considering only the intended meaning and not the effect that a speech act may have, we will fail to see that for someone on the receiving end of a performative the words may have signified very

successfully. What Derrida shows with regards to iteration is that there cannot be any meaningless sentences.

When anyone proposes an example of a meaningless sentence, listeners can usually imagine a context in which it would in fact have meaning. By placing a *frame (parergon)* (Derrida, 1987b; 63) around it, they can make it signify. In order to arrest or control this process, which threatens the possibility of a successful theory of speech acts, Austin is led to reintroduce the notion, previously rejected, that the meaning of an utterance depends on the presence of a signifying intention in the consciousness of a speaker. He goes about doing this in two ways:

- First, he sets aside the nonserious - a notion not explicitly defined but which clearly would involve reference to intention: a "serious" speech act is one in which the speaker consciously assents to the act he appears to be performing (Culler, 1994; 122).
- Second, he introduces intention as one feature of the circumstances by setting aside speech acts performed unintentionally - done under duress, or by accident, or owing to this or that variety of mistakes, say, or otherwise unintentionally (Culler, 1994; 122).

However, this reintroduction of intention does not solve the problem of context; intention cannot serve as the decisive determinant or the ultimate foundation of a theory of speech acts. What the speaker had in mind at the moment of utterance does not determine what speech act his utterance performed. What counts is the plausibility of the description of the circumstances: whether the features of the context create a frame that alters the illocutionary force of the utterances.

Thus the possibility of grafting an utterance upon a new context, of repeating a formula in different circumstances, does not discredit the principle that illocutionary force is determined by context rather than by intention. What the indissociability of performative and performance puts in question is not the determination of illocutionary force by context but the possibility of mastering the domain of speech acts by exhaustively specifying the contextual

determinants of illocutionary force. This is a general principle that holds sway wherever deconstruction engages. A theory of speech acts must in principle be able to specify every feature of context that might affect the success or failure of a given speech act or that might affect what particular speech act an utterance effectively performed. This would require, as Austin recognises, a mastery of the total context. But, the total context is unmasterable, both in principle and in practice. Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless. As Derrida (1995a; 79) says:

Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can ... break with every context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any centre or absolute anchoring [*ancrage*].

Culler (1994; 124) explains this boundlessness with the following two examples:

- First, any given context is open to further description. There is no limit in principle to what might be included in a given context, to what might be shown to be relevant to the performance of a particular speech act. The notion of the unconscious is important because, if unconscious desire becomes a contextual consideration, the status of some speech acts will change. For instance, an utterance that promises to do what the listener apparently wants but unconsciously dreads might thus cease to be a promise and become a threat; conversely, an utterance that would be deemed a defective promise, because it “promises” something the listener claims not to want, might become a well formed promise.
- Secondly, any attempt to codify context can always be grafted onto the context it sought to describe, yielding a new context which escapes the previous formulation. Culler uses an example provided by Wittgenstein. The suggestion that “one cannot say ‘bububu’ and mean ‘if it does not rain

I shall go out for a walk,' has, paradoxically, made it possible to do just that".

Austin gives the act of signing one's signature as the equivalent in writing of an explicit performative utterance with the form 'I hereby ...'. Signing one's signature is a most common everyday procedure by which we aim to authoritatively take responsibility for an utterance. It is not uncommon for us to feel that by signing a document one intends its meaning and seriously performs the signifying act it accomplishes.

But, again, certain questions can complicate what Austin and we so readily accept. For instance is it still a signature when the supposed signatory calls it counterfeit? Can one counterfeit one's own signature? "Are there signatures" (Derrida, 1982a: 328).

Traditionally a signature is supposed to witness the presence to consciousness of a signifying intention at a particular moment. The case of the signature presents a moment when I fully intended a particular meaning, no matter what my thoughts were before or after and obliges me to return in fullness to that moment when called to do so. "In order to function, that is, in order to be legible, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to detach<sup>3</sup> itself from the present and singular intention of its production" (Derrida; 1982a; 328).

The signature on a check has to correspond to a model of the signature that was previously given to the bank. If a check is signed with an acceptable copy of the model the check can be cashed whatever my intentions at the moment of signature. Hence, it is also part of the structure of the signature that it can be produced by a stamp or by a machine. "The requirement that a signature be recognisable as a repetition introduces the possibility of a machine as part of the structure of the signature at the same time as it eliminates the need for any particular intention at the point of signature" (Culler, 1994; 126-127). Culler is of the opinion that the need for intention is eliminated totally but Derrida himself does not take such a radical stance. He (Derrida; 1982a, 326) says:

... the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from this place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and the entire system of utterances. Above all, one then would be concerned with different types of marks or chains of iterable marks, and not with an opposition between citational statements on the one hand, and singular and original statement-events on the other. The first consequence of this would be the following: given this structure of iteration, the intention which animates utterance will never be completely present in itself and its content. The iteration which structures it a priori introduces an essential dehiscence and demarcation.

It is not a matter of denying that signatories have intentions, but of situating those intentions in the subject of enunciation. The moment of enunciation overflows with the fullness of the unconscious, which is the excess of what one says over what one knows, or of what one says over what one wants to say. "Above all I will not conclude from this that there is no relative specificity of the effects of consciousness, of the effects of speech (in opposition to writing in the traditional sense), that there is no effect of the performative, no effect of ordinary language, no effect of presence and of speech acts. It is just that these effects do not exclude what is generally opposed to them term by term, but on the contrary presuppose it in dyssemtrical fashion, as the general space of their possibility" (Derrida, 1982a; 327).

In its engagement with philosophy's essentialising theories, deconstruction emphasises that discourse, meaning and reading are thoroughly historical, produced in process of contextualisation, decontextualisation, and recontextualisation. By way of iteration meaning is made clear and knowledge gained as that which was incomprehensible at first sight starts to look more and more familiar at every return. Derrida supplements this way of drawing frames around contexts with self-love or auto-affection. The subject who loves itself and seeks to preserve its own life seeks to know its

surroundings and to learn how to control and make use of it to optimal benefit of itself. As Derrida (1976; 166) writes:

This possibility - another name for 'life' - is a general structure articulated by the history of life, and leading to complex and hierarchical operations. Auto-affection, the as-for-itself - subjectivity - gains in power and its mastery of the other to the extent that its power of repetition *idealises itself*. Here idealisation is the movement by which sensory exteriority, that which affects me or serves me as signifier, submits itself to my power of repetition, to what thenceforward appears to me as my spontaneity and escapes me less and less.

History, as this continuing return of the same that grasps meaning by repeating it, is not a privileged authority. We are always interpreting history as part of a general text, making determinations of meaning and halting, for practical reasons, the investigation and redescription of context. Deconstruction's insistence on a continuing interpretation ensures that what is reiterated is not a pure repetition of what has gone before. As we shall see in the following section this insistence takes the form of a graft.

Iteration thus has a double movement, a double interpretation that resists settling on either side but rather oscillate between two readings. Derrida (1993e; 292-293) is clear on this point:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology - in other words, throughout his entire history - has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.

The humanities in general, and philosophy specifically, unlike pure sciences like mathematics for instance, often seem touched with the belief that a theory which asserts the ultimate indeterminacy of meaning makes all effort pointless. To allay such fears one has to point out that through the movement of iterability an opposition that is deconstructed is not destroyed or abandoned but reinscribed. Hence, “meaning is produced by a process of grafting, and speech acts, both serious and nonserious” (Culler, 1994; 134).

This resistant reading that reinscribes itself again and again into another signifying chain holds ethical implications, it keeps the possibility of ethics open. Critchley (1993; 192) calls it *clôtural* reading:

it is precisely in the suspension of choice or decision between two alternatives, a suspension provoked in, as, and through a practice of *clôtural* reading, that the ethical dimension of deconstruction is opened and maintained. ... the textual practice of *clôtural* reading keeps open a dimension of alterity or transcendence that has ethical significance.

This ethical significance takes shape when the controlled contexts, the *virtual reality*, produced by technology are grafted onto by excluded meanings and marginalised data. The movement of iteration is produced by grafting.

### **5.2.5 Plato’s Pharmacy: The Work of the “Graft”**

*Grafts* are complex structures that self-organise into patterns of meaning. A graft, the preface to a book for example, that comments on another text and in itself offering an explanation, is also an addition that exceeds that explanation.

In other words, the graft operates in a double way. A text’s description of its own procedures is always a graft that adds something to those procedures in the same way a preface situates a text in a contemporary milieu for a reading public. But, there is a related graft whereby the analyst applies the text’s statements to its own processes of enunciation. In other words creating a feedback loop. This second feature of grafts is important here. It can be

equated with the fractal where the results of the equation is also fed back into the calculation. Two distinct features (Culler, 1994; 139) of grafts create this loop in a text:

- Each text becomes a machine with multiple reading heads for other texts much like the hyper-links on a web-page by which one can go from one idea on the current page to another page that clarifies that idea and,
- minor, unknown texts are grafted onto the main body of the canon, or else an apparently marginal element of a text, such as a footnote, is transplanted to a vital spot which the author did not necessarily intend the footnote for.

The logic of the graft is structured as the “logic of ‘paleonymics’: the retention of old names while grafting new meaning upon them” (Culler, 1994; 140). By using “writing” as a model Derrida is able to describe how grafts supplement the accepted notion of writing and what it can achieve. He says:

Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated. For example, writing, as a classical concept, carries with it predicates which have been subordinated, excluded, or held in reserve by forces and according to necessities to be analysed. It is these predicates (I have mentioned some) whose force of generality, generalisation, and generativity find themselves liberated, grafted onto a ‘new’ concept of writing which also corresponds to whatever always has *resisted* the former organisation of forces, which always has constituted the *remainder* irreducible to the dominant force which organised the - to say it quickly - logocentric hierarchy. To leave to this new concept the old name of writing is to maintain the structure of the graft, the transition and indispensable adherence to an effective *intervention* in the constituted historic field. And it is also to give their chance

and their force, their power of *communication* (Derrida, 1982a; 329-330).

“The graft is the very figure of intervention” (Culler, 1994; 141) but grafting something from the margins onto the centre does not immediately imply that a new centre has come into being. The fact that a marginal meaning can be grafted onto the centre places the whole notion of a centre into question. Derrida (1981a) proceeds to deconstruct the notion of “centre” by way of Plato’s use of the notions “*pharmakon*”, “*pharmakeus*”, and “*pharmakos*”.

In Plato’s (1973; 95-99) dialogue the *Phaedrus* writing is described as a *pharmakon*, which means both “remedy” (a remedy for weakness of memory, for example) and “poison”. Offered to mankind by its inventor as a remedy, writing is treated by Socrates as a dangerous drug. Writing as a supplement of speech is considered an artificial addition, which cures and infects. “The text thus presents ‘[t]he philosophical, epistemic order of *logos* as an antidote, as a force *inscribed within the general alogical economy of the pharmakon*” (Derrida, 1981a; 124).

For Derrida and deconstruction, writing is what the *pharmakon* was for Plato: a medium that is hard to master. Too little and an illness might not be cured, but too much and the patient might just die. Hence, it is ambivalent and unstable. It is because of the instability that Plato has to attempt to fashion a theory that can take control of the oscillation. As Derrida explains:

If the *pharmakon* is “ambivalent,” it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.). It is on the basis of this play or movement that the opposites or differences are stopped by Plato. The *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference (Derrida, 1981a; 127).

*Pharmakon* is closely related to *pharmakeus* (magician, sorcerer) the label that Socrates attracted to himself as the poisoner of young minds. To his interlocutors Socrates is a magician who works by indirection and enchantment. The role of *pharmakon* as a condition of difference is further confirmed by the link with *pharmakos*, or 'scapegoat'. The *pharmakos* is cast out as the representative of the evil that afflicts the centre of the city: cast out so as to make evil return to the outside from which it comes and to assert the importance of the distinction between inside and outside. But, to play his role as representative of the evil to be cast out, the *pharmakos* must be chosen from *within* the city. The possibility of using the *pharmakos* to establish the distinction between a pure inside and a corrupt outside depends on its already being inside, just as the expulsion of writing can have a purificatory function only if writing is already within speech. Derrida (1981a; 133) says:

The ceremony of the *pharmakos* is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside, which it has as its function ceaselessly to trace and retrace. *Intra muros/extramuros*. The origin of difference and division, the *pharmakos* represents evil both introjected and projected.

In order for an expulsion of the *pharmakos* to signify the specific ritual is important and the specific manner in which it is celebrated. "In Athens, Derrida notes, the ritual of expulsion was repeated every year, on the day that was also the birthday of that *pharmakeus* whose death by *pharmakon* made him a *pharmakos* - Socrates" (Culler, 1994; 144). In the same manner there is a ritual expulsion of writing from any grounding philosophy that claims the last word.

This is the height of irony because although philosophy seeks to finalise the discussion, "writing" is condemned for doing just that. As Socrates (Plato, 1973; 97) says: "writing involves a similar disadvantage to painting. The productions of painting look like living beings, but if you ask them a question they maintain a solemn silence. The same holds true of written words; you might suppose that they understand what they are saying, but if you ask them

what they mean by anything they simply return the same answer over and over again". All metaphysical theories have a moment at which writing is again banished to the outside of the theory and living speech and a subject takes its rightful place (We have seen that Levinas does this with art and with woman). Thus, philosophy constantly proceeds by setting its sights on a sorcerer whose practices seem unintelligible and whose teaching seems to be an unstable substance in order to exorcise it through the ritual of interpretation aimed at shutting him up, and stabilising the discourse again.

Derrida insists that this is the infinite progression of philosophy. There cannot be a last word, for at least the last of the last words will always follow, as "writing" is made to speak through interpretation. Thus, he suggests that philosophy make peace with this fact by accepting a certain "art of differing" (Culler, 1994; 146).

The graft and the way it works preclude any pure meaning from appearing. A quick consideration of metaphor in philosophy shows that "metaphor seems to involve the usage of philosophical language in its entirety" (Derrida, 1982a; 209). Indeed separating essential concepts from the rhetoric in which they are expressed is a fundamental philosophical task. But, to say that metaphor constitutes "obscure" language use and that such a thing as "clarity" can be achieved in language is already metaphorical (Derrida, 1982g; 252), if only in a photographic sense.

What is important about the graft in terms of ethics is the rigorous scrutiny that Derrida employs to show that philosophy is a commitment, an obligation, from which we cannot escape by slamming the door with a final theory that will solve all its problems once and for all. Philosophy has to return in each age in order to graft onto and explain whatever has come to claim dominance in the name of finality. An exploration of the devices of writing is at the heart of such an engagement.

### **5.3 TEMPTING ABRAHAM: THE GIFT OF DEATH**

Not only Levinas but also Derrida moves between two traditions. Hence, it is important that we confront in this section the resistance of theology to ethical

engagement. One of the greatest obstacles on the road to an ethics that commits to the call of the other is a belief in God that insulates the believer in a total one-on-one pact with God. The problem here is very much a problem of the archetypal God in which man and God is hardly discernible from each other. In a sense, ethics has to seduce the archetypal believer into ethics. Hence, *temptation* is the means by which a believer will be able to associate with the challenge of ethics.

In the *Gift of Death* (1995h) Derrida, following Kierkegaard, associates ethics with the fear and trembling that confronts us in the face of a great unknown, the unknown that simultaneously attracts us. It is the structure of the unknown that its seduction makes us quiver with anticipation of that which might come. "One could say that water quivers before it boils; that is the idea I was referring to as seduction: a superficial pre-boil, a preliminary and visible agitation" (Derrida, 1995h; 53).

The past is irrefutable. It is a shock to see it in ruins as we walk backwards into the future, not knowing exactly where we are going. Here we may recall the vision Walter Benjamin (1992d; 249) has when he refers to history as an angel. Based on a painting by Paul Klee called *Angulus Novus*, the angel is thrown backwards into the future by the gust of a great wind called "progress" that blows from paradise. Behind him the angel sees history lying in ruins. But he is unable to turn around and look at the future.

As Derrida writes: "We tremble in that strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past (a shock has been felt, a traumatism has already affected us) to a future that cannot be anticipated; anticipated but unpredictable; *apprehended*, but, and this is why there is a future, apprehended precisely as unforeseeable, unpredictable; approached as unapproachable" (Derrida, 1995h; 54). For Derrida there is a future exactly because nothing blocks it yet. There is nothing there yet, if we affirm our commitment to it, all possibilities await. And this is where the image of the *Angulus Novus* becomes important once more. Benjamin's angel is undeniably alone. There

is no way he can feel affirmative about the future. He is carried along by the wind without the ability to change direction or call out.

Unlike the “new angel” however, “I tremble because I am afraid of what already makes me afraid, of what I can neither see nor foresee. I tremble at what exceeds my seeing and my knowing ... although it concerns the innermost parts of me, right down to my soul, down to the bone, as we say (Derrida, 1995h; 54). This “I” that Derrida recalls and uses in the sense Levinas would have us think of it, as an “ego” in need of justification, trembles in this situation because “I” stand alone in a self-obsessed mode and it is hateful because it is no angel, not even in the metaphorical sense. It is a *suffering body* that is caught at the edge of an abyss and the abyss is the instant of decision. “What does *the body mean to say* by trembling or crying?” (Derrida, 1995h; 55).

Risking an answer to Derrida’s question we might argue that the body wants to say that it is a body, vulnerable and irrational. When it comes to its own survival, it is not to be reasoned with. It fights against the unknown as if death could be the only thing that awaits it. To the body, God makes little sense except that God would be that place where the body ceases to exist. This is why the body trembles. It has to do God’s bidding, surrender to the unknown, but also wants to survive. “We fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible, that is, free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death” (Derrida, 1995h; 56). Hence, we have to justify the actions with which our bodies attempt to soothe its trembling. We must justify the way in which it chooses to survive, because the body is never alone and never an angel.

### **5.3.1 Silence and the Secret**

The “mysterious God, the one who decides, without revealing his reasons” (Derrida, 1995h; 58), makes a secret demand on Abraham, according to the

Old Testament. It is to be a most cruel, impossible, and untenable gesture that he is asked to perform. God demands that he offer his son Isaac, a child he was given at a late age after much prayer by him and his wife Sarah, as a sacrifice. For Derrida there is no way in which a man properly named Abraham can commit this deed without being responsible for it in his own name as the name by which he is recognised in society. Society cannot see this act of sacrifice as anything but murder. As Derrida says:

... linking the question of secrecy to that of responsibility immediately raises the question of the name and of the signature. One often thinks that responsibility consists of acting and signing *in one's name*. A responsible reflection on responsibility is interested in advance in whatever happens to the name in the event of pseudonymity, metonymy, homonymy, in the matter of what constitutes a *real name* (Derrida, 1995h; 58).

Abraham has no choice but to keep the demand of God a secret. He cannot tell anyone about it because he cannot justify it. God has not given any reasons and hence Abraham cannot give any reasons. He has been called by the name which signifies his pact with God, but God is the unnameable. Hence, Abraham will be treated as a murderer and punished but god cannot be called to responsibility. Thus, on the one hand Abraham "must keep the secret (that is his duty), but" on the other hand "it is also a secret that he *must* keep as a double necessity because in the end he *can only* keep it: he doesn't know it, he is unaware of its ultimate rhyme and reason. He is sworn to secrecy because he is in secret" (Derrida, 1995h; 59). Abraham thus keeps a secret but does not know what it is or even that he is keeping it. The secret defies all knowledge. It places a limit on knowledge but conversely also vitalises the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

From the point of view of ethics ignorance of the reasons behind Gods demand is not a good enough reason not to talk about the demand at least to his wife Sarah. "By keeping the secret, Abraham betrays ethics. His silence, or at least the fact that he doesn't divulge the secret of the sacrifice he has

been asked to make, is certainly not designed to save Isaac” (Derrida, 1995h; 59). Ethics is a push to come clean. Talk, which is also a call for writing, about the inability to understand the limit against which we have come up. The aporia must be shared.

Abraham is terribly alone in the secret. This secret holds for Derrida also the structure of a model for “decision” that “assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, entrenched in one’s own singularity at the moment of decision” (Derrida, 1995h; 60). Each one of us as we stand at the moment of decision stands alone. But this loneliness can be shared, the burden can be lightened by stepping out into the possibility of forgiveness that resides in language. “Thus, every decision would, fundamentally, remain at the same time solitary, secret, and silent [but] speaking relieves us, Kierkegaard notes, for it ‘translates’ into the general. ... Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique” (Derrida, 1995h; 60).

### **5.3.2 Breaking into Language**

The problem for decision and for responsibility in general is that a decision comes down to one person making it alone but at the same time responsibility demands that this sealed entity be broken open in a response to that which is not my loneliness but the loneliness of the other. This problematic becomes apparent only in an oscillating reading that settles neither on the side of theology nor philosophy but places the two in ethical conversation.

For common sense, just as for philosophical reasoning, the most widely shared belief is that responsibility is tied to the public and to the non-secret, to the possibility and even the necessity of accounting for one’s words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owing up to them. Here on the contrary it appears, just as necessarily, that the absolute responsibility of my actions, to the extent that such a responsibility remains mine, singularly so, something no one else can perform in my place, instead implies secrecy. But what is also implied is that, by not speaking to others, I don’t account for my actions, that I answer for nothing ... and to

no one, that I make no response to others or before others. It is both a scandal and a paradox (Derrida, 1995h; 60).

Thus, ethics cannot ensure or guarantee responsibility in a way that philosophy or strict discipline would like to do. The generality of ethics carries within it the seeds of irresponsibility. It impels me to speak, to reply, to account for something, and thus to dissolve my singularity in the medium of the concept. Immediately upon breaking into language I am confronted with the fact that I am using an other's words. I repeat what has been laid down as the standard answer to the call of responsibility. To answer by giving the standard reply would be to act irresponsibly. Only I can respond, and have to respond uniquely. As the deconstruction of Saussure and Austin has shown there can be no guarantee that my response will be unique and thus absolutely responsible. Derrida (1995h; 61) puts it as follows:

Such is the aporia of responsibility: one always risks not managing to accede to the concept of responsibility in the process of *forming* it. For responsibility (we would no longer dare speak of "the universal concept of responsibility") demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution, and on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence and secrecy. What I am saying here about responsibility can also be said about decision. The ethical involves me in substitution, as does speaking. Whence the insolence of the paradox: for Abraham, Kierkegaard declares, *the ethical is a temptation*. He must therefore resist it.

Thus, for ethics there is an "insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility *in general* and *absolute* responsibility" (Derrida, 1995h; 61). Absolute responsibility cannot be derived from a concept by which the unique individual is substituted in language, and only absolute responsibility will do. Absolute responsibility is thus unthinkable, inconceivable and unethical. "The ethical can therefore end up making us irresponsible" (Derrida, 1995h; 61).

But this is the irresponsibility towards God and myself as an individual singularity locked on the inside of faith. It seems that if I am absolutely responsible, hence keeping the secret of God and my singularity, I am being irresponsible to the generality, the others. If on the other hand I enter into the responsibility required by the living in general I am irresponsible to God and the singularity. I have a duty to be responsible but this duty cannot take the form of a law that binds me because it oscillates between the absolute responsibility only I can have in secret and the responsibility I have in general. This has specific implications for the notion of "duty". Derrida (1995h; 63) raises the notion of Kantian ethics in the following way:

The paradox of faith is that interiority remains "incommensurable with exteriority" ... The absolute duty that obligates her with respect to God cannot have the form of generality that is called duty ... In order to fulfill my duty towards God, I must not act *out of duty*, by means of that form of generality that can always be mediated and communicated and that is called duty. The absolute duty that binds me to God himself, in faith, must function beyond and against any duty I have. ... Kant explains that to act morally is to act "out of duty" and not only "by conforming to duty." Kierkegaard sees acting "out of duty," in the universalisable sense of the law, as a dereliction of one's absolute duty. It is in this sense that absolute duty (towards God and in the singularity of faith) implies a sort of gift or sacrifice that functions beyond both debt and duty, beyond duty as a form of debt.

"I" am always both responsible and irresponsible at the same time. In being responsible in general "I" sacrifice being absolutely responsible and when "I" am absolutely responsible "I" sacrifice responsibility in general. Responsibility is always a gift from that which makes the sacrifice. And in this sense the price of responsibility is high. "If I put to death or grant death to what I hate it is not a sacrifice. I must sacrifice what I love. I must come to hate what I love, in the same moment, at the instant of granting death" (Derrida, 1995h; 64). I must hate my neighbour in order to sacrifice

responsibility to God and I must hate God in order to sacrifice responsibility to my neighbour. But sacrificing something I hate is not a sacrifice hence, I must sacrifice what I love. This movement between responsibility and irresponsibility, love and hate takes place in writing, a living writing, a textual body that suffers misunderstanding and has to justify itself constantly. It is never consoled, never satisfied. It is the movement of the law, the excesses of hate tempered by love and the excesses of love tempered by hate.

### 5.3.3 Return of the Tragic Hero

The tragic hero, whose antics can be highly comical, is the allegorical figure in writing that enables a reader to find a way in which to deal with and express the movement of love and hate in her own life.

As Derrida (Derrida, 1995h; 65) explains:

I have emphasised the word *instant*: “the instant of decision is madness,” Kierkegaard says elsewhere. ... Like the gift and “the gift of death,” it remains irreducible to presence or to presentation, it demands a temporality of the instant without ever constituting a present. ... Understanding, common sense, and reason cannot seize [*begreifen*], conceive, understand, or mediate it; neither can they negate or deny it, implicate it in the work of negation, make it work: in the act of *giving death*, sacrifice suspends both the work of negation and work itself, perhaps even the work of mourning. The tragic hero enters into mourning.

The tragic hero would be one who suffers publicly and openly. The tragic hero is the very figure of ethics. He is the embodiment of the trials and tribulations suffered by all. He is the concept of suffering given human form. He acts out every sacrifice he has had to make to the gods. He mourns every loss and remembers every instant of decision. He generalises responsibility even as he, at the same time, presents a model for the singular individual and the absolute responsibility expected from him. The tragic hero makes the singular absolute individual possible. It is possible for all of us to keep our secret pact only if we have the figure of the tragic hero who takes

responsibility in general upon himself. The tragic hero is also the *pharmakos* the one who suffers, and sometimes dies, for us.

#### 5.4 THE HEART OF PLATO: KHORA

The figure of the tragic hero makes it possible for us to frame Derrida's reading of the Platonic tradition and aim at the central point (or non-point) in this system of systems. At the heart of deconstruction lies what Plato denies or tries hard to forget or to hide. This is the fact that every theory has a hole. Every rational model sooner or later comes up short. This is especially important in a discussion of ethics. Every rational model of ethics will have its flaw. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that every model of ethics be concerned and vigilant for the moment at which it will break down. It is at this moment that an opportunity is opened up in the responsibility in general towards an absolute responsibility.

Hence, this moment of breakdown is a moment filled with the greatest opportunity, an opportunity for ethics to establish itself as the primordial response to a call in the Levinasian sense. The space identified in Plato by deconstruction operates according to a logic that allows it both to be named and to have no name: for convenience sake it is designated as *khôra*.

It is well known: what Plato in the *Timaeus* designates by the name of *khôra* seems to defy that logic "of binarity, of the yes or no." Hence it might perhaps derive from that "logic other than the logic of the *logos*." The *khôra*, which is neither "sensible" nor "intelligible," belongs to a "third genus" (*tritton genos*). One cannot even say of it that it is *neither* this *nor* that or that it is *both* this *and* that. It is not enough to recall that *khôra* names neither this nor that, or, that *khôra* says this and that (Derrida, 1995e; 89).

*Khôra* is literally the place of place. It is what makes space possible. It is thus also the one place from which to start thinking what it would be to name something, in other words to say that something exists. It is the greatest challenge to the ontological order of things. Although it does not seem to fit into any system it makes all systems possible. "The *khôra* seems to be alien

to the order of the 'paradigm,' that intelligible and immutable model. And yet, 'invisible' and without sensible form, it 'participates' in the intelligible in a very troublesome and indeed aporetic way ... Not lying, not saying what is false: is this necessarily telling the truth?" (Derrida, 1995e; 90).

*Khôra* is ultimately a place of silence but paradoxically it makes all sound and language possible as that which resists silence and grows restless because of its passivity. As the question above indicates if we say these things about *khôra* we would not speak falsely, but is this enough, is the absence of falsity automatically to be considered truth? Can we speak the truth about what *khôra* is by merely insisting that we at least are not lying about it? We seem to be in the realm of a strange logic that would both claim that something exists and does not exist at the same time. This is important for a logic of ethics. Ethics sets out to say how things *ought* to be. An "ought", however does not exist in the strict ontological sense of the word "existence". We have to think this word under erasure as it exists prior to being given a name and being presented as a possibility in the place which is not a place, *khôra*. "[T]he discourse on the *khôra*, as it is *presented*, does not proceed from the natural or legitimate *logos*, but rather from a hybrid, bastard, or even corrupted reasoning (*logismo notho*). It comes 'as in a dream', which could just as well deprive it of lucidity as confer upon it a power or divination" (Derrida, 1995e; 90).

The logic of *khôra* is also the logic of ethics. The possibility of ethics comes "as in a dream", never guaranteed an existence or a name, never guaranteed a sensibility, yet it is at the heart of philosophy, it makes philosophy possible. *Khôra* is not merely a mythical notion deprived of all intelligibility and closed to reason. It is open to reason at the same time that it withdraws from it. Derrida acknowledges the difficulty presented to thinking in such a moment. He asks:

... how are we to think that which, while going outside of the regularity of the *logos*, its law, its natural or legitimate genealogy, nevertheless does not belong, *stricto sensu*, to *mythos*? ... how is

one to think the necessity of that which, while *giving place* to ... opposition [to *différance*]... seems sometimes to be itself no longer subject to the law of the very thing which it *situates*? What of this *place*? It is nameable? And wouldn't it have some impossible relation to the possibility of naming? Is there something to *think* there, as I have just so hastily said, and to think according to *necessity*? (Derrida, 1995e; 90 - 91).

In ethics there is an oscillation between what is, what exists and what should be. An oscillation between reality and dream between identifying by naming and being unsure of the identity or name of what exhibits merely a proximity to intelligibility without clear or ready access. This oscillation is best described by the logic to which *khôra* belongs. It is a double logic, in other words, it is a logic that moves between the logic of reality and the logic of dream as a third logic that operates as if stitching a wound. This third logic operates as a way of reading, a *clôtural* reading style.

#### 5.4.1 Naming the Impossible: A Third Genus

To say that the logic of *khôra* is also the logic of ethics is to say that it is a logic that is situated within different types of discourse. Strictly speaking the logic of *khôra* situated within types of discourse is concerned with types of being. In other words with the ontological question of "why something exists rather than nothing" and how it can be said to do so. Saying this raises some doubts, however. Derrida is concerned about the blurring of the distinction between being and discourse. He (Derrida, 1995e; 91) asks:

But have we the right to transport the logic, the para-logic or the meta-logic of this super-oscillation from one set to the other? It concerned first of all types of existent thing (sensible/intellegible, visible/invisible, form/formless, icon, or mimeme/paradigm), but we have displaced it toward types of discourse (*mythos/logos*) or of relation to what is or is not in general. No doubt such a displacement is not self-evident. It depends on a sort of metonymy: such a metonymy would displace itself, by displacing

the names, from types [*genres*] of being to types [*genres*] of discourse. But on the one hand it is always difficult, particularly in Plato, to separate the two problematics: the quality of the discourse depends primarily on the quality of the being of which it speaks.

As we have seen previously it is not possible to distinguish clearly the object of thought from that which mediates it. Hence, in the case of what exists the description of it must pass through discourse and thus it will share by degrees the same logic. The discourse of ethics oscillates with a logic that does not tolerate the imposition of polarities in thinking about its subject. Rhetoric needs to make a distinction between sensible and intelligible (what can be felt and what can be thought) but ethics seeks to traverse this distinction in the same way as thinking about *khôra* would traverse the polarity between logic and myth. Derrida (1995e; 92) puts it as follows:

...[the] tradition of rhetoric which places at [our] disposal a reserve of concepts which are very useful but which are all built upon this distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, ... is precisely what the thought of the *khôra* can no longer get along with ... This problem of rhetoric - particularly of the possibility of naming - is, here, no mere side issue ... (those who speak of metaphor with regard to the *khôra* often add: didactic metaphor) ... We shall not speak of metaphor, but not in order to hear, for example, that the *khôra* is *properly* a mother, a nurse, a receptacle, a bearer of imprints or gold. ... It is perhaps because its scope goes beyond or falls short of the polarity of metaphorical sense versus proper sense that the thought of the *khôra* exceeds the polarity, no doubt analogous, of the *mythos* and the *logos*. ... the thought of the *khôra* would trouble the very order of polarity, of polarity in general, whether dialectical or not.

Ethics constantly traverses this boundary between logic and myth to the extent that the word "ethics" can never be said to name something definite

and un-moveable once and for all. Although there are moments of clear logical exposition which distinguishes it from being *khôra* and also moments of mythical and fictitious storytelling that reminds logic and clarity of what made it possible. What Derrida says about *khôra* in this regard can thus also be said, by way of analogy, about ethics:

We would never claim to propose the exact word, the *mot juste*, for *khôra*, nor to name it, *itself*, over and above all the turns and detours of rhetoric, nor finally to approach it, *itself*, for what it will have been, outside of any point of view, outside of any anachronic perspective. Its name is not an exact word, not a *mot juste* (Derrida, 1995e; 93).

#### 5.4.2 The Sur-name of *Différance*

Instead *khôra*, and ethics by analogy, is more like a *sur-name*. The name that comes after a proper name and that is situated as belonging to a group rather than an individual. “If *différance* is what deconstruction is all about, in a nutshell, then *khôra* is its surname” (Caputo, 1997; 96) and ethics can stand in or take the place of *khôra* in our discussion. Hence, the surname of difference is ethics. *Ethics* is the place in which all *différance* takes place. It remains eternally the same without being touched or marked by that which passes through it. By way of an inversion of the notion what came first and what came second the unchangeable sur-name, the name written after the propername, is actually the constant that continues over time and to which different proper names can be attached. It is the very possibility for any difference at all. Ethics then would be the two together: *différance khôra*. To extend the metaphor of writing to this discussion, *khôra* would be the blank page and *différance* would be the writing that covers it. However, if the metaphor is to incorporate the horror of *khôra* it has to make clear that the page stays eternally blank. In the final analysis *différance* does not make any lasting impression on *khôra*. The difficulty of explaining an image or sign that is not one in the strict sense takes us back to the *mauvaise conscience* and the *il y a* used by Levinas. Any attempt to rise out of this unhappy situation

confronts justice and the need to do right. However, it is not as in Levinas, an unhappiness that can be overcome through a belief in God. This consciousness never assures us that an act springing from it is a right move. Caputo (1997; 97) puts it thus:

To deploy a famous Platonic image: the story of *khôra* works like an “allegory” of *différance*, each addressing a common, kindred non-essence, impropriety, and namelessness. Just as Plato composed the allegory of the cave to explain the surpassing excess of the *agathon*, so, on the other side of being, Derrida can put Timaeus’s story of the *khôra* to work explaining the lowly recessiveness of *differance*, being’s humble hinterlands or underside. It also helps us to understand the divergence of deconstruction and negative theology, since *différance* is *khôra*’s cousin, not God’s. Derrida loves *khôra* the way he loves *différance*, illegitimate children both.

If deconstruction takes sides then it takes sides with responsibility in general. It ends up being slightly irresponsible when it comes to absolute responsibility. It tends to be tempted into justifying itself. It tends to be slightly heroic and more than a little tragic. It establishes the possibility of a question being put, or rather it places being into question.

### 5.4.3 Heidegger’s Question

Heidegger presents us with the best but also most problematic example of what the question about being leads thinking towards. Heidegger does not place being into question rather he reintroduces the question of being, *Dasein*, to philosophy. He contends that the question of being has been forgotten and has to be rethought in a fundamental way. This is very important for our discussion on ethics. Not only in the light of what happened in Germany from 1930 to 1945 but also because Heidegger does not seem to doubt for an instant that there is something that can respond to this call to rediscover the question of being. This cannot be *Dasein* because the latter is exactly what has been forgotten and what has to be rediscovered. “The very

possibility of fundamental ontology is conditional upon *Dasein's* distinctive relationship (*Bezug*) with the question of Being ... Heidegger's thought begins from the necessity of making the question of Being a question once again for us, as it was for the Stranger in Plato's *Sophist*. It is questioning that will take hold of the "forgottenness of Being as forgotten" (Critchley, 1993; 193). But, what then does Heidegger suppose will take up the call? "According to Derrida, Heidegger's thinking moves between two determinations of Spirit, one belonging to onto-theology or metaphysics, ... and the other pointing towards a more originary and nonmetaphysical thinking that appears most forcefully in the 1953 essay on Trakl, *Language in the Poem*<sup>4</sup>" (Critchley, 1993; 191).

*Spirit* for Heidegger is an affirming flame that sets out to bring light in darkness but also has the ability to scorch and to burn. What Derrida (1989) asks in his deconstruction of Heidegger is that we keep two things in mind when thinking the notion of *Geist*:

- Heidegger's analogy of Spirit with flame and,
- what happened to Jews during the Second World War.

As Derrida (1989; 68) says: "When I think about [Heidegger], when I read him, I'm aware of both these vibrations [philosophical nationality and nationalism (Derrida, 1989; 7)] at the same time. It's always horribly dangerous and wildly funny, certainly grave and a bit comical". The problem with a question or with questioning is that put on the spot, so to speak, a certain paralysis takes place in the mind of the person who is suddenly questioned. Especially if it is a difficult question or one to whom the answer is not apparent and requires some consideration. Who is asking this of me? Why are they asking me? It is impossible to think of the answer especially if the question is posed in a foreign language. In Heidegger the question of the question of being also comes together with the rise of Nazism. Derrida suggests a subtle congruence between Nazism and the irresponsibility of the immediate presentation of the question as Heidegger supposes. Critchley writes: "the *immediate presentation* of a question or a problem is a disaster

for *thinking* and ... all that Derrida is seeking to do in *Of Spirit* is to keep open the possibility of thinking in spite of the disaster" (Critchley, 1993; 197). The disaster is that of not knowing the answer to the question. Nationalism sets up a model of what it means to belong. This model allows some to study the answers to the questions and are able to answer quickly without having to think. Nationalism abhors a pause or hesitation, identity documents have to be produced instantly or arouse suspicion.

For Heidegger *Dasein* is eventually something that can be related to nationality. It is not that the question of being has been forgotten in general but that the German *volk* has forgotten *its* being. For Heidegger the ghost of being should be rekindled like a flame that can shine (or blaze like lightning) in the darkness of the *volk's* forgetfulness. As Derrida (1989; 81-82) writes: "[s]eized by German idiom, *Geist* would rather, earlier [*plutôt, plus tôt*], give to think flame".

We have seen that for Derrida and deconstruction experience is an experience of language. And language is always open to the excesses of the subconscious and of meaning. Just as Derrida questioned Saussure and Austin about the structure of language and the limitation of context so Derrida also introduces a most subtle questioning of Heidegger on the point of "exclusion". Heidegger is a subtle mystic and is careful to avoid any overt claims or soapbox rhetoric when it comes to claiming *Dasein* as something distinctly Germanic.

But, Derrida concentrates on the word *Versprechen* used by Heidegger to indicate an excess in the use of language. This word can be made contemporary by rephrasing it as a "Freudian slip". It indicates a moment in the use of language where a subject says more than he wanted to say, when meaning escapes the tight gathering of intended meaning. For Heidegger *Versprechen* is merely a non-sensical moment before the more serious question of being can be put. It is a moment that has to be gotten rid of before any real question will be forthcoming. But, Derrida (1989; 94) does not agree, on the contrary, he says:

It remains to find out whether this *Versprechen* is not the promise which, opening every speaking, makes possible the very question and therefore precedes it without belonging to it: the dissymmetry of an affirmation, of a *yes* before all opposition of *yes* and *no*. The call of Being - every question already responds to it, the promise has already taken place wherever language comes. Language always, *before any question*, and in the very question, comes down to [*revient à*] the promise.

Derrida is concerned with the possibility of a promise that would render questioning possible and he finds it in the discarded notion of *Versprechen*. But he is not interested in a questioning that would belong to the order of interrogation. He refers us to the way in which Heidegger constantly uses the term "hunt down" in the Trakl essay when he talks about how spirit should approach the question of being. Heidegger (1989; 108) writes: "Inasmuch as the nature of spirit consists in a bursting into flame, it strikes a new course, lights it, and sets man on his way. Being flame, the spirit is the storm that 'storms the heavens' and 'hunts down God' ". For Derrida spirit does not resemble flame but promise, a moment of affirmation that he chooses to describe in the language of Kant's ethics as an *unconditional categorical imperative*. Derrida (1995a; 152-153) writes:

In the different texts I have written on (against) apartheid, I have on several occasions spoken of "unconditional" affirmation or of "unconditional" "appeal." This has also happened to me in other "contexts" and each time that I speak of the link between deconstruction and the "yes". Now, the very least that can be said of unconditionality (a word that I use not by accident to recall the character of the categorical imperative in its Kantian form) is that it is independent of every determinate context, even of the determination of a context in general. It announces itself as such only in the *opening* of context. Not that it is simply present (existent) elsewhere, outside of all context; rather, it intervenes in the determination of a context from its very inception, and from an

injunction, a law, a responsibility that transcends this or that determination of a given context. Following this, what remains is to articulate this unconditionality with the determinate (Kant would say, hypothetical) conditions of this or that context; and this is the moment of strategies, of rhetorics, of ethics, and of politics. The structure thus described supposes both that there are only contexts, that nothing *exists* outside context, as I have often said, but also that the limit of the frame or the border of the context entails a clause of nonclosure. The outside penetrates and thus determines the inside.

Derrida needs to call Heidegger's, and also our, attention to the fact that there is something that precedes any question. It is such a small thing that we tend to push it into the margin or forget about it completely. Yet for Derrida, as for Levinas, neither philosophy, nor anything for that matter, can proceed without it and if attempted inevitably irrupts into violence. This very small thing is ethics, or the categorical imperative of an opening or *khôra*, a chance and a promise that a question may be forthcoming. This opening does not mystically *give* (*es gibt*) anything. It is chance and the horror of not being able to capitalise on it. Hence Derrida (1989; 130) writes: "[t]he question is thus not the last word in language. First, because it is not the first word. At any rate, before the word, there is this sometimes wordless word which we name the 'yes'. A sort of pre-originary pledge [*gage*] which precedes any other engagement in language or action". There can be no freedom to ask a question if this pledge, this obligation that for Levinas can never become a rule but that Derrida would paradoxically insist is an ethical imperative, is not adhered to in advance because "[the question] answers in advance, whatever it does, to this pledge and of this pledge. It is engaged by it in a responsibility it has not chosen and which assigns it even its liberty" (Derrida, 1989; 130).

This pledge takes the form of a commitment to language and to communication. From the outset the question has to be put in a form that precedes it, in one language or another. The responsibility becomes very

apparent when the interlocuters speak different languages and have to commit to a place where they will try and translate their interaction and their questioning to each other. Translation can be regarded as a primal scene for language and for the interlocuter. One is at the same time in language and outside of it. The face that confronts me and speaks is not immediately understandable. There is a pledge, an obligation to the face of the stranger, the one who sounds mad to my ear, to start language anew. In this way language is again originated and so we can understand what Derrida means when he says: "The origin of language is responsibility" (Derrida, 1989; 132).

If Heidegger asks the question that has supposedly been forgotten, and one has to wonder how such an important knowledge could have been lost, he has to commit himself first of all to the justification of the *right* to ask the question "what is being?" As Levinas says:

If the question *what?* in its adherence to being, is at the origin of all thought ... all research and all philosophy go back to ontology. ... Yet the question about the Question is more radical still. Why does research take form as a question? How is it that the *what?*, already steeped in being so as to open it up the more, becomes a demand and a prayer, a special language inserting into the *communication* of the given an appeal for help, for aid addressed to another? (Levinas, 1981; 24).

We always ask the question "what is it" from a specific point of view. This point of view is structured more radically than anything else by the language in which we dwell. Breaking into language can make us irresponsible. If we are over hasty and forget that the question is always already put to someone, we will violate the obligation of ethics and our responsibility towards the other. We will forget that the question "what" already engages and seeks the help of another, help we cannot force the other to offer.

## **5.5 TIME FOR ETHICS: MOVING AHEAD**

In this thesis it has become apparent that ethics takes a peculiar shape and form, it seems fluid and solidifies or vaporises according to the context.

These changing states in the structure or quasi-structure of ethics is intimately related to the notion of time. As we have seen there is a movement of delay and deferral that “undermines presence by making it a construct rather than a given, but time is not a foundation” (Culler, 1994; 129). Time is not bedrock on which presence can be constructed because time represents movement *per se*. Time is merely the measure of the attempts by presence to construct and manifest itself.

Time is also the notion that is most central to a discussion of ethics. The question is whether or not there is time for ethics? Time is money is an expression that many are familiar with. Derrida claims that money is “the signifier most destructive of all signification” (Derrida, 1987a; 452). This is because money can take the place of anything. It is the signifier that can be exchanged for any other signifier. But it has to be well proportioned and limited. It has to be calculated. Hence, the time of money is not what Bergson calls *duree*, on the contrary, it is clock time in the strictest sense.

Derrida asks whether there can be any notion of the gift of time in such a situation. A gift, in the true or impossible sense of this word, would be something that exceeds its proportion and overflows without any calculation of its return. Can ethics be such a gift of time and does that necessarily mean that it takes place outside the economy of calculated give and take?

Derrida is in no way against economy or money, but he does not allow a luxurious comfort with relation to either. He encourages us to know what money is and to see how the gift is not a gift in the limited economy of money. As he writes: “know how the gift annuls itself, commit yourself (*engage-toi*) even if commitment is the destruction of the gift [the impossible that overflows] by the gift [in Mauss’ sense of the potlatch], give economy its chance” (Derrida, 1992b; 30). There is a difference between the two senses of gift. Derrida deconstructs the notion of gift giving presented by Marcel Mauss. He finds that Mauss makes of the gift a bedrock to which we can return in order to calculate the prestige of the giver and the receiver. This intricate system of gift giving Mauss describes as “potlatch”. However, as

Derrida rightly perceives, as soon as the giving of gifts enter a system of giving where the aim is to out-give one another the notion of gift evaporates once more into the more accurate notion of exchange. The gift is no longer excessive but has become calculated. As Derrida says about the difference between the gift as potlatch and the gift as impossible overflowing:

This difference is precisely that of the *excessive*. ... The problem of the gift has to do with its nature that is *excessive in advance, a priori exaggerated*. A donating experience that would not be delivered over, *a priori*, to some immoderation, in other words, a moderate, measured gift would not be a gift. To give and thus do something other than calculate its return in exchange, the most modest gift must pass beyond measure” (Derrida, 1992b; 38).

We have seen above that an absolute responsibility is limited to the responsibility of a single individual who keeps a secret he is not even aware he is keeping. Thus, ethics makes one irresponsible in terms of this limited sense as one steps out and shares the secret with others, and oneself, in language. No longer completely myself I take the risk of being responsible for myself, my words, and more than myself. Derrida relates the economy of calculation to a limited responsibility that is breached by ethics as an excessive responsibility, and also irresponsibility. The absolute peace of limited economy achieved within clearly demarcated borders, its successful calculations, is disturbed by the call of the other. In the essay on Levinas entitled *Violence and Metaphysics* (Derrida, 1993f; 128), the following sentence is printed cursively: “*We do not say absolutely peaceful. We say economical*”.

### **5.5.1 A Return to the Gift**

Why does Derrida encourage the reader to give this absolute peace of limited economy a chance? Is it perhaps because he sees the effects of dealing in

such an economy as having the same effect as that which Levinas subscribes to art? To argue on this point that Derrida sees the projects of limited economy as a necessary evil, would not be far fetched. An evil that is bound, if pushed to its most solipsistic limit, to implode as a lesson in ethics and the value of an open system that allows itself to cool. Derrida, however, is well aware of the catastrophic implications such an implosion would entail. Instead, contra Baudrillard, Derrida does not push for an extreme theory that would help the limited economy to implode on itself by encouraging it to continue. Instead he pushes for an extreme *thinking* that might just help us break out of the circle, if even for a moment. But, thinking the impossible, thinking the outside from a position inside is always difficult, if not impossible. Against the limit, a limit that Derrida acknowledges and gives a chance, he tries to think what delimitation would mean and if we could call such a movement a gift. The difficulty is not a small one,

... after all. What would be a gift that fulfils the condition of the gift, namely, that it not appear as gift, that it not be, exist, signify, want-to-say as gift? A gift without wanting, without wanting-to-say, an insignificant gift, a gift without intention to give? Why would we still call that a gift? That, which is to say what? What does 'to give' mean to say? And what does language give one to think with this word? And what does 'to give' mean to say *in the case of* language, of thinking, and of meaning-to-say? (Derrida, 1992b; 27).

In the strictest sense the gift for Derrida takes shape in the same way as Being does. Here of course he does follow Heidegger but unlike the latter he never suggests that either being or the gift *necessarily* comes into existence out of some giving substance. For Heidegger Being is guaranteed as the *es gibt* that is thrown forth (*geworfen*) from the mists of time past as a burning flame. Derrida has a more uncertain, prudent approach to both the gift and being. It is a strictly phenomenological approach that at every step asks of that which is presented only dimly, what is it? He says that,

[i]t so happens (but this “it so happens” does not name the fortuitous) that the structure of this impossible *gift* is also that of Being - that gives itself to be thought on the condition of being nothing (no present-being, no being present) - and of time which, ... is always defined in the paradoxia or rather the aporia of what is without being, of what is never present or what is scarcely and dimly (Derrida, 1992b; 27).

The question is whether or not one can speak of something that is outside or more than the system of gifts exchanged? It is here that the notion of time can be most fruitfully employed. Derrida focuses on the way in which deferral and difference might be created through a negotiated delimitation. A *quasi-delimitation* that would allow both the madness of absolute limitation on the one hand and anarchic overflowing on the other hand to be curbed. Because as he says even though the gift is impossible in the above sense, “we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it” (Derrida, 1992b; 29).

There is as much potential violence hidden in the ecstasy of the excessive overflowing of the gift as there is in the tight-fisted calculation of exchange. The infinite is not necessarily more preferable than the totality. Hence, Derrida concentrates on the notion of “term” in which the gift and exchange may be bound together in a system that temporalises *différance* (Derrida, 1992b; 39). The “term” is negotiated so that what would have been a gift excessively or the impossibility of a gift in the limited economy becomes what is commonly known as a *loan*. The gift here given is the *gift of time*. And the term may be indefinite, or more calculated. However, the repayment is deferred. What is set up in the space of the term is the possibility between bridging the gap between economy and the gift by way of a compromise.

This gap between, on the one hand, thought, language, and desire and, on the other hand, knowledge, philosophy, science, and the order of presence is also a gap between gift and economy. This gap is not present anywhere; it resembles an empty word or a transcendental illusion (Derrida, 1992b; 29).

However, this transcendental illusion is the very place from which ethics might come. The gap or *khôra* is the very possibility of language to present us with the terms of a response to the call of the other. The ethics of deconstruction can do nothing but traverse this gap between limit and excess in an experience of language, of different terms. This is not a mere empty talking but very much the *experience* of language as it constitutes beings that are actively able to respond to each other's demands, invitations and also laughter.

One has to be responsible, not only for what one receives, *but* perhaps more importantly for what one gives. For deconstruction when it comes to giving there is always a "but." As Derrida explains:

... with the gift there is always a "but" - the contrary is also necessary: It is necessary [*il faut*] to limit the excess of the gift and of generosity, to limit them by economy, profitability, work, exchange. And first of all by reason or by the principle of reason: It is *also* necessary to render an account, it is also necessary to give consciously and conscientiously. It is necessary *to answer for* [*répondre*] the gift, the given, and the call to giving. It is necessary to answer to it and answer for it. One must be *responsible* for what one gives and what one receives (Derrida, 1992b; 62 - 63).

From the logic that we saw above, the gift of life is always also the gift of death. The deferral of these gifts are of utmost importance and makes all the difference. The severity of the gift, as the possibility of ultimate sacrifice, the gift of death, places us in the realm of the justified imperative. The gift *must* occur *but* as a negotiated term that breaks out of absolute secrecy and silence.

### **5.5.2 Restricted and General Economy**

However, a disturbing question haunts the neat negotiation of terms that compromises the limit and the excess as it regards each other in language.

Is there any *reason* for giving? This also concerns most intimately the whole question of “forgiving,” of “forgiveness”. Derrida is very specific:

*In total*, there is no gift as concerns reason, not even as concerns a practical reason. There is no reason for there ever to be the least gift. ... Not that it is *opposed* to reason or to anything whatsoever - not at all, through and through [*du tout, du tout au tout*] - but perhaps it passes them by so that something may come to pass, including something like reason, including everything [*tout*] (Derrida, 1992b; 77).

From Derrida’s point of view the best reason for giving would be giving itself. It would be the very gift of reason. Perhaps by giving reasons for giving one is already engaged in giving *per se*. The ethical endeavour would be exactly finding and negotiating reasons for giving and for “forgiving” because this movement, this thought, taking time out to attempt reason is a gift in itself, if it is at all possible to give time or to receive a thought that counts.

Derrida follows George Bataille’s resistant reading of Hegel to establish the notions of a *restricted* economy and a *general* economy. The gift would form part of the general economy for which from the point of view of the restricted economy (also called the absolute, total, or limited economy) there exists no reason.

The restricted economy is “restricted to commercial values ... a ‘science dealing with the utilisation of wealth,’ limited to the meaning and the established value of objects, and to their *circulation*. The *circularity* of absolute knowledge could dominate, could comprehend only this circulation, only the *circuit of reproductive consumption*” (Derrida; 1993c; 271). Against this absolute circuit is the infinite excess of general economy. Economy of emotion, memory and the trace. The imperfect economy of “excessive energy” that is lost without the slightest aim and consequently without meaning. Bataille is adamant that this senseless loss is what constitutes “sovereignty” (Derrida; 1993c; 270).

Bataille reads the notion of individual sovereignty against the Hegelian edifice of restricted economy, characterised by the corporation and ruled over by a *monarch* as the representative of sovereignty, which for Bataille “is too heavy to bear” (Derrida; 1993c; 251). Bataille’s sovereign, another word for the individual, chooses rather to “shrug his shoulders” and to head boldly away into the world of wasted energy without aim. As Derrida notices, Bataille, or rather the sovereign individual, chooses to find shelter “very close to that at which laughter laughs: close to anguish” (Derrida; 1993c; 252).

The sovereign individual exists in meaninglessness but confronted with the Hegelian alternative has no other option unless it wants to compromise its singularity in the state of a universal. Those who serve the restricted economy are no longer sovereign individuals. They carry the meaning, the identity of the *corporation* (Wood, 1990; 241). But for both Hegel and Bataille individual existence comes down to meaninglessness. In Bataille’s case this is a lightness to be celebrated but for Hegel it is madness, meaning has to be ultimately bestowed through the adoption of a Absolute dialectical synthesis.

At this impasse between “a *system of meaning* permitting or promising an absolute formal mastery” that “would amount to erasing the excess of non-meaning and to falling back into the closure of knowledge” ethical writing may take place. Ethical writing would be a tentative and oblique search for reasons to justify the gift. “Only *perhaps*, ... [a writing] absolutely adventurous, ... a chance and not a technique” (Derrida; 1993c; 273) can constitute this place of ethical writing and create a text on ethics if not an ethical text. “This text, then, is also the piece, *perhaps* a piece of counterfeit money, that is, a machine for provoking events” (Derrida, 1992b; 97).

### 5.5.3 Tolerance: An Impure Fiction

It is critical to look at two related questions: How does the ethical text provoke events and how does the notion of counterfeit money make ethical sense.

In a story by Baudelaire that is quoted by Derrida in *Given Time. I. Counterfeit Money* a man and his friend leaves a tobacconist shop after having made a purchase. The man’s friend has calculated and distributed his change very

carefully and has placed it in various pockets. He, however, keeps a counterfeit coin in his hand. When they pass a beggar the man hands the counterfeit coin to the beggar who is astonished at receiving such a seemingly large amount of money. The man, who also narrates the story, is also impressed by the generosity of his friend. But the friend admits that he has only given the beggar a counterfeit coin.

This admission sets the narrator to thinking in what circumstances receiving a counterfeit coin may be fortuitous. The beggar may not realise that the coin is counterfeit and wager it as a bet, or invest it, or make a purchase. If the counterfeit is not discovered he may get a lucky break. However, he soon realises that his friend never had the beggars interests at heart. The way his friend obviously calculated his deed and the way in which he admitted to it shows the narrator that he passed off the counterfeit only to receive the dubious accolade of being generous. In a sense he wanted to give himself the gift of feeling generous without spending any money. And also he wanted to play a mean trick on the unfortunate beggar.

In the previous chapters we have looked at the problem of tolerance and its close connection to power. The question is whether an individual has the power to partake in ethical behaviour. To open oneself up to the other could be a dangerous exercise. One could be handed counterfeit money. Giving one's time may result only in being lied to and made a fool of. From an ethical point of view the narrator's disgust with the action of his friend is informative. As he says: "[t]o be mean is never excusable, but there is some merit in knowing that one is; the most irreparable of vices is to do evil out of stupidity<sup>5</sup>."

Baudelaire is giving us a fictional account and there is thus no way for us to know if the incident really happened or not. In this sense it has the character of counterfeit money. It may very well be a lie. But in literature the convention of fiction allows us to "take it or leave it" so to speak. As Derrida (1992b; 93-94) says:

This is what it seems to share with the phenomenon of counterfeit money (to pass off a fiction as “true”). But since the convention permits us to know - Baudelaire and us the readers - that this function is a fiction, there is no phenomenon here of “counterfeit money,” that is, of an abuse of trust that passes off the false for the true.

This is very important for the consideration of ethics. Ethics is after all a fiction. A narrative that has as its most cherished expression the term “ought”. Ethics attempts to prevent moral action from being perpetrated “out of stupidity”. And as such it sets itself up to be true. The convention of ethics as fiction allows us to remember that it is not trying to pass itself off as the truth in order to look generous or to gain for itself the prestige of being right. It has as its goal only one thing: correcting moral stupidity. Ethics may keep its fictionality secret from time to time, hide its frame, in order to effect its goal. But this is not the secret of the criminal or of absolute responsibility, it is a *secret without depth*. Derrida (1992b; 94) explains:

... the moral fault or the criminal misdeed implies lying, the intention to deceive - and thus knowledge - only on the part of the emitting agent or the counterfeiter, to the exclusion of the receiver or the “dupes” (the beggar, for example, or the narrator before his friend’s confession and, outside the narrative, in a heterogeneous space, the reader at least preceding the same confession; but the reader is not “deceived or “duped” in the same sense as the narrator: in truth, his non-knowledge is not on the order of being-deceived; it is the experience of a *secret without depth*, a *secret without secret* ...).

Thus, the fictionality of ethics grants the interlocutor a precarious power to tolerate. It is never an absolute power certain of its knowledge and therefore the outcome of its actions. It is not a power that stabilises tolerance once and for all by grounding it either in the existence of an Almighty God or the power of Reason. It is a process of stabilisation and a vigilance that can never be

said to be fully done with. It is a process that depends on structures of interaction between individuals that are itself as old as the first moment when a face met another face in conversation. Derrida (1992b; 95) puts it succinctly:

... no natural stability is ever given, as there is only *stabilisation in process*, that is, essentially precarious, one must presuppose “older” structures, let us not say originary structures, but more complicated and more unstable ones. We propose here to call them structures, and even to study them as such in literary processes, because they are not necessarily chaotic. Their relative “anteriority” or their greater complexity does not signify pure disorder.

Ethics in the same way as reading asks of the calculating subject, the writer who calculates his words, to suspend disbelief. The time for ethics is surely a time of luxury, a time that gives time by annulling the clock aspect, but it is constantly made to feel uncomfortable, to check the clock, by the pressing need to correct moral stupidity. In a way giving oneself the time to reflect on ethics can be compared to giving oneself permission to smoke (Derrida, 1992b; 107) or to read without writing. Ethics, and fiction in general, is “a luxury product, that is, a product of pure consumption that is burned without leaving, apparently, any remainder” (Derrida, 1992b; 103). However, the burning of tobacco leaves us to contemplate the ashes and all the different images, tropes and metaphors that can be recalled there. In the same way ethics would be a contemplation of the trace that is left and might spark into a good moral action. This moral action will have its roots in the suspension of disbelief. The spark that sets ethics alight is “an act of faith, phenomenon of credit or credence” through which a certain authority of moral action can establish itself by way of “accreditation, both in the sense of legitimation as effect of belief or credulity, and of bank credit, of capitalised interest” (Derrida, 1992b; 97).

Thus, the tolerance expressed by an ethical fiction seeks to authorise moral action by way of oscillating between two polarities that is impossible to fuse, that of belief and of calculation. The ethics of deconstruction thus runs the risk of receiving or giving counterfeit coin, but the logic of iteration would say that it will not happen more than twice, before a pattern establishes itself and a context becomes recognisable. Then control can be exerted in an instant of decision or choice.

#### **5.5.4 Marx and the Other Heading**

We have established above that ethics sets an aim, an aim that it does not know beforehand but vigilantly seeks and that was described in broad terms as: correcting moral stupidity. It is not far fetched that the condition of moral stupidity is a reality for we cannot accept that, as the ethics of deconstruction does not, that moral integrity is given naturally. After all the word “stupidity” shares the same root as the word “student”. Hence it is necessary from time to time, and for Derrida there is never a better time than right now, to think through the stupidity of a moral reality as a student and to present what one finds.

He proposes that one can look at the state of the world today, as the state of *globalisation*, and remark as Hamlet did that “The time is out of joint” and that world affairs, the multicultural impact on territorial identity for example, presents a reality to scrutiny that resembles the image of “A black picture on a blackboard”. This is not to say that the world is in *crisis* but, rather, that one has to consider two notions of what “bad” might mean when one says that the picture looks *bad*. It is not a case of choosing one of these notions but of keeping both in mind as one tries to think a correction. Hence one should “avoid deciding between the *bad as suffering* and the *bad as wrong or as crime*” (Derrida, 1994; 78).

Derrida (1994; 87) suggests two ways to interpret what he calls the “blackboard picture.” The first interpretation remains within an *idealist* logic. This logic reduces all that is *going badly* in the world today to an inability to adequately measure the gap between an empirical reality and a regulating

ideal. According to this idealist hypothesis, a certain *spirit* of Marxist critique will have to remain indefinitely necessary in order to denounce and reduce the gap *as much as possible*. This critique sets itself the task of adjusting “reality” to the “ideal” in the course of a necessarily infinite process.

The second interpretation of the blackboard picture would obey another, more deconstructive, logic. Beyond the “facts,” beyond the supposed “empirical evidence,” beyond all that is inadequate to the ideal, it would be a question of putting into question again, in certain of its essential predicates, the very concept of the said ideal. This would be the task of ethics *par excellence*. Some of the matters to be considered would be: an economic analysis of the market, the laws of capital, of types of capital (financial or symbolic), liberal parliamentary democracy, modes of representation and suffrage, the determining content of human rights, women’s and children’s rights, the current concepts of equality, liberty, especially fraternity, dignity. The task of ethics will also extend as a quasi-conceptual investigation, to the concept of the human<sup>6</sup>, its difference from the divine and the animal and to a *determined quasi-concept* of the democracy that supposes it.

This last point is of particular concern. The very idea of representative government and of democracy as citizenship for the benefit of all seems to be under severe pressure. Derrida (1994; 79). writes:

Electoral representivity or parliamentary life is not only distorted, as was always the case, by a great number of socio-economic mechanisms, but it is exercised with more and more difficulty in a public space profoundly upset by techno-tele-media apparatuses and by new rhythms of information and communication, by the devices and the speed of forces represented by the latter, but also and consequently by the new modes of appropriation they put to work, by the new structure of the event and of the spectrality that they *produce* (both invent *and* bring to light *at the same time, there where they were already there without being there*: it is the relation of the concept of *production* to the ghost that is in question here).

This transformation does not affect only facts but the concept of such “facts.” The very concept of the event.

The whole notion of identification of an electorate with a candidate that has their interest at heart is made untenable by the way opinion is “produced, if not premeditated by the power of the media” (Derrida, 1994; 80). Politicians who might in their personal capacity have all the integrity in the world become mere TV actors who say what their pollsters tell them to say as they try to determine the ever changing opinions of the voters who are bombarded with information.

With this political climate in mind Derrida (1994; 81-83) supplies a decalogue of “plagues” that might be addressed by an ethics of deconstruction in the future:

- Unemployment. This can be defined as social inactivity in general, or non-work or underemployment, but also joblessness.
- The massive exclusion of homeless citizens from any participation in the democratic life of States.
- The ruthless economic war among the countries of the European Community, between them and the Eastern European countries, between Europe and the United States, and between Europe, the United States, and Japan. And here one might supplement Derrida by pointing out that Southern Africa is not spared in this war.
- The inability to master the contradictions in the concept, norms, and reality of the free market. For instance how does one go about saving one’s own interests in the global market by claiming to protect one’s “social advantages” in the face of those who are socially, politically and otherwise disadvantaged?
- The aggravation of foreign debt and other connected mechanisms are starving or driving to despair a large portion of humanity. Loans may be granted to emerging economies on the basis of democratisation or human rights. However, by way of many *geopolitical* fluctuations it becomes

impossible for these markets to repay even the interest on such loans. Hence, what starts out as a process of creating wealth in these economies becomes another mechanism for exclusion on the basis of bad debt.

- The arms industry and trade (whether it be “conventional” arms or at the cutting edge of tele-technological sophistication) are an intricate part of the normal regulation of scientific research, economy, and socialisation of labour in Western democracies. Short of an unimaginable revolution, they cannot be suspended or even cut back without running major risks, beginning with the worsening of unemployment. As for arms trafficking, to the (limited) degree that it can still be distinguished from “normal” commerce, it remains the largest in the world, larger than the drug traffic, from which it is not always dissociated.
- The spread of nuclear weapons exceeds not only statist control but every declared market. Devices are also becoming smaller and more portable which means that the necessity for large delivery vehicles such as inter-global rockets are no longer a priority. These devices become impossible to track via satellite or aerial photography. The nuclear threat has become truly global and dissent has acquired the ability to be privatised.
- Inter-ethnic wars (have there ever been another kind?) are proliferating, driven by an *archaic* phantasm and concept, by a *primitive conceptual phantasm* of community, the nation-State, sovereignty, borders, native soil and blood. Archaism is not a bad thing in itself, it doubtless keeps some irreducible resource. But how can one deny that this conceptual phantasm is, so to speak, made more outdated than ever, in the very *ontology* it supposes, by tele-technic dislocation? (By *ontology* we mean an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being [*on*] to its *situation*, to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general. All national rootedness, for example, is rooted first of all in the memory or the anxiety of a displaced - or displaceable - population.

- Can one ignore the growing worldwide power of the super-efficient and properly capitalist phantom-States that are the mafia and the drug cartels on every continent, including in the former so-called socialist States of Eastern Europe? These phantom-States invade not only the socio-economic fabric, the general circulation of capital, but also statist or inter-statist institutions.
- Above all, one would have to analyse the present state of international law and its institutions.

This last point is of utmost importance if we are to consider another heading, thinking about another course of action than the one that is at present pulling time out of joint. If any of the above points are to be addressed the role of law will have to be demarcated if that is at all possible. Two distinct problems or limits with regard to the notion of international law and its institutions will have to be crossed or traversed.

- The first and most radical stems from the fact that their norms, their character, the definition of their mission depend on a certain historical culture. They cannot be dissociated from certain European philosophical concepts, and notably from a concept of State or national sovereignty.
- Another limit is strictly linked to the first: This supposedly universal international law remains, in its application, largely dominated by particular nation-States.

It is with regards to this last point that the force of deconstructive ethics, or as we will see in the next section, poststructural ethics, can open a space in which the mettle of language, the coin of its terms may be tested for signs of possible counterfeiture. A good place to start will be with "what is obscurely and sometimes hypocritically called the *humanitarian*". What does "aid" imply? Does the gift of "aid" hold certain responsibilities for both the giver and the receiver? For Derrida (1994; 84) it is clear that however insufficient, confused, or equivocal signs of "aid" in the name of being a *humanitarian* may still be, we should salute what is heralded today in the reflection on the

right of interference or intervention and in limiting the sovereignty of the State under certain terms.

“[T]he *New International*, refers to a profound transformation, projected over a long term, of international law, of its concepts, and its field of intervention” (Derrida, 1994; 84). It is before the spectre of such a “super-State,” heralding a “new world order,” that poststructural ethics trembles in anticipation. The spectre of such an infrastructure of laws and regulations is powerfully seductive but as a future it is indeed a “black picture” on a “blackboard”. It is difficult to see what will eventually present itself in the name of a *justice for all*. What is clear though, as clear as *khôra*, so to speak, is that even this State will be subject to deconstruction.

## 5.6 SUMMARY

As we have seen, deconstruction is a specific experience of language. Due to the dynamic aspects of language and the fact that the meaning of words change over time and in different contexts, it is difficult to define deconstruction which is itself a word that take on many meanings. However, this does not mean that we cannot or are not obliged to try definitions. Hence, a definition of deconstruction, a nutshell, and a summary could be: Deconstruction as language is experience itself suppressing parts and favouring others in a dynamic repetition aimed at creating new meaning where misunderstanding arises.

This is also a definition of ethical engagement. The difference between what deconstruction attempts and the self-closure of belief were sharply contrasted in a discussion of the Old Testament story of Abraham. As we have seen a key concept for ethics is the opportunity to question, but deconstruction does not take for granted that questioning opens the road to ethics. Rather, a certain non-knowledge, a questioning from ignorance, was presupposed in the discussion of Heidegger’s notion of the questioning of Being.

Finally, however, the ignorance from which questions are formulated is a state of unhappy urgency as ethics cannot wait. Time plays an important role

in the delivery of effective ethical formulations and we looked at the pressure of this situation by way of the aporia of the *gift* and its relation to money.

Deconstruction formulates tolerance as an impure fiction. If such a fiction is to have any political impact it will have to be *legitimised*. In the next chapter, the progress of developing a poststructural ethics can also be read as an attempt to think through the notion of constitutional tolerance.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Of this word Derrida writes that it is a “tired word of philosophy and logic, [that] has often imposed itself on me” (Derrida, 1993a; 12) and that it is a “word, *aporia*, which I chose a long time ago . . . without really knowing where I was going, except that I knew that what was going to be at stake in this word was the ‘not knowing where to go’” (Derrida, 1993a; 12).

<sup>2</sup> “This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible)” (Derrida, 1976; xiv).

<sup>3</sup> The translation in *Margins of Philosophy*, the one I use here, differs slightly from the one provided in *Limited INC.* on p. 20. In the *Margins* translation the signature seems to retain an independent metaphorical existence from its production, an autonomy that is diluted if we replace “detach itself” with “to be detached” as is done in *Limited INC.* The latter does however, signify the relationship of the signature to the system of writing better than what seems to be an arbitrary and anarchic “will” expressed by the *Margins* text. An interesting example of the different political agendas expressed by the two texts in question.

<sup>4</sup> See: Heidegger M (1989) Georg Trakl: Language in the Poem in Bloom H (ed) **Modern German Poetry** New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House pp 83 - 121.

<sup>5</sup> The quote is taken from a textual insert of the story *Counterfeit Money* by Baudelaire and has no page numbers. See: Derrida J (1992b) **Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money** Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press

<sup>6</sup> For Derrida the question of the human is also closely related to the question of animals. If “progress” entails a better quality of life one cannot today ignore “that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth”. One can also not ignore “what is becoming of so-called ‘animal’ life, the life and existence of ‘animals’ in this history. This question has always been a serious one, but it will become massively unavoidable” (Derrida, 1994; 85).

## CHAPTER SIX

### POSTSTRUCTURAL ETHICS

#### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to give content to the notion of *poststructural ethics*. In the previous chapters we have looked at what Modernity expected from a project of ethics. It had to produce a comprehensive list of values that could be taught as the authoritative version of what “correct thinking” about moral matters implied. These authoritative versions are called “metanarratives”.

In contrast, postmodernity favours an anarchic freedom of choice allowing individuals to experiment and identify an ethic that suits them. However, this gives rise to an “anything goes” consumption of ethical codes in which one’s allegiance can be changed at will or where one can opt for moral indifference.

Individually, both these projects fail to live up to their promises. However, poststructuralism does not abandon these projects but thinks them together as necessary parts of the same need for ethics. In the attempt to think what is basically a rule based system and an anarchic enthusiasm at the same time, poststructuralism turns to the work of Levinas and Derrida.

Poststructural ethics gains from Levinas’s exposition of the phenomenality of the human face and also the “said” / “saying” structure of ethical discourse. Derrida, however, provides the most comprehensive contribution with his thorough deconstruction of Western metaphysics.

Poststructural ethics, however, finds its distinction in that it insists on decisions being made based on good judgements. It appreciates the infinite openness that deconstruction has towards a future but cannot ignore the responsibility that ethics has in ensuring that choices and promises are given moral force. The exposition of poststructural ethics is intimately interwoven with Linda Hutcheon’s (1995) description of a politics of irony, Drucilla

Cornell's (1992) rephrasing of deconstruction as "philosophy of the limit", and Paul Cilliers' (1998) introduction to self-organisation in complex systems.

The following chapter proceeds by firstly providing a quick glance at the key features of poststructural ethics. Secondly, a defence of reason in terms of ethics and the ironic politics it has to contend with, will be looked at. Thirdly, by using the example of law an explanation of the sublime or aporetic character of judgement will be offered. This structural feature of all judgements has the consequence of never being able to exclude ethics from the processes of the Law. Fourthly, the notion of friendship provides an opportunity to examine the kind of life a poststructural ethics proposes. Finally, a note on the impossibility of ending poststructural ethics is a logical place to bring this thesis to an end.

## 6.2 WHAT IS POSTSTRUCTURAL ETHICS?

In the first instance poststructural ethics, which embraces the movement of *différance* and the notion of *khôra*, does not seek to ground itself in a metaphysical first principle, such as Rationality or the existence of God. In the second instance it endeavours to establish an ethics that takes up position between "anything goes" anarchism and absolute authoritarianism by means of stimulating a community that questions itself and its relation to others.

In order for us to start answering the question of what poststructural ethics entails we need to reiterate Derrida's (1995a; 93) statement quoted in the previous chapter under sub-heading 5.2.2 - *The Scene of Writing*:

All metaphysicians, ... have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just *one* metaphysical gesture among others, it is *the* metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.

Poststructuralism does not attempt to conceive from the outset what is good or positive or pure or simple or essential or what should be imitated. It does not however, take the obvious alternative course following an inverted path, and conceive a negative strategy by privileging evil, negativity, complexity, accidents and imitation. This would be to do the same thing philosophy has always done, but only in reverse.

Instead, poststructural ethics begins where it finds itself and is in a certain sense blind to its own beginning. This beginning may be anywhere in what Derrida calls the “text”<sup>1</sup>. It proceeds over time in an attempt to come to terms with emerging patterns that identify the *network* of relationships in which it is embedded. In scientific terms it proceeds *deductively*, working from the general to the specific rather than *inductively* from the specific to the general. However, it is not a “specific theory” that attempts to develop itself *a priori* and then “forces” itself upon, what is regarded as, an indifferent universe.

By identifying and describing patterns, as it goes along, it attempts to “influence” decisions about appropriate action. It attempts to strike a balance between arbitrary prescriptions based on knowledge that is held to be unchanging and the requirements of contingency. These are such that an ethical departure, or an attempt at ethics cannot have the good conscience of knowing exactly what to do from the outset. It has knowledge and *enframing* texts at its disposal but the ethical requirement may deem it necessary to transgress the rules of this knowledge or break out of the frame. This might happen without the *agent*<sup>2</sup> being aware of it initially.

On this point Caputo (1997; 81) is wrong about the ethical impulse in poststructuralism, and about what drives deconstruction, when he says that “transgression is a controlled contravention or invention, requiring the discipline of an already standing frame or horizon to transgress, which is why it is described as a ‘double gesture’”. Poststructural ethics is always a double gesture, but it is not always a planned and *controlled* contravention or invention. The agent of ethics is not “in the moment” always guaranteed of doing the right thing. As we have seen, sometimes the ethical act can make one irresponsible, at least initially.

The fact that things change presents rules of behaviour, as ethics is often perceived, with the problem that they may be incomprehensible in certain situations to which they are supposed to pertain. This does not entail that rationality has to be sacrificed to historico-social demands or chaotic irrationality. Through an insistence on irrationalism “ethical responsibility is reduced to a choice amongst other choices the individual can make. But, as we have seen in Levinas, responsibility is not a choice at all but an irremissible necessity, since we are inevitably in proximity to the Other” (Cornell, 1992; 100).

Through a complex interaction of observation, experimentation and choice poststructural ethics self-organises<sup>3</sup> into strategies most effective for survival. It sifts through the rubble of what has been and also the shiny projects proposed for the future. It evaluates, makes decisions about the appropriate action to take and tries to render the object of theory.

### **6.3 RECONSIDERING RATIONALITY**

Deconstruction does not proceed by conducting empirical research necessary for resolving social debates on the level of actual politics although it does not disallow it. Rather than regard this as an error one has to proceed with a “quasi-transcendental analysis [for it is] crucial to justice, and more specifically, to a conception of justice that promotes, not just allows, legal transformation” (Cornell, 1992; 8).

In order to speak about the role of the museum and of ironic strategies employed by curators in a postcolonial society Linda Hutcheon (1995; 176) chose a specific exhibition that ran from 16 November 1989 to 6 August 1990, at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto Canada, entitled “Into the Heart of Africa”.

Her concern has focused mainly on the reception of the exhibition within a *multicultural* society. She (Hutcheon, 1995; 199) makes the following observation:

For a museum to choose not to take an unequivocal stand might be interpreted as a refusal of any single, modern, “master

narrative” of Truth; but from a postcolonial perspective - given the position of authority of the institution - the possible reading was more problematic. What might be read as irony or ambiguity becomes, from a postcolonial perspective, potential evasion ... ambiguity within an institution associated with cultural and educational authority itself makes a kind of truth-claim.

This problem of reception is one that Derrida looks at in terms of the University but is a situation that pertains in all institutions with authoritative power. The University and the museum are prime examples of the Enlightenment myth that represent the completed move from *mythos* to *logos*. “This myth is dangerous from an ethical standpoint because it denies its own mythical structure, parading as the universal truth of *mankind* and, thus, foreclosing in advance the very legitimacy of its challengers” (Cornell, 1992; 10). Derrida does not, as Levinas does, insist that knowledge and rationality are incompatible with ethics. Instead he favours a re-visioning of rationality.

Derrida’s introduction of the notion of *respect* is one of the clear differences between the ethics of deconstruction and Levinas’s Ethics as First Philosophy. Respect, with all the connotations of vision and rationality that goes with it, is not something that Derrida wants to abandon. For him the question of rationality is of utmost importance. As we have seen, giving reasons is one of the key manifestations of an ethics as discourse and it must be a priority in a multicultural society.

When we think about thinking, and more specifically, when we seek reasons for reason, Derrida identifies two typical risks that has to be avoided. “Some take the form of a bottomless pit, while others take the form of a protectionist barrier” (Derrida, 1983; 3). In the first instance reasoning regresses infinitely as it seeks one rational proof to prove the previous proof etc. Or it can form a circle that traps what it seeks to protect, and suffocates it. For example, the law has the right to dispense justice, justice is dispensed by the law because it has the right. According to Derrida sight is closely connected to the theoretical attitude. As he (Derrida, 1983; 4) writes:

The pleasure of useless sensations explains the desire to know for the sake of knowing, the desire for knowledge with no practical purpose. And this is more true of sight than of the other senses. This one sense, naturally theoretical and contemplative, goes beyond practical usefulness and provides us with more to know than any other; indeed, it unveils countless differences. We give preference to sight just as we give preference to the uncovering of difference.

In the work of the Abstract Expressionist painter Willem de Kooning one is able to glimpse what Derrida might mean with “countless differences”. De Kooning’s work is a visual feast that in a sense reminds the viewer that one’s eyes are always bigger than one’s stomach. Theory is sometimes hard to swallow and even harder to digest and the eyes are greedy and overzealous. Hence, Derrida (1983; 4) is moved to ask:

But is sight enough? For learning and teaching, does it suffice to know how to unveil differences? In certain animals, sensation engenders memory, and that makes them more intelligent and more capable of learning. But for knowing how to learn, and learning how to know, sight, intelligence and memory are *not* enough. We must also know how to hear, and to listen. I might suggest somewhat playfully that we have to know how to shut our eyes in order to be better listeners. Bees know many things, since they can see; but they cannot learn, since they are among the animals that lack the faculty of hearing. Thus, despite appearances to the contrary, the University, the place where people know how to learn and learn how to know, can never be a kind of hive.

Derrida denies that he proposes an “art of blinking” but he does not believe that the University should be a sclerophthalmic animal, an animal without eyelids. It is better in this instance to remember that “[m]an can lower the sheath, adjust the diaphragm, narrow his sight, the better to listen, remember and learn” (Derrida, 1983; 5).

As with a drawing that starts out in a confusion of lines that seeks to express its object so reason starts out over-saturated and indistinct. Someone who renders a drawing has to fight with the contradictions that lines present as they try to move around an object. In a similar way “[t]here are two first principles in all reasoning, the principle of non-contradiction, of course and the principle of rendering reason. The second principle says that for any truth - for any true proposition, that is - a reasoned account is possible. Or, to translate more literally, for any true proposition, *reason can be rendered*” (Derrida, 1983; 7). But, reason itself is an action, a practice and not an “object in the world”. So how is it possible to contemplate reason itself? How is one to render reason? How does one give reasons for reason? For Derrida (1983; 8) the questions of reason,

cannot be separated from a question about the modal verb “must” and the phrase “must be rendered”. The “must” seems to cover the essence of our relationship to principle, it seems to mark out for us requirement, debt, duty, request, command, obligation, law, the imperative. Whenever reason can be rendered (*reddi potest*), it must. Can we, without further precautions, call this a moral imperative, in the Kantian sense of pure practical reason? It is not clear that the sense of “practical”, as it is determined by a critique of pure practical reason, gets to the bottom of the “must,” or reveals its origin, although such a critique has to presuppose such a “must”. It could be shown, I think, that the critique of practical reason continually calls on the principle of reason, on its “must” which, although it is certainly not of a theoretical order, is nonetheless not simply “practical” or “ethical” in the Kantian sense. A responsibility is involved here, however. We have to respond to the call of the principle of reason.

Thus, we are obliged to render reason. But, obliged in the sense that Levinas implies. It is an obligation that never merely forces or coerces but invites. It is not an obligation that can be rendered once and for all as one

succinct phrase. It is rather a commitment to an endless questioning of reason by rational means.

Are we to use reason to account for the principle of reason? Is the reason for reason rational? Is it rational to worry about reason and its principle? Not *simply*; but it would be over-hasty to seek to disqualify this concern and to refer those who experience it back to their own irrationalism, their obscurantism, their nihilism. Who is more faithful to reason's call the one who offers questions in return and tries to think through the possibility of that summons, or the one who does not want to hear any question about the reason of reason? (Derrida, 1983; 9)

The postmodern attitude, and also the feminist critique of reason, attempts exactly this questioning of the reason for reason. Modernity insisted, for reasons of gaining power, on a "principle of reason" which holds nothing sacred and to whose inquisition everything is an object that has to reveal an essence and a final analysis. Derrida (1983; 9 - 10) writes:

The modern dominance of the principle of reason had to go hand in hand with the interpretation of the essence of beings as objects, an object present as representation [*Vorstellung*], an object placed and positioned *before* a subject. This latter, a man who says 'I,' an ego certain of itself, thus ensures his own technical mastery over the totality of what is. The 're-' of *repraesentatio* also expresses the movement that accounts for - 'renders reason to' - a thing whose presence is *encountered* by *rendering* it present, by bringing it to the subject of representation, to the knowing self. A dominance is thus assured for representation, for *Vorstellen*, for the relation to the ob-ject, that is to the being that is located *before* a subject that says 'I' and assures itself of its own present existence. But it is true that a caricature of representational man, in the Heideggerian sense, would readily endow him with hard eyes permanently open to a nature that he is to dominate, to rape

if necessary, by fixing it in front of himself, or by swooping down on it like a bird of prey.

For poststructuralism there is no such thing as a “return to reason” as if reason has somehow been lost in thinking about it. Rather, we can talk of a certain correction that has taken place in the way reason is approached as we think the notions of Modernity and postmodernity together. For Hutcheon reason has been tempered by the realisation of complexity in the world and a challenge has been set for it by the ironic and contradictory behaviour of that world. However, reason is not unattached from whomever employs it. And neither is irony. As she (Hutcheon, 1995; 6) makes clear: “irony isn’t irony until it is interpreted as such - at least by the intending ironist, if not the intended receiver. Someone attributes irony; someone makes irony happen”.

Thus, from the outset the successful use of irony depends on whether or not the intended receiver “gets it” or not. Trying to understand it is “not unlike the difference between a joke and explaining a joke: irony cancels itself out the moment it adds a word of interpretation” (Hutcheon, 1995, 7).

What pertains to irony also pertains to a multicultural environment and ethics. It seems that if you “get it” you can’t explain it. You either act morally in a successful way or you don’t. This is unsatisfactory, from a poststructural point of view. One has to know wrong from right. Reason has to take up the challenge, but not as a grand project. It has to look at right and wrong in a more complex way.

For Derrida, the University can contribute by structuring research in two different ways. He (Derrida, 1983; 11-12) identifies two main streams of research namely “orientated” and “fundamental” research:

- “ ‘Oriented’ research is research that is programmed, focused, organised in an authoritarian fashion *in view of* its utilisation whether we are talking about technology, economy, medicine, psychosociology, or military power - and in fact we are talking about all of these at once” and,

- “In opposition to this basic concept of oriented research basic, ‘fundamental’ research, disinterested research with aims that would not be pledged in advance to some utilitarian purpose”.

For Derrida the distinction between these two ways of conducting research is not clear. The blurring of the boundary between them is what constitutes a community of reason and the ethical justification of reason. As he (Derrida, 1983; 16) says:

Now reason is only one species of thought - which does not mean that thought is ‘irrational’. Such a community would interrogate the essence of reason and of a principle of reason, the values of the basic, of the principial, of radicality, of the *arkhe* in general. What is meant by community and institution must be rethought. This thinking must also unmask - an infinite task - all the ruses of end-orienting reason ... That does not mean that “orientation” is bad in itself and that it must be combatted, far from it. Rather, I am defining the necessity for a new way of educating students that will prepare them to undertake new analyses in order to evaluate these ends and to choose, when possible, among them all.

A poststructural community would be one such community, one in which inquisitive pursuits would respect the notion of *many* as it constantly seeks to understand itself in that contradiction of “one and many”. A community that exists as many cultures has *tolerance* as its most cherished political value based on the rights and principles enshrined in a constitution. “Tolerance *recognizes* that certain areas of human engagement should be free from state intervention. Human beings must be free to pursue competing forms of life and divergent moral commitments. But these pursuits must not infringe on the basic rights and other forms of constitutional protections that are guaranteed to all citizens as a matter of law” (Cornell, 1992; 3). Hence, in the following section we will look at judgement as a basic tool for the justice system but also for every individual presented with the complex choices of democracy.

#### 6.4 CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT: THE SUBLIME AND THE APORETIC

The so-called return to reason discussed above has the characteristic of “sublime judgement”. By introducing the sublime we will not follow Kant all the way to his conclusion that a “rational concept of infinity”, an idea with which the mind can grasp a boundlessness beyond all limitation, all finitude, is what is needed to overcome the moment of awe and fear when confronted with the pain of recognising the limits of our power to imagine. Hence, poststructural ethics does not accept that the sublime is a definite limit of imagination that predictably occurs at the same place and time.

Kant’s thesis in *The Critique of Judgement* (1914) under the heading *Analytic of the Sublime* is crucial for a rudimentary understanding of the paradoxical melancholy and contradictory pleasure of the desire to move outside of the “Self” or the in-group with whom “I” identify and are identified with by others. On the one hand, when Derrida uses the term “idea in the Kantian sense” he draws attention to the complexity of Kant’s reasoning when he places ethics beyond the actual in a radical way which seems to encourage a negative acceptance that ethics is impossible in the fallen state of the world.

On the other hand, “Derrida ... is ‘suspicious’ of Levinas’ acceptance of the inevitability of dissatisfaction and of the right-wing Hegelian’s complacency that reduces the ethical to the actual and, therefore, at least on the conventional reading of Hegel, to the perpetuation of order” (Cornell, 1992; 84). It is to be stressed here that poststructural ethics does not endorse the negativity of sublimity as a form of closure. What the notion of the sublime does provide is a dynamic structure in which a judgement may either survive all contexts or not, and may even be the engine for unforeseen events.

For Kant, the sublime, as distinct from the merely beautiful (or in this case the merely desirable), affords a negative pleasure because it is accompanied, as its defining condition, by a moment of pain. By pain is meant the normal feelings of shock or fear aroused by the presence of whatever impresses us by virtue of its sheer magnitude, giving rise to awe or respect. In Kant’s terms

what we ordinarily consider beautiful (desirable), the object of what he calls a “judgment of taste,” (Kant, 1914; 106) is a finite entity; indeed, it is precisely its exquisite boundaries - the finitude of its means and ends, its margins and measure - that excite the feelings of calm enjoyment and reposeful exaltation that we normally associate with aesthetic satisfaction. By contrast, the ethical pleasure we take in the experience of boundlessness is, for Kant, not positive but negative. This negativity is the very condition of sublimity.

The melancholy experienced due to the inability of a desire to be satisfied lends itself to paradox in that it is negatively satisfied by never being satisfied. Also, pleasure without an object from which to gain pleasure seems like no pleasure at all, suggesting that seemingly, no pleasure is the highest pleasure of all. Logically there is no way out of this conundrum, or *performative fallacy*, without Kant’s “concept of infinity”. But, the “concept of infinity” only re-establishes reason in the face of infinity that caused the breach of reason in the first place. Thus, this measure establishes an oxymoron that cannot effectively stem the tide of ever overflowing infinity and the desire for it. If a “concept of infinity” was ever successful there would be no experience of the sublime, and no further need for talk of it. On the contrary though, it seems plausible to conclude that contracting a sublime case of infinity, though treatable, is incurable. Hence, in the face of reason this is the moment at which the rational subject is at its most ridiculous and also presents the moment that defines rationality’s peculiar discomfort when confronted with ethics at its most basic level.

Poststructural awareness is awoken by the sublime realisation that no specific statement, because it is necessarily *mediated*, will necessarily retain its force and clarity in all contexts. Statements, rules, laws etc. need to be clarified, made appropriate in different circumstances and at different times. However, this does not preclude a certain “force of law”:

The very emergence of justice and law, the founding and justifying moment that institutes law implies a performative force, which is always an interpretative force: this time not in the sense of law in the service of force, its docile instrument, servile and thus exterior

to the dominant power, but rather in the sense of law that would maintain a more internal, more complex relation with what one calls force, power or violence (Derrida, 1992a; 13).

Everything cannot always be discussed or reviewed. At certain times in certain situations the letter of the law has to be enforced. This is most notable in the case of the police. The police is supposed to act to *conserve* law. It is said (Derrida, 1992a; 43) that the police are acting in an “ignoble” way when they also partake in the *founding* violence of law, when they “invent” it as they go along. “The two types of violence is at bottom the paradox of iterability. Iterability requires the origin to repeat itself originarily, to alter itself so as to have the value of origin, that is, to conserve itself”

But, it cannot be accepted that the case of the police should be the example for the state of good governance. Democratic government, has the ethical responsibility to appreciate the morphological aspects of “life” as it finds ways to reinvent itself and survive the impossible fixes that it gets into at times. “Deconstruction takes place in the interval that separates the undeconstructibility of justice and the deconstructibility of *droit* (authority, legitimacy, and so on)” (Derrida, 1992a; 15).

These problems are not only the territory of the irrational or the thoughtless, although a *mystical* element is undeniable, but also as Derrida (1992a; 16) shows by invoking the *aporia*, the “dead ends” into which rational calculation can lead.

[By] the very experience of *aporia*, I mean two things. (1.) The experience finds its way, its passage, it is possible. And in this sense it is impossible to have a full experience of *aporia*, that is, of something that does not allow passage. ... (2.) I think that there is no justice without this experience, however impossible it may be, of *aporia*. Justice is an experience of the impossible. A will, a desire, a demand for justice whose structure wouldn't be an experience of *aporia* would have no chance to be what it is, namely, a call for justice.

Aporia in the second sense can be related to Kant's idea of the negative pleasure in encountering the infinite. It is characteristic of deconstruction though, that it does not settle on the side of negativity, although the experience of it is of structural importance for any ethics or understanding of law. "The identification of deconstruction with ethical skepticism is a serious misinterpretation" (Cornell, 1992; 100).

As we have seen the sublime experience of negativity takes the shape of a slippery irony in politics. For example, with every election voters invest their every emotion in electing an official, the object of their political aspirations, who is the best and the brightest, and they will defend his virtues to anyone. As soon as he is elected, though, the self same voters start tearing him down by pouring criticism on every action in anticipation of the next "best and brightest" candidate.

In law a similar ironic situation exists. Every law has to be obeyed in its letter and ignorance of a law is no excuse not to have obeyed. This is the condition for all basic rights and obligations. In this basic sense "Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law" (Derrida, 1992a, 16).

However, as soon as different degrees of penalty is introduced, as law inevitably does, for breaking the Law one enters into a situation where all laws are not created equal. "It is precisely the 'jurisgenitive' power of law to create normative meaning that makes law other than a mere mechanism of social control" (Cornell, 1992, 104). Thus, one says that punishment must fit the crime.

Absolute consistency treats The Law as The Law and punishes all offences and transgressions as if they were the most extreme case. Hence, in a situation of absolute consistency, all transgressions of The Law invoke the death penalty. This could very well be the situation at the outset or foundation of law. "If the legal system fully manifests itself in the possibility of the death penalty, to abolish the penalty is not to touch upon one *dispositif* among others, it is to disavow the very principle of law" (Derrida; 1992a; 42). If this founding violence persists un-tempered by distinctions everyone will be

ruled by The Law and justice will never escape from the “carnivorous sacrifice, at the basis of our culture and our law” (Derrida; 1992a; 18).

This is a situation of extreme simplicity in which complexity is feared in the extreme and cannot be sustained if justice is to prevail. However, for a legal system to operate successfully it has to retain within itself, and be able to recall, some element of its founding violence. If this can no longer be done, “when the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay” (Derrida; 1992a; 46).

For a legal system to be a system it has to make a distinction between transgressions and distribute its founding violence, its right to make judgements, as a proportionate *conserving* violence. This apportioning of violence aimed at conserving the law is expressed as a penalty or, jail *term*. A *sentence* is given in which the *terms* of restitution to the society, by whom the law is sanctioned to serve, is explained.

In the previous chapter we looked at the notion of the *gift* in deconstruction. Here, it can be used as a digression aimed as an example. The jail *term*, a term of time also supposes a “gift of time”. As we have seen in the previous chapter, time and money have a close relationship in deconstruction. The theft of money, for instance, is also a theft of time, the time it took a person to accumulate the money stolen in an instant. For the thief to pay back what he has stolen means sacrificing time on terms to be negotiated by the justice system.

Murder, however, is not as easily negotiated in terms of time or money. The murderer did not only steal the potential earning power of an individual, or inhibit it. He did not only steal the time and money spent by a parent raising a child. He stole a “life” in all the complex senses of that word. He did not “make a better move” as Lyotard would describe it. He put an end to all moves in the game. His punishment cannot entail a “gift of time” but must entail rather all the connections that supplement the notion of “sacrifice” and the problems raised by religious self-closure.

If the founding violence of the law is the death penalty, as we have seen above, the murderer establishes himself as the law through an act of killing. But, the difference is that he has been preceded by the founding violence of the law as a *system* and challenges it from the outside. In this sense the challenge also legitimates the law as system, for it is only a system insofar as it has an outside.

By murdering, by invoking the death penalty, the killer challenges the authority of the law by establishing his own authority. This entails challenging the legal system in the sense that another system sets up in competition to it. This, the legal system cannot allow. It has to keep the absolute right to the death penalty for itself. In this absolute sense, the law system is exclusive.

But, a problem presents itself. In order for the challenge not to be mistaken for an equal challenge, for the system has to remain the more authoritative of the two and also be seen as such, the system cannot use founding violence against the challenger. It has to do something even more powerful. It has to invoke its founding violence without actually using it.

Through lifelong incarceration the killer is not only discredited as a worthy opponent to the justice system, who can take all the time in the world in putting him to death, he is kept as a reminder to others that the system has time on its side. The challenge to the system is thus not met with an equal but opposite violence. The system's violence against the killer is much greater and is disseminated as a message that the system will outlive any deed or challenge against it. Eventually there is no escape to a transcendental outside.

The killer pays through a sacrifice of what he loves the most. His own life becomes hateful in the acceptance of his deed. Murder or killing, in the final analysis will always be the act of a self closed within itself at the moment of committing the deed. It is not dissimilar to the self-closure of the archi-believer. The murderer believes that he will not be caught, he might even

believe that what he is doing is right, as he is the absolute authority with the right to dispense the death penalty.

The allegorical figure of the “innocent man on death row”, of which the Bob Dylan<sup>4</sup> song *The Hurricane* is a good textual example, acts not only as a political call for justice from those marginalised and mistreated by the inefficiency and bias of the judicial system, but also as an ethical temptation for the guilty killer to recognise in it the plight of his victim. The victim was innocent and was not given any terms but was outright sacrificed in the name of greed or avarice or revenge to the selfish solipsism of an individual taking right into his own hands, by initiating an instance of “founding violence”.

If poststructural ethics takes a side, it takes the position of defending the right to a good defence. This does not mean that it excludes itself from the side of the accuser and the prosecution. It endeavours to develop principles of justice “through the appeal to contextual universals by which we distinguish between differences we want to be recognised by the law from those we condemn” (Cornell, 1992; 104).

Poststructural ethics has the task of reminding The Law and the prosecutor, that finding the defendant guilty can provide only a negative pleasure. A guilty verdict is in every case a victory to *thanatos*<sup>5</sup> and a defeat of *eros*. The “Good”, the desire (*eros*) to do justice to the other has been forfeited to the grasp (*thanatos*) of a self that in its selfishness is dead to the call of the other. Hence, if the actions of the defendant has broken the law the prosecution’s disappointment at the failure of the individual to recognise his responsibility is what is at stake, not a bloodthirsty pursuit for vengeance on the side of the State.

This does not preclude judgement from meeting out severe punishment. But punishment cannot be arbitrary and cannot go without consideration of the case made by the defence which acts as the “face” of the other regarding the system of justice. It also cannot revel in punishment as a pleasure but should adopt, what Derrida has previously called, a sense of “mourning” for the law that was forgotten. Poststructural ethics merely stand to remind both the

prosecution and the defence that punishment has to be tempered with encouragement. Law is in essence “not prohibitive but affirmative” (Derrida; 1992a; 8).

The aim is not to be spiteful or to delay the proceedings of the court. Instead ethical encouragement manifests merely as the realisation that the law, even as it has to prosecute an accused, can never do so by claiming to embody the entirety of the accused’s existence in a verdict. “For Freud, successful mourning involves mimetic interiorisation in which the Other lives on ‘in us.’ But for Derrida, this process of mimetic interiorisation will always fail, precisely because the Other’s absence, which puts the memory in us, cannot be revoked. Ironically, it is only through this failure to fully recollect the Other that we ‘succeed’ in mourning the Other as Other. There is always an allegorical dimension to mourning” (Cornell, 1992; 73).

In keeping with the ethical obligation we have to seek justice beyond the law while keeping the law in mind. This, movement beyond the law is not something that can ever be precluded by making more laws or by accumulating precedent or by way of case study. Not that the knowledge and insight accumulated by these must be forfeited. On the contrary. It must, however, be “made to play” so to speak in the performance of the court. “Writing ... [is] an attempt to defend against human violence. But to the degree that the establishment of systems for ethical and political ‘representation’ identifies the norm and rigidly circumscribes the definition of right behavior, such establishments carry within them their own violence” (Cornell, 1992; 51). Each case is different. The face of the accused is always his own face and in a certain respect always comes from outside the system’s closure.

Cornell (1992; 54-55), identifies a problem in this regard. The overwhelming responsibility for the other. At this point, the asymmetry of Levinas’s thinking must be tempered with a certain return to symmetry that she finds in Derrida.

The other is an other who can open herself to me precisely because she is an other ‘in my economy.’ Without this strange

symmetry, or the introduction of a positive notion of infinity in which the encounter with the infinite Other is an encounter with God, Levinas's insistence on the *phenomenological* as well as the ethical asymmetry of the Other would degenerate into the worst sort of violence. Derrida's concern can be translated into an attempt to dream the dance of sameness and difference beyond the demonstration of shared substantive properties and its counterpart, the denial of all phenomenological symmetry.

The "I" has to take into account its own limitations. In order to be responsible, on a practical level, to retain the ability for a response at all, the "I" has to filter out the relevant from the irrelevant. "The work of mourning the remains demands the mimetic persistence to scrape through the debris left over from Hegel's system at the same time that we recognise that '[t]he rest, the remain(s), is unsayable' " (Cornell, 1992; 63).

This is most closely resembled in the figure of the "judge", of whom the allegorical figure is the *Chiffonier* (Cornell, 1992; 62). He has to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant information. He is the very figure in which poststructural ethics places its hope, namely *discretion* for which another name is *différance*. Cornell (1992; 62) quotes Walter Benjamin:

Here we have a man whose task is to gather the day's rubbish in the capital. Everything that the big city has cast off, everything it lost, everything it disdained, everything it broke, he catalogues and collects. He combs through the archives of debauchery, the stockpile of waste. He sorts things out and makes intelligent choices; like a miser assembling his treasure, he gathers the trash that, after being regurgitated by the goddess of Industry, will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects.

Without this ability to discriminate a judge might well feel that he is constantly better informed but hardly ever any wiser! The movement of discretion is what Derrida has in mind with deconstruction namely opening up knowledge systems in order to make an informed decision. From the discussion on

*khôra* in the previous chapter it is clear that the movement of *différance*, which is infinite in the sense that it never stops (it has infinite energy), is however, limited by the greater infinity, an infinite space, which is *khôra*. The desire and energy of *différance* is a love of the unknown. However, it is not a desire to dominate but a desire to love wisely. For deconstruction this entails an ethical reading, for “when one is reading, one is reading ‘some-thing.’ For ‘deconstruction,’ however, ‘the thing’ that one is reading is the ‘heart of the matter’ allegorised in the text” (Cornell, 1992; 81).

Discretion resides in the realisation that judgements have a sublime and aporetic character and that meaning is distributed<sup>6</sup> throughout the system. But, a system, legal or otherwise, in order to operate “is a system only to the degree that it is operationally closed” (Cornell, 1992; 122). A judge with ethical discretion knows that he has to consult. Whether it is the sources of law or other judges. He has to take someone into confidence, he realises that he is part of a complex system. The system is not mechanical or automatic but do have machinelike qualities such as a need for expediency. Derrida (1992a; 22-26) summarises three aporia’s of judgement as follows:

- *First aporia: épokè of the rule.* “If the act simply consists of applying a rule, of enacting a program or effecting a calculation, we might say that it is legal, that it conforms to law, and perhaps, by metaphor, that it is just, but we would be wrong to say that the decision was just”
- *Second aporia: the ghost of the undecideable:* “The undecideable is not merely the oscillation or the tension between two decisions; it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obliged - it is obligation that we must speak - to give itself up to the impossible decision, while taking account of law and rules”
- *Third aporia: the urgency that obstructs the horizon of knowledge.* “A just decision is always required *immediately*, ‘right away’. ... the moment of *decision as such*, always remains a finite moment of urgency and percipitation, since it must not be the consequence or the effect of this

theoretical or historical knowledge, of this reflection or this deliberation, since it always marks the interruption of the juridico- or ethico- or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that *must* precede it”.

In terms of the frame of this thesis, the judge is an example of the tragic hero, the one who suffers with the indifference of the world and the moral stupidity that surrounds him. He also suffers because it is at all necessary to have such a thing as law. It would have been much better if everyone just knew what was right and good and could realise that if they stick to it their “life-world” would be a better place. In many aspects every individual identifies with this heroic and tragic struggle on a daily basis, trying to do the right thing. Ethically speaking one can never just accept that one is a good person and always in the right. “*Sittlichkeit*, the collective ethics of modernity” (Cornell, 1992; 62) has to be forever vigilant.

## 6.5 ETHICS OF FRIENDSHIP

An ethics that has as its original moment, its beginning, the meeting of a face by another face, as we have seen Levinas describe, finds its most favourable manifestation in the trials and tribulations of friendship. It is often said that a man is judged by the company he keeps. This seems easy enough but it is not at all adequate. Friendship is a complex relation unlike family bonds that can always be reduced to genetic ties. Friendship cannot be reduced to a simple formula. We only have to mention the example of Judas, who kept excellent company, to see that judging a man’s character by the company he keeps is not the most reliable of judgements.

For Derrida the political aspect of friendship can be traced in the Marxist spirit of criticizing institutions that treat people as replaceable parts in a big machine whether that machine is the State or the Law. This political friendship is not an organisation but an ethical awareness of human responsibility. Derrida writes:

The name of New International is given here to what calls to the friendship of an alliance without institution among those who, even if they no longer believe or never believed in the socialist-Marxist

international, in the dictatorship of the proletariat, in the messiano-eschatological role of the universal union of the proletarians of all lands, continue to be inspired by at least one of the spirits of Marx or of Marxism (they now know that there is *more than one*) and in order to ally themselves, in a new, concrete, and real way, even if this alliance no longer takes the form of a party or of a workers' international, but rather of a kind of counter-conjuration, in the theoretical and practical critique of the state of international law, the concepts of State and nation, and so forth (Derrida, 1994; 86).

By *counter-conjuration* Derrida has in mind another sort of *capital*. There can be no thinking or progress without rationality and calculation, but Derrida has in mind a rationality that does not stop at calculating money or other abstract symbols of wealth. The friendship of the new international, it must also include a critique of *globalisation*, has as its subjects those who can write (make a mark, signify) and disseminate a critique of ethics. Sharing insights, responses and experiences of problems adds value to the lives of people by presenting solutions that cannot be found in solitude. These problems cannot be overcome by solitary thinkers because they are concrete manifestations of community and need to be dealt with by participation and interaction. For Derrida this participation, specifically through writing, constitutes at the same time the singular subject and a community of subjects. He says:

As an identifiable, bordered, posed subject, the one who writes and his or her writing never give anything without calculating, consciously or unconsciously, its reappropriation, its exchange, or its circular return - and by definition this means reappropriation with surplus-value, a certain capitalisation. We will even venture to say that this is the very definition of the *subject as such*. One cannot discern the subject except as the subject of this operation of capital (Derrida, 1992b; 101).

This writing and its dissemination has the task of creating a general economy of value in which that which escapes the circular movement of the limited or

money economy is re-capitalized as ethical currency. It is not a value or capital that can be calculated in the smallest degree in order to deliver a balance of debits and credits. It is rather the free flow of communication, the telegram, the distress signal etc. sent out without hope or guarantee that it will be answered or that it will find a market. "Friendship is never a given in the present; it belongs to the experience of waiting, of promise, or of commitment. Its discourse is that of prayer and at issue there is that which responsibility opens to the future" (Derrida, 1988; 636).

Poststructural ethics does not base itself on the confessions of friendship given in the corridor or at graduation ceremonies with a slap on the back. Friendship is that which answers the call in the time of need and celebration appropriate to the specific instance. It keeps its name silent and is merely there at the right place at the right time. Derrida tries to illustrate this discretion of friendship by invoking a paradox of which, so it is said, Aristotle and Montaigne were very fond. Thus, Derrida uses a quote from the outset. He depends on his two "friends" to help him illustrate his point. It goes without saying that he would not have been able to depend on them had they not written this utterance down. The paradoxical quote in question is "O my friends, there is no friend" (Derrida, 1988; 632).

Behind the logical game of contradiction or paradox, perhaps the "O my friends, there is no friend" signifies first and last this surpassing of the present by the undeniable future anterior which would be the very movement and time of friendship. Undeniable future anterior, the absolute of an unrepresentable past as well as future, which is to say of traces that one can only ever deny by summoning them into the light of phenomenal presence. A temporal torsion thus knots up the predicative proposition ("there is no friend") within the apostrophe ("O my friends"). The torsion of this asymmetry envelops the theoretical determination or the knowledge within the performativity of a prayer that will never exhaust. This asymmetry leads us back to what I ... call the *question of the response* (Derrida, 1988; 638).

The “question of the response” is acutely interested in *who* or *what* is responding? It is also interested in the ability of the response. Someone may take up the call to respond but lack the ability to do so and thus fail in the attempt. However, one always *answers for oneself*, for what one is, says, or does. This answer also takes place beyond the simple present.

The “oneself” or “myself” supposes the unity, in other words the memory, of the one responding. This is often called the unity of the subject, but one can conceive such a synthesis of memory without necessarily having recourse to the concept of *subject*. This unity of memory or the subject is never secured in itself as an empirical synthesis. Thus, the recognition of this identity is entrusted to the instance of the name. “I” am held responsible for “myself,” which is to say, for everything that can be imputed to that which bears my name. What is called a “proper name” is not necessarily limited to the phenomenon of the legal name, the patronymic, or the nickname, although these phenomena are, most frequently, its determining manifestation (Derrida, 1988; 639). As an example of a manifestation other than those mentioned one could imagine that a proper name has come to signify purely in the distinctive features of repeated graffiti on city walls for instance. In such a case it would suffice to say that the one responsible for the distinction is held responsible.

But, by whom is one held to account? Derrida says that “[o]ne *answers* first to the question, the request, the prayer, the apostrophe, the appeal, the greeting, or the sign of the Other” (Derrida, 1988; 639). In other words I am held accountable by that which cannot be recognized as distinctly myself. That which comes to me from outside my uniqueness<sup>7</sup>. However, before any answer to the other one is merely responsible *for* the other. One does not yet answer for oneself and in one’s own name, hence, one is also responsible *before* [*devant*] the question, request, challenge, “instance,” or “insistance” of the Other. It is this awareness of responsibility *for* the other that moves the proper name into position. The proper name structures the “answering for oneself” and is in itself a gift of identification for the Other. It implies the Other in the very act of naming, in its origin, its finality and its use. Thus,

"[r]esponding always supposes the Other in the relation to oneself; it preserves the sense of this asymmetrical 'anteriority' even within the seemingly most inward and solitary autonomy of reserve [*quant à soi*], of one's heart of hearts, and of the moral conscience jealous of its independence - another word for freedom" (Derrida, 1988; 639).

Derrida makes a "note in passing" about the fact that response plays upon the voice and of speaking. Although his discussion of ethics follows that set out by Levinas and hence favours a response that cuts across vision he does link it up with "respect" and a more visual sensibility of the look (*regard*) (Derrida, 1988; 640). Hence, for Derrida, unlike Levinas, there is a return to the rationality of the discerning glance and the calculation of vision because unlike Levinas, Derrida establishes writing as superior to speech and, hence one has to read the words. Writing like friendship does not produce happiness but "[Kant says that] although friendship does not produce happiness, the two feelings [respect and responsibility] that compose it envelop the *dignity of being happy*" (Derrida, 1988; 640).

It seems very cynical of Derrida to say that friendship does not produce happiness. There is, however, also a history of friendship that opens upon a glaring problematic and, from a poststructural perspective, can be the very reason why friendship and happiness does not seem to go together. Derrida writes that: "[this 'history of friendship' maintains a] 'double exclusion' that can be seen at work in all the great ethico-politico-philosophical discourses on friendship, namely, on the one hand, the exclusion of friendship between woman, and, on the other hand, the exclusion of friendship between man and woman" (Derrida, 1988; 642). In Hegel's case for instance the difference between the role and function of men and woman in society differ as much as night and day and if it is a difficult enterprise to imagine friendship among men it is impossible to imagine woman entering the equation. "The tension here is within politics itself. It would be necessary to analyse all discourses that reserve politics and public space for man, domestic and private space for woman." (Derrida, 1988; 642). Although it might be politically formidable it cannot be that the same impossibility presents itself to ethics. In the face-to-

face relation of ethics there can be no doubt that a woman's face interrupts the categories of the same as forcefully as does a man's. In Levinas' sense of face, and we must read a certain correction into his work at this point, the face transcends any features that might distinguish it as anything other than that of the call to responsibility. On this point Derrida makes an ally of Nietzsche when he writes: "Here is the 'Oh my friends, there is no friend' of Zarathustra: 'Woman is not yet capable of friendship. But tell me, men, who among you is capable of friendship? . . . There is camaraderie: may there be friendship!' " (Derrida, 1988; 643). Thus, for poststructuralist ethics the question goes out equally to men and woman, who indeed among them are capable of friendship?

But, the other and my responsibility for her also teaches me the greatest value of ethics. In an uncanny and un-guaranteed return, friendship with the other can lead to "that state of profound friendship where a man abandoned, abandoned by all his friends, meets up in life with the one who will accompany him beyond life, himself without life, capable of free friendship, detached from any ties" (Derrida, 1988; 643). Although poststructural ethics can have no objection against the solitude the hermit seeks out in order to establish contact with the friend beyond life it would always insist that solitude must not be sought too soon.

## **6.6 A LOGICAL END**

Freud (1989; 94) explains in *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*:

We have no way of conveying knowledge of a complicated set of simultaneous events except by describing them successively; and thus it happens that all our accounts are at fault to begin with owing to one-sided simplification and must wait till they can be supplemented, built on to, and so set right.

What poststructural ethics seeks most keenly is that special failure of the limiting act to make complete the circumscription and leaving an opening, or breakthrough, occurring within closure, violating its vows and breaching its barriers, delivering the promise of a new beginning.

Deconstruction's aversion for closing a debate by offering conclusions, solutions, or decisions confirming a commitment to not close down the process of comprehension and description (Derrida, 1993d; 154). This has the implication of not accepting speculation about the conclusion of philosophy as a closed system or structure. For Derrida, "the idea of truth - that is, the idea of philosophy - is an infinite idea, or 'Idea in the Kantian sense' [and that] as such, no finite totality or *clôture* can account for the infinite *ouverture* to truth, to philosophy" (Critchley, 1993; 64). The concept (idea in the Kantian sense) of closure designates a *finite totality* which is continually breached by a movement of infinitisation. Philosophy generates the radical freedom of the theoretical attitude which permits the "overcoming" of finite knowledge based on sensible data. The overcoming of the finite is achieved through the conception of philosophy as an infinite task. The "phenomenological consciousness is indicated every time that Husserl speaks of the *Idea in the Kantian sense*" (Derrida, 1993d; 167).

The example of Gödel's (Hofstadter, 1979; 17) Incompleteness Theorem, that rejects the notion of the possibility of mathematical closure, shows that the infinite task of philosophy (Hofstadter, 1979; 696) is even present in the most precise of sciences, namely mathematics. The theorem states that:

meta-logical statements concerning the completeness or closure of axiom systems can neither be demonstrated nor refuted within those axiom systems. This entails that there is an undecidable statement within each axiom system which refutes [any notion] of an 'axiom of completeness' and by implication, the Husserlian conception of . . . mathematics, and geometry as closed, or definite systems (Critchley, 1993; 67).

This moment of undecidability that Gödel opens up undermines the conception of *exact* science, in the Modernist sense, and provides us with a description of *rigorous* sciences, such as phenomenology, that is able to produce accurate results without having to claim that they are precise, perfect or absolutely final.

An exact science is characterised by the possibility of closure. On the other hand, a rigorous science like phenomenology possesses the structural impossibility of closure. Phenomenology's novelty lies in the transcendentalism of an opening or overflowing which exceeds the borders of the closure and "deconstructs" the very possibility of structuralism.

The problem from a poststructural point of view, however, is that phenomenology *cops out* to a metaphysical level, setting up the *structural impossibility* of closure as the *final word*, in order to overcome closure *finally*. A similar suspicion to that with which Derrida views Levinas's ready acceptance of the negativity in the sublime, rears its head with the ready acceptance by phenomenology of the impossibility of closure.

Derrida breaks with and at the same time continues the project of Husserl by acknowledging the impossibility of completely breaking out of the language of metaphysics (Derrida, 1993d; 166). Thus, Derrida's project of deconstructing the logocentric, reason bound, metaphysics, wrapped in the "word" as it is stated in Genesis, continues as a double gesture that hinges on the notion of *limit*.

The deconstruction of logocentrism *continues* by showing how the limit, or closure, of a logocentric text is irreducibly flawed. The closure with which a text's dominant interpretation surrounds itself is shown to possess certain faults, or breaks, which are the marks of an *alterity*, an overwhelming otherness, which the text is unable to successfully reduce or expel. Deconstructive reading exposes the logocentric text as a scarred, flawed body which is unable to demarcate its inside from its outside and which is divided within itself between belonging and not belonging to the logocentric tradition. Thus, deconstruction slips past the structural impossibility of closure, by quoting, or mourning the loss of the limit. The notion of closure divides metaphysics along the irreconcilable yet inseparable axes of transgression and restoration, of belonging and not belonging, of the break and the continuation.

Hence, Derrida is able to give a non-nihilistic reading to the notion of 'end' in Heidegger. Heidegger points out that his use of the notion 'end of philosophy' leads to many misunderstandings<sup>8</sup>. This notwithstanding, we can note that for Heidegger the end of philosophy does not entail the disappearance of philosophy but a *completion of metaphysics*. In other words, the thinking through to the end of all eschatological and teleological metaphysics that postulate a logical apocalyptic finish to the project of philosophy. Derrida takes up this challenge and suggests a thinking that radicalises the thinking through of metaphysics and takes the thinking of an end right through to the thinking also of the end of the end, which holds the promise, if nothing else, of a certain beginning.

*Clôture* reading of a text is then defined as the production of a dislocation within a text, dividing the latter along the inseparable yet irreconcilable axes of belonging and not belonging to the metaphysical or logocentric tradition. At this axes, in between belonging and not belonging, at the line where the opposition cannot be heard any longer a *silence announces a possibility*. As Derrida says: ". . . but within [thinking], today, is sheltered and encapsulated an unbreachable dignity and duty of decision. An unbreachable responsibility" (Derrida, 1993f; 80). This silence, this pause, establishes the moment in which the greatest test must be confronted as having to make a decision in the face of the impossibility of making it. The questions have to be asked, even if at the outset they seem to have no answer, questions like: "what is a legally *legitimate* tradition and community, a question that cannot be *absolutely* separated from certain further questions such as what is morally acceptable and which forms of life would we like to see promoted in our community" (Cornell, 1992; 6).

Derrida is confident that a pause or hesitation is enough to establish an ethical community in which asking questions, reminding one another of our responsibilities, and also searching for what has gone missing, can be established. It is an appeal to the promise of reconciliation, the promise of translations, and not an already achieved reality. But, a "promise is not nothing" (Cornell, 1992; 59). Derrida calls it:

A community of the question, therefore, within that fragile moment when the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer to have already initiated itself beneath the mask of the question, and not yet determined enough for its voice to have been already and fraudulently articulated within the very syntax of the question. A community of decision, of initiative, of absolute initiality, but also a threatened community, in which the question has not yet found the language it has decided to seek, is not yet sure of its own possibility within the community. A community of the question of the possibility of the question. This is very little - almost nothing ... (Derrida, 1993f; 80).

## 6.6 CONCLUSIONS

In terms of the aims set out in the Introduction three main conclusions about the generality or rules of ethics can be summarised:

- Ethics seen as rules of conduct, must always include the participation, in formulating them, of those for whom these rules are meant.
- Rules cannot be forced on anyone without becoming itself unethical and has to develop through influence and over time.
- For rules to remain ethical they have to be able to change.

Modernity did not allow the participation, in rule making, of the vast majority of people for whom the rules of conduct were intended. Big theories and lists were arbitrarily distributed and the expectation was that they should be followed and enforced to the letter. This approach does not bode well for the formation of any lasting democratic order.

On the other hand the postmodern approach of letting the crowd run wild, so to speak, does not present us with a participatory solution. Instead all rules are gradually abandoned in favour of a nihilistic anarchism in which the individual abandons all attempts at ethics and settles for self gratification.

But, rules cannot be enforced for any length of time without resistance developing. Thus it is imperative to realise that reason, well understood as

discretion, dictates that rules will be followed if they are seen to be beneficial to the individual who realises his singular dependence on the health of a broader community. Deconstruction attempts to combine education and experience in order to foster an ethical awareness that includes both care of the self and care for the other. Hence, it promotes a situation in which the community at large and its representatives are placed in conversation with each other while at the same time creating a space of free communication between citizens. From this interaction a democracy might arise that is as yet unfathomable.

Looking ahead, I propose that poststructural ethics can be further developed in three ways, but do not close it there:

- In terms of the history of philosophy a reading of Hegel's notion of the *corporation* can be built out to address the challenges of a changing economic environment. Derrida has already made a start by providing the text *Glas* which is a reading of Jean Genet into Hegel. An interesting substitute for Genet might be George Bataille.
- What has recently become popular under the name "African Renaissance" can be read through the challenges of system, reason, law, multicultural society, global politics and economy. Especially the politics of representation may provide a golden opportunity to build out the notion of poststructural ethics in a uniquely African context.
- An ongoing debate that can benefit from a poststructural approach is the one concerning technology. The equitable distribution of technology, the need for it, and especially the rights of those who have access and those who have not, are a few of the questions that need to be answered. Does technology create jobs, if so, for who and at what cost? This will not only concern the cost incurred by companies and their shareholders but has to include all stakeholders, such as communities. The debate around technology has to consider, most urgently, how it can address poverty.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Derrida says: “*There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]” (Derrida, 1976; 158). What this means is that deconstruction never takes place outside, cannot take place outside the “various *networks* -social, historical, linguistic, political, sexual networks (the list goes on nowadays to include electronic networks, worldwide webs) - various horizons or pre-suppositions, which is what Derrida means by the ‘general text’ or ‘archi-text’ or ‘textuality’ or, here, just ‘text’ “ (Caputo, 1997; 79-80)

<sup>2</sup> *Agency* entails the full sense of a body in the world that has to act and re-act, whether it is to get out of the way of an oncoming bus or to help someone cross the street.

<sup>3</sup> “The capacity for self-organisation is a property of complex systems which enables them to develop or change internal structure spontaneously and adaptively in order to cope with, or manipulate, their environment” (Cilliers, 1998; 90).

<sup>4</sup> On the Bob Dylan album *Desire* released 1976; re-released 1987 on Audio CD / Sony/Columbia, ASIN: B00000255X

<sup>5</sup> These terms relate to Freud’s theory of the “drives” and can be studied in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1991; 218-268).

<sup>6</sup> “The structure of the system cannot consist of a random collection of elements; they must have some *meaning* ...Meaning is the result of a process, and this process is dialectical - involving elements from inside and outside - as well as historical, in the sense that previous states of the system is vitally important. ...the elements of the system have no meaning by themselves, but only in terms of patterns of relationships with many other elements” (Cilliers, 1998; 11).

<sup>7</sup> Freud would call the ego that which is uniquely self. The *super-ego* is that mechanism which holds the *ego* to account for what it allows the *id* to get away with. The super-ego has been thought to arise due to strict parenting or social conditioning. However, research has also shown that a person may develop a strict and even neurotic super-ego by merely imagining rules and regulations that should pertain to the ego. Hence, through imagination a person can create an “outside” within himself. In the worst cases this conscience does not reflect any of the demands of a real world.

<sup>8</sup> When Heidegger attempts to clarify his notion of end and totality in *Being and Time* (1995) he gives a glimpse of the problems he foresees when describing something’s end or totality without knowing the thing’s, be it philosophy or Dasein, limitations at the outset. Hence, one has to speculate about the limits of philosophy or Dasein running the risk of perpetuating a self fulfilling prophecy that necessarily contains an apocalyptic vision of the end. As Heidegger (1995; 285) writes:

The task of carrying out in an appropriate way the ontological analysis of end and totality breaks down not only because the theme is so far-reaching, but because there is a difficulty in principle: to master this task successfully, we must presuppose that precisely what we are seeking in this investigation - the meaning of Being in general - is

something which we have found already and with which we are quite familiar.

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