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# Critical ecologies: Violence and life in the work of Jacques Derrida and Theodor Adorno

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DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

Chicago, Illinois

CRITICAL ECOLOGIES:  
VIOLENCE AND LIFE IN THE WORK OF JACQUES DERRIDA AND THEODOR  
ADORNO

A dissertation completed in partial fulfillment of the  
requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

By  
Rick Elmore

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## Abstract

My dissertation offers the first sustained engagement with the question of violence in the works of Jacques Derrida and Theodor Adorno. I argue that the conjunction of questions of violence and with those of “life” indicates a profound sympathy in their thinking and suggests the need to develop a critical dialogue between discourses of life (ecology, environmental science, etc) and philosophy. In early works such as *Of Grammatology* and “The Actuality of Philosophy,” Derrida and Adorno contend that the structures of thought, meaning, and signification are necessarily incomplete and, as such, are always marked by violent exclusions. “Archē-violence” and “dialectics” are names for this originary violence. Both Derrida and Adorno argue that this violence fundamentally shapes thought’s relationship to the world. The notions of “reparatory violence” and “interpretation” in the works cited above give way in later texts to notions of “sovereignty,” “autoimmunity,” “identity thinking,” and “exchange” as ways to understand the passage from structural to empirical violence. Of particular interest is the relationship between violence and “life.” In their later works (*Rogues*, *The Beast and the Sovereign Lectures*, *Minima Moralia*, and *Negative Dialectics*, etc), this relation emerges both in terms of the violent denial and annihilation of life implied in the reductive logics of “logocentrism” and “identitarian thinking,” and in the question of “animal life,” the question of who counts as “human,” and who or what can be included in the “human” community. Hence, my dissertation situates the historical and philosophical concern for violence in relationship to the questions of “life” and, in so doing, enters into the growing conversation surrounding violence and environmentalism that can be heard across the humanities.

## Introduction

Towards the end of his Frankfurt Address, Derrida sketches seven chapters of a “dream book” he would wish to write “to interpret the history, the possibility, and the honor of this prize [The Adorno Prize]” (Derrida, F 177/45).<sup>1</sup> Concerning the last of these dream chapters, Derrida writes:

Finally I get to the chapter I would most enjoy writing, because it would take the least trodden but in my view one of the most crucial paths in the future reading of Adorno. It would be about what we call, in the singular—which has always shocked me—the *Animal*. As if there were only one of them. (F 180/54)

This chapter would examine the indications in Adorno’s work of a “critical ecology” or what Derrida prefers to call a “deconstructive ecology:” “a revolution in thought and action that we [humans] need, a revolution in our dwelling together with these living things that we call animals” (PM 180/54). This critical ecology would be a complete change in *our* ways of thinking and acting in relationship to other living creature. This shift would necessarily entail a challenge to the logic by which humans historically have reduced the multiplicity of animal life (including the human animal) by grouping all under the singular concept *Animal* (a move which has legitimated humanity’s domination of nature and devalued what is *animal* in humans). Derrida suggests that Adorno’s work pushes us to think these concepts and this logic in a new way. This “revolution” would be in no way alien to Derrida’s own work, as this “critical ecology” could just as easily be called a “deconstructive ecology.” Hence, there is something in this question of the animal that resonates through the work of both Adorno and Derrida and

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, Jacques. “Fichus,” in *Paper Machine*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005, 177; *Fichus: Discours de Francfort*. Paris: Galilée, 2002, 45. Hereafter abbreviated F.

forms a junction point between the two.<sup>2</sup> Derrida argues that this “critical” or “deconstructive” ecology emerges in Adorno’s work in opposition to “two formidable forces.”

On the one hand, says Derrida, Adorno’s ecology opposes “the most powerful idealist and humanist tradition of philosophy” (F 180/55). It challenges the intellectual tradition that attempts to separate fundamentally what is *human* from what is *animal*. This separation forms the basis for justifying or naturalizing the “sovereignty or mastery [*Herrschaft*] of man over nature” (F 180/55). Thus what is at stake in Adorno’s ecology is the very basis for humanity’s mastery of nature and general claim to sovereign control.<sup>3</sup> Adorno is particularly concerned with the idealism, emerging from Kant, that “feels only hate for human animality” (F 180/55). He goes so far as to contend that in idealism “animals play a role virtually the same as Jews in a fascist system (*die Tiere spielen fürs idealistische System virtuell die gleiche Rolle wie die Juden fürs faschistische*)” (F 181/55-56).<sup>4</sup> Here Adorno is making a structural claim. In idealism, *animality* names that which must be excluded and annihilated in order to secure the purity, which is to say, the superiority, mastery, and sovereignty of idealism. For the idealist, *we* can be *human* only insofar as we are utterly cleansed of animality and particularly cleansed of what is *animal* in us. Built into the logic of idealism is the exclusion, degradation, and annihilation of the *animality* of the human being. This logic then leads to a self-denying, self-destructive notion of

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<sup>2</sup> Derrida makes clear in a number of texts that the question of the animal is central to his work. For example, in a 2002 interview with Elisabeth Roudinesco entitled “Violence Against Animals” Derrida says “[t]he ‘question of the animal’ is not one question among others, of course. I have long considered it to be decisive (as one says), in itself and for its strategic value; and that’s because [...] it also represents the limit upon which all the great questions are formed and determined, as well as all the concepts that attempt to delimit what is ‘proper to man,’ the essence of the future of humanity, ethics, politics, law, ‘human rights,’ ‘crimes against humanity,’ ‘genocide,’ etc” (FWT 62). *For What Tomorrow...A Dialogue*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004. Also see but Adorno wrote almost nothing explicitly on animality.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno’s clearest critique of humanity’s assumed mastery over nature comes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente, Gesammelte Schriften, Volume 3* (written with Max Horkheimer). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996. Hereafter abbreviated DE.

<sup>4</sup> *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 80.

human subjectivity. Hence, Derrida contends that Adorno's critical ecology opposes any force that would attempt to justify itself through the absolute separation of humans from animals and that such a separation is the fundamental gesture of fascism.

On the other hand, citing a fragment from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* entitled "Man and Beast," Derrida says that Adorno's critical ecology would resist the "ideology concealed in the troubling interest in animals, that the fascists, the Nazis, and the Führer did in fact seem to show, sometimes to the point of vegetarianism" (F 181/56).<sup>5</sup> While concerned with the idealist attempt to separate fundamentally *humanity* from *animality*, Adorno is equally concerned with what appears in fascism as an attempt to equalize humans and animals. Principled vegetarianism (whether Hitler's or otherwise) often rests on the notion that because humans and animals *share* some capacity or faculty (to suffer for instance) there is a moral obligation to extend to animals considerations typically reserved for humans (for example, not being killed for food). This position would appear to be starkly opposed to the absolute domination of animality by humans. However, Adorno worries that this kind of *equalizing* of humans and animals actually conceals a profound hatred of animality.

Extending certain rights or considerations to some species of non-human animals or to some particular set of such animals, allows one to avoid the explicit claim to anthropocentrism—I'm not anthropocentric. I don't even eat animals. However, nothing in this logic of interest or *care* necessarily contests the fundamental ascendancy of humans over *animals*, as the very *decision* of what kinds of *animality* deserve recognition remains squarely within the control of humans. In the fragment Derrida cites, Adorno compares this kind of ideological interest to the concern for the *feminine* in patriarchal societies.<sup>6</sup> The glorification of the *feminine* under

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<sup>5</sup> DE 203-212/282-292.

<sup>6</sup> DE 207/285-286.

patriarchy does nothing to contest patriarchy. In fact, it may ultimately reinforce and extend it, as this interest allows patriarchal power to claim that it is in fact not patriarchal—How can we be patriarchal? We love the feminine so much. It is this potential to reinforce and extend the exclusion and hatred of animality, which is the “troubling ideology concealed in the interest in animals.” Such an ideology takes an interest in animals (or women, or nature) only ever more thoroughly to enslave the objects of interest. This interest in animals legitimates more thoroughly the sovereignty of humans over nature. Derrida thus sees a critical or deconstructive ecology in Adorno’s work that resists both the absolute separation of humans from animals and the reduction of animality to humanity. It contests humanity’s fundamental claim to sovereign mastery but stops short of simply doing away altogether with the notion of mastery.

How is it possible to think or mark the difference between humans and all other forms of life (and in truth the ways in which all other forms of life differ from each other) without reducing or determining all these differences merely as lesser forms of human life? This is the question that a critical or deconstructive ecology would set itself: How is it possible to think and to act—dare I say to live—difference within similarity? Seen in this light, a critical ecology strikes to the heart of many of the central concerns of both Derrida and Adorno: identity, difference, meditation, exchange, sovereignty, mastery, ideology, life, death etc. It connects with Derrida’s desire in *Rogues* to think a “shared sovereignty” and Adorno’s notion of non-identitarian thinking.<sup>7</sup> It suggests that all these concerns are fundamentally connected to the questions of violence and animality, both the question of violence against animals, and of

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<sup>7</sup> *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005, 86/126. *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison*. Paris: Galilée, 2003. Hereafter abbreviated R. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973, 147/150; *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften, Volume 6*. Frankfurt en Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996. Hereafter abbreviate ND.



violence to what is *animal* in humans. It would seem then that Derrida's and Adorno's projects intersect around the issues of violence and animality.

Derrida points to these issues as bearing upon the deconstructive project and critical theory in a fundamental way. My project attempts to follow out this connection paying particular attention to the issue of violence and its connection to questions of life. I argue that concerns for violence and, more specifically, violence against life, are basic to the character and orientation of both Derrida's and Adorno's thought. A study of the way each of these thinker approaches violence exposes the remarkable affinity between their projects and marks their difference from other thinkers within the Western philosophical tradition. It suggests further, as Derrida says, that there is a contribution in both these projects to the discourses of ecology. My intention is to support three fundamental claims. First, I argue that questions of violence and life shape and orient the thinking of both Derrida and Adorno. Second, I contend that their shared concern for questions of violence and life mark a previously under-theorized connection between their critical projects generally. Third, this connection shows an ecological dimension inherent in both their thought.

Chapter One explores the foundational role of violence in Derrida's thinking, specifically as it arises in *Of Grammatology*.<sup>8</sup> By following the development of this exclusionary violence through the figures of "writing," "originary violence," and "reparatory violence", this chapter traces the way Derrida articulates violence as the irreducible possibility of exclusion within all acts of signification, meaning, and thought. I show how Derrida connects the "originary" structural violence of "writing" to all forms of empirical violence through a "reparatory" delimiting of the openness of originary difference. For Derrida, all violence emerges from a

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology: Corrected Edition*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974; *De La Grammatologie*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967. Hereafter cited as G.

basic logic of exclusion. In particular, he connects this exclusionary violence to the violence of ethnocentrism. Every instance of reparatory violence marks who or what will be included and excluded, who or what will be counted or passed over, who or what belongs on the inside—who or what is autochthonous. A look at Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss allows me to explicate the character and importance of this connection between reparatory violence and ethnocentrism. This discussion opens the way to show how, while maintaining that every appearance involves reparatory violence, Derrida "qualifies" his notion of exclusionary violence. I then argue that his qualifications mark the sites at which the concentration of exclusionary violence can be expected. In particular, Derrida contends that exclusionary violence is inherently linked to ethnocentrism, and therefore always involves questions of the *ethnos*: questions of race, nationality, language, culture, and ultimately questions of what it means to be *human* as opposed to *animal*. Hence, I hold that the unavoidable exclusionary violence present in every act of signification is, for Derrida, always already a violence involving life. It is the unavoidability of this violence to life that determines Derrida's fundamental resistance to discourses of non-violence.

Chapter Two examines Derrida's critique of discourses of non-violence as a means to explore further his notion that violence is unavoidable. I show that Derrida resists the notion of *non-violence* as marking a power or site *free* from violence because of his worry that establishing the *purity* of *non-violence* forecloses the question of violence and, in doing so, denies the unavoidability of violence. I trace, through his reading of Levinas and Benjamin, the link he makes between foreclosing the question of violence and "subjectivity," "ipseity," and ultimately "sovereignty." He argues that the problem with this kind of sovereign foreclosure is that it tends toward "the worst." I then proceed to show how the writings on non-violence by Emmanuel

Levinas, Hannah Arendt, and Walter Benjamin do in fact foreclose the question of violence and non-violence, by attempting to establish the *purity* of the non-violent in opposition to the violent.

I expose this moment of foreclosure in Levinas's work, through a reading of Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics." I argue that in this essay Derrida concerns himself primarily with Levinas's unwillingness to explain how he can identify, name, and know the violent when, by his own account, the ability to do so appears only through the violence of light and subjectivity. Similarly my reading of Arendt maintains that Derrida shares with other critics a concern with her attempt to separate violence from power or violent force from non-violent force. I sketch Arendt's conflicting accounts of the founding relationship between power and violence in *On Violence* and *On Revolution*, and I argue that Arendt's separation of power and violence stands at odds with her notion of human action as fundamentally indeterminable.

Lastly, I take up Derrida's critique of Benjamin in "Force of Law." I contend that here Derrida makes clear the stakes involved in his concern over discourses of non-violence. For here he argues that the problem created by foreclosing the question of violence is a tendency toward the "worst" violence. This chapter concludes by showing that, in his resistance to non-violence, Derrida frames the deconstructive project fundamentally as a critique of non-violence. Furthermore, Derrida's own critique of non-violence clarifies his notion of "sovereignty," as the power to make a *decision* about what constitutes the violent and the non-violent, the power *to decide* on which life can be damaged or sacrificed with impunity.

Chapter Three explores the importance of violence in Adorno's work through the figures of "identity" and "exchange." Following from Adorno's claim that "pain" and "negativity" are "the moving forces of dialectical thinking," exclusionary violence and particularly violence to

*life* can be marked as a fundamental category of negative dialectical method.<sup>9</sup> Here I note a profound sympathy and continuity between the work of Adorno and Derrida. I show that, for Adorno, the dialectical logic of identity structurally and unavoidably weaves exclusionary violence into all acts of signification, meaning, and thought. Adorno conceives this violence as operating by the exclusion of the unique spatio-temporal aspects of objects, leading to a logic by which subjectivity dominates objectivity, particularly the objectivity that is the living subject. I explore Adorno's contention that this reduction of the life of subjects occurs socially through the “principle of exchange” and the reduction of subjects, under capitalism, to “wage workers.”<sup>10</sup> Adorno asserts that this reduction leads subjects into a self-destructive relationship to their own lives, a relationship I parallel with Derrida’s notion of autoimmunity. Thus, I point to two confluences between the work of Derrida and Adorno. Both projects are oriented by a commitment to the irreducibility of exclusionary violence, and both deny the feasibility of resisting violence simply by rejecting it.

Beginning with a discussion of Adorno’s resistance to discourses of non-violence as shown in his critiques of Bergson, Husserl, and Heidegger, Chapter Four develops the connection between questions of violence and questions of life in both Adorno and Derrida. The argument establishes that Adorno, like Derrida, resists any notion of non-violence as a power or site free from violence. His resistance emerges from a concern that such claims suppress their own inherent dialectical logic, allowing naturalization of the current state of the world and affirming history as a reflection of the essence of the world.

I argue that the stakes of Adorno's concerns with the discourses of non-violence are seen most clearly in his critique of Heidegger which is remarkably similar to Derrida's. Chapter Four

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<sup>9</sup> ND 202/202.

<sup>10</sup> ND 146/149.

concludes that Adorno's resistance to the discourses of non-violence clarifies his orientation to these discourses, the import in his work of questions of life, and his marked continuity with Derrida. Further it defines critical theory as a critique of non-violence fundamentally concerned with the "naturalization" of 'life.'

Ultimately my aim is to show that questions of violence and life are central to the work of both Derrida and Adorno, producing a remarkable and previously under-theorized affinity between the deconstructive project and critical theory. Furthermore I find an inherently ecological vein in the concern of both their thinking, a vein oriented by questions of coexistence and particularly the violence of coexistence. In fact Adorno speaks of a critical ecology and Derrida of a deconstructive ecology. In examining what a critical ecology might mean, I hear it as a challenge to ask, "What do our actions, systems, and structures live on?" For a system of thinking or way of life that refuses to attend consciously to what it *eats* runs the risk of pandemic violence that consumes everything in its path and finally devours itself.

## Chapter One: Foundational, Reparatory, and Empirical Violence in the Work of Jacques Derrida

*“La cruauté est toujours à l’œuvre.”*  
--Jacques Derrida

The question of writing is, in the work of Jacques Derrida, everywhere accompanied by violence. For example, in *Of Grammatology* one reads that “Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss are not for a moment to be challenged when they relate the power of writing to the exercise of violence” (Derrida, G 106/156). A bit later, in that same text, Derrida unequivocally states that “we [Derrida], like Lévi-Strauss, conclude that violence is writing” (Derrida, G 135/195). The association of writing with violence is hardly unique to Derrida’s thinking emerging from Plato to Saussure.<sup>11</sup> This association emerges from a notion of speech as more present than writing, the notion that writing sacrifices the presence of speech to thought in a way that necessarily does violence to thought. Working through the relationship between writing and violence is a major preoccupation of Derrida’s early work, figuring prominently not only in *Of Grammatology* but also in essays from *Writing and Difference* and even spectrally in *Speech and Phenomenon*.<sup>12</sup> Despite the central role given to the interrelation of violence and writing in Derrida’s work little of the scholarship has looked closely at exactly what he means by the term *violence* and the way in which violence sits, in many respects, at the heart of both the deconstructive project and the

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<sup>11</sup> See James K. A. Smith *The Fall of Interpretation*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 116-129.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978; *L’écriture et la différence*. Éditions du Seuil, 1967. Hereafter cited as WD. *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*. Edited by John Wild. Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973; *La Voix et le Phénomène*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967. Hereafter cited as SP. The French word *violence* never appears in the text of *La Voix et le Phénomène*. However, Derrida speaks in that text of phenomenology as “tormented,” and, in a crucial footnote, he links his exploration of phenomenology to his understanding of writing. In particular, he suggests that questions of phonetic and non-phonetic writing could be graphed onto his concerns with Husserlian phenomenology, and he suggests that such a graphing “endangers” Husserl’s entire system. One can thus see that in all Derrida’s early works, even those not explicitly concerned with the question of writing and violence, these themes are never absent. See SP 4/5, 27-28/29.

trajectory of Derrida's later work on sovereignty, law, and animality.<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that commentators have ignored Derrida's focus on questions of violence, particularly in his later political works. However, in the main, existing scholarship little acknowledges the constitutive role concerns over violence play in Derrida's thinking, and there is as yet no account that traces how questions of violence influence the methodology and entire trajectory of Derrida's corpus.

This chapter aims first to clarify the link between violence and writing as a preface to exploring how the structural violence of "writing" leads to other forms of physical and psychological violence, particularly around issues of exclusion, language, the nation-state, and animality. I begin by outlining Derrida's understanding of writing and its relationship to violence.

### **I: Originary Reparations: The "Violence" Before "Violence"**

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida defines writing as "not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it [pictographic or ideographic inscription] possible" (Derrida, G 9/19). Writing designates both the literal marks on the page or screen and that which makes such marking possible. Beyond the merely literal notion of writing understood in the strict sense of the inscribing of words, Derrida uses "writing" to name the possibility of inscription and representation in general, the possibility that something can represent or stand in for something else. Writing is simultaneously the condition for there being a discernable difference between any two things (whether these be objects, signs, ideas, affects, etc) and the set of symbols that marks these differences. Writing thus constitutes a

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<sup>13</sup> There are several notable exceptions to this general trend, texts that emphasize both the issue of violence and the continuity between the concerns of Derrida's early and later work. Jack E. Marsh Jr. "Of Violence: The Force and Significance of Violence in the early Derrida" *Philosophy Social Criticism* 35 (2009): 269-286. Marko Zlomistic, *Jacques Derrida's Aporetic Ethics*. New York: Lexington Books, 2007; David Wood. *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics after Deconstruction*. New York: SUNY Press, 2005. Christopher Johnson's *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

differential system in two senses. On the one hand, writing is a differential system of signs,<sup>14</sup> such as any set of inscriptions; and, on the other hand, it is the structural possibility of difference itself—the fact that there is any discernable difference between one thing and another.<sup>15</sup> Existing as both these differential moments, writing is necessary for the constitution and production of meaning.

Following the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Derrida conceives meaning as conditioned by difference. Meaning and signification require difference, as there would otherwise be no intelligible distinction between a thing and its representation, between the signifier and the signified.<sup>16</sup> In a world without an irreducible difference between signifiers and signifieds there could be no language, thought, or meaning, since every word and idea would be indistinguishable from the thing for which it is a symbol. Thus writing is “the origin of *meaning* in general”; writing names the basic differential structure that makes meaning possible (G 9/19).<sup>17</sup> While writing is necessary for meaning to exist, the difference it represents also jeopardizes the completeness and purity of all meaning.

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<sup>14</sup> I use the phrase “differential system of signs” to express the Saussurean notion, with which Derrida agrees, that signifiers, words, and symbols only have meaning in relation to other signifiers, words, or symbols.

<sup>15</sup> These two senses of “differential system” parallel the two meanings Derrida ascribes to *différance*. On the one hand, the notion of writing as a differential system of signs expresses difference as deferral, the relaying and also delaying of meaning from one sign to another. On the other hand, the notion of writing as originary difference expresses difference as differentiation, the spatial or logical distinctness of one thing from another. For a full discussion of *différance* see “Differance” in *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*. Edited by John Wild. Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 129-160. “La Différance.” *Theorie d’ensemble* Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968.

<sup>16</sup> See G 14/26 and also WD 281/412 where Derrida writes “as soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word ‘sign’ itself—which is precisely what cannot be done. For the signification ‘sign’ has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified.” The sign, in order to be a concept that makes any sense at all, requires a discernable difference between the signifier and the signified.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche argues something very similar in his essay “Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense.” In this essay, Nietzsche shows that “truth” and by extension meaning emerges out of language. It is only at the point at which one has an agreed upon set of designations that one can begin to question the “truth” or “meaning” of an object. This link to Nietzsche is particularly interesting for my project, as Nietzsche constantly connects questions of meaning and truth to questions of the “human” and the “non-human”. In fact, Nietzsche suggests that the very notion of the “human” has a direct relationship to meaning, truth, and language. Hence, the question of the “human” and of the



If meaning and signification require an irreducible moment of difference, and if writing is the moment of difference, then it follows that writing (and all modes of representation) must always fall short of full representation of the signified. They must leave some aspect of the thing unrepresented. The inherent demand for difference necessitates this “failure.” A signifier can never absolutely represent its signified. Despite one’s best intentions, one cannot produce a symbol or set of symbols that fully describe any object, for words are always different from the things they represent. Thus, writing comes to mark a paradox at the heart of meaning and signification, for in order to represent anything at all, every representational system, mode of inscription, and system of writing must leave something unrepresented, eliminating the possibility of a “complete” or “pure” representation.<sup>18</sup> This paradox is the basis of Derrida’s critique of logocentrism. This critique claims that within any system of signification (figured as absence), “writing” undermines in advance language’s assumed identity with the *logos* (figured as presence).<sup>19</sup> Speech cannot be pure presence since, as a signifying system, it requires a moment of difference or deferral, that is, a moment in which the signified is absence. It is in this claim about the paradoxical structure of language and writing that Derrida will locate the problem of “violence.”

Within the structure of writing exists the paradox that there must be, in every act of signification, something that remains unrepresented or excluded. Derrida recognizes that this necessity for exclusion introduces the irreducible possibility of confusion, dissemination, and

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“non-human,” of “non-human animals” and “human animals” or non-human “life” and human “life” is always already in operation in both Derrida’s and Nietzsche’s work.

<sup>18</sup>Derrida also expresses his commitment to constitutive incompleteness in his equating of writing with “metaphor” or “metaphoricity.” Metaphors presupposes a certain incompleteness insofar as they describe some object or situation only on the condition that they be something fundamentally different than that which they describe. See G 15/27. Derrida’s most sustained engagement with the question of metaphor comes in “White Mythologies” *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 207-272.

<sup>19</sup>For a concise account of Derrida’s critique of logocentrism see Christopher Johnson. *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 66; and Arthur Bradley. *Derrida’s Of Grammatology* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008, 47-50.

misrepresentation within every act of signification. As he writes in *Of Grammatology*, “writing, obliteration [*oblitération*] of the proper classed in the play of difference, is the originary violence itself: pure impossibility of the ‘vocative mark,’ impossible purity of the mark of vocation” (Derrida, G 110/162). The differential and paradoxical character of writing undermines the potential of ever “properly classing” or fully representing any signified, a fact that cancels the chance of there ever being a pure, totally accurate and true representation. The use of “obliteration” to translate “*oblitération*” is a bit misleading. The English “obliteration” implies total annihilation or effacement in a way that the French “*oblitération*” does not. In fact, “*oblitération*” never implies total annihilation, connoting rather the “canceling” or “occlusion” of something as, for example, the canceling of a postage stamp. Hence, the language of “*oblitération*” shows that the proper is never completely destroyed without a trace but is rather compromised in advance in a way that leaves some trace or remnant of “the proper” as always already compromised. This impossibility of completely representing any object is a structural facet of writing, signification, and meaning. However, as the language of *oblitération* suggests, this moment of distortion or canceling implies a material loss, insofar as the structural loss during the process of conceptualization leaves some trace, some indication, some scent of the exclusion it implies. I will return to the link between the structural fact of loss and its material consequences shortly. However the point for now is that, given the impossibility of *true* and *complete* representations, the entire system and logic of signification is thrown into question. Every signification becomes suspect and corrupt. Derrida uses the term “originary violence” to describe the structural uncertainty implied by this irreducible possibility of corruption and misrepresentation. He then goes on to clarify the nature of this violence and its originary status.

Derrida uses the notion of *originariness* to qualify violence in at least two ways. On the one hand, the originary marks the structural necessity of violence in all modes of signification and meaning. As outlined above, there is no meaning or signification without difference, and, consequently, no signification without the structural threat of harm or violence to the signified—without the threat that some aspect of an object will be excluded from its representation. On the other hand, this “originality” marks structural violence as the origin of all other violence, for “[a]nterior to the possibility of violence in the current and derivative sense [...] there is, as the space of its possibility, the violence of the arche-writing, the violence of difference, of classification, and of the system of appellations” (G 110/162). The violence of arche-writing is originary insofar as it introduces the possibility and opens the space for all other violence, since the irreducible fact of difference, the possibility of contamination, corruption, and misrepresentation, must be anterior to any particular instance of such contamination or corruption. Originary violence is, thus, “originary” insofar as it is necessary, structural, and anterior to all other forms of violence. Yet one wonders exactly what kind of *violence* is suggested here, since originary violence cannot be, on this account, physical or psychological violence.

Given that originary violence is structurally necessary, it cannot be physical or psychological, since all physical or psychological violence is by definition contingent. Nothing in the logic of arche-violence dictates the necessity of any particular violent act, in the same way that, for example, the structural possibility of breaking someone’s arm in no way commands that any particular arm be broken. In addition, the anteriority of originary violence means that such violence must precede any violent act; in fact, it must precede the very distinction between violence and non-violence as such. Originary violence opens the possibility of violence, by

allowing a distinction between the violent and non-violent, a distinction which is, of course, necessary for the appearance of any particular violent act. Arche-violence, thus, is not violence directly perpetrated on the bodies or minds of individuals. In the strict sense, it is not perpetrated at all for it must lack all physical or psychical content.

Derrida presents originary violence as a “middle voice” between violence and non-violence, enabling the possibility of all violence but lacking all discernable content. “True” originary violence, if there were such a thing, would be an empty, abstract, and contentless “violence” of pure possibility: neither positive nor negative, real nor imagined, good nor evil, productive nor destructive. Such “violence” would be nothing but an irreducible possibility, an opening that allows for every violent and non-violent act to follow and whose only defining feature is that its possibility cannot be completely eliminated. One might rightly wonder why Derrida insists on continuing to call this contentless, openness of possibility *violence*. I think it is because he does not want to suggest or forget that this possibility of violence always already implies actual violence. There will be real harm. Yet, if originary violence is simply the condition for the possibility of violence and non-violence, then how is it that this pure condition comes to have content? What is the connection between the space or possibility of violence and any particular violent act? This connection is, I think, constellated around yet another paradox: originary violence can appear only by disappearing.

Derrida most clearly defines violence in a passage from *Of Grammatology* when he writes:

[t]o think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place, of a self-presence which

has never been given but only dreamed of and always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance. (G 112/165)

The character of archē or originary violence is positioned around the figure of loss, in particular the “loss of what has never taken place.” Insofar as it is an expression of irreducible difference, originary violence is the loss of the proper, the loss of the absolute closeness of thought to words and the *self to itself*. It is the loss of any possibility of thinking or representing the uniqueness of a particular object in its particularity, because it marks the limit that allows engagement with the signified only through a generalized set of signs, which are by necessity always different from the objects they wish to define. Originary violence, thus, exposes the loss of the possibility to represent fully any object in its uniqueness—the loss of the power of signs to signify objects as they “properly” are. Yet this loss is also a fiction, for the vision of absolute closeness it bemoans will have always been a mere dream, a mirage, a phantasm; all systems of signification and meaning require difference, and difference forecloses in advance the possibility of absolute presence or contiguity. This is why originary violence paradoxically appears only in its disappearance; it manifests only by ceasing to be the ambiguous possibility of violence or non-violence, by becoming a particularized manifestation either violent or not. It is this limiting of possibility, this limiting of originary violence, that marks the first step toward concrete violence, a step Derrida characterizes as “reparatory.”

Directly following his description of originary violence, Derrida writes  
[o]ut of this arche-violence, forbidden and therefore confirmed by a second violence that is reparatory [*réparatrice*], protective, instituting the ‘moral,’ prescribing the concealment of writing and the effacement and obliteration of the so-called proper name which was already dividing the proper, a third violence can

*possibly* emerge or not (an empirical possibility) within what is commonly called evil, war, indiscretion, and rape. (G 112/165)

Empirical violence can emerge out of originary violence, as a potentiality made possible by originary difference. This passage from the structural possibility of violence to empirical violence is, however, mediated by a “second” form of violence that limits or forecloses the openness of arche-violence. As discussed above, originary violence cannot in itself have content or appear, as it is nothing more than an open space of possibility. Hence, in order for something to appear as “violent,” there is a need to limit the pure openness of originary difference.

Reparatory violence answers this need. The reparatory, as its etymology suggests,<sup>20</sup> orders the openness of originary difference, allowing for the appearance of an object by differentiating or opposing it to other objects.<sup>21</sup> This differentiation creates a situation in which an object is seen to exclude other, dissimilar objects. This exclusion becomes the basis for the appearance of the object as *this* object and *not* another object. For example, reparatory exclusion divides writing from speech within logocentric discourses. Speech is defined in opposition to writing. This operation excludes writing from the domain of speech, thus establishing the character of both speech and writing.<sup>22</sup> The possibility of anything appearing at all, for Derrida, requires this

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<sup>20</sup> The word reparatory is a modified noun form of the verb “to repair.” Repairing has two etymological sources, the first is from the Latin verb “*reparāre*” meaning to make ready, put in order, or prepare. The second is from the late Latin verb “*repatriāre*” meaning “to return to one’s country (a combining of the prefix “re” and the noun “*patria*,” fatherland). Hence, the reparatory implies a systemizing or putting in order, but one which harkens back to a previous condition, a return to a former state or arrangement, and this arrangement evokes a notion of the fatherland or land of origin. All etymological citations are from the OED.

<sup>21</sup> “*Réparatrice*” is just one of several terms with which Derrida marks this process of limiting through exclusion. For example, he frequently employs the term “economic” to describe a similar dynamic. See “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve” in *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978: 251-277/369-407.

<sup>22</sup> See G 33-34/50-51. Speaking of the necessity of the logocentric opposition of speech and writing, Derrida writes, “the condition for the scientificity of linguistics is that the field of linguistics have hard and fast frontiers, that it be a system regulated by an *internal* necessity, and that in a certain way its structure be closed. The representativist concept of writing facilitates things. If writing is nothing but the ‘figuration’ [. . .] of the language, one has the right

structural delimiting. This exclusive process orders the ambiguous and always uncertain openness of originary difference, allowing an object to appear as *this* particular object. However, in the process of allowing an object to appear, this reparatory delimiting also institutes a certain “morality”—that *in the name of* which an appearing thing is constituted as the thing it is.

The delimiting originary difference not only sets up the possibility of appearance but also necessitates the creation of a morality. The process that defines an object in opposition to other objects simultaneously demarcates the legitimacy or illegitimacy of that object. The appearance of any object, for example a “Disaster Relief Organization,” requires that it be distinguished from other objects which are not such organizations. This set of rules serves as the foundation of the “moral.” The moral establishes the notion of a “Disaster Relief Organization” as a group of people who work together to assist victims of disasters. This notion or set of rules renders a “Disaster Relief Organization” recognizable and confirms that this particular thing in front of me is a group of people that assist victims of disasters. At the same time, these rules legitimize the Relief Group’s appearance, prescribing that anything that does not correspond to this notion is not a legitimate “Disaster Relief Organization.” Hence, the reparatory marks a twofold delimiting and ordering of the undecidability of originary violence both by allowing the appearance of an object and establishing the rules by which the relative legitimacy of that appearance is discernible. Every appearance brings with it a set of moral assertions, which operates to legitimate and protect that appearance. Importantly for Derrida, this legitimation and protection takes place through an inherent hierarchy.

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to exclude it from the interiority of the system [. . .] as the image maybe excluded without damage from the system of reality” (G 33/50).

The necessary co-arising of morality and appearance shows that a hierarchically arranged system of value is structurally implicit in every appearance. The fact that every appearance brings with it a set of guidelines by which to judge the legitimacy of that appearance means that some appearances are situated, from the beginning, as superior to others. To return to the example of the Disaster Relief Organization, the appearance of such an organization as having certain qualities that define it means that those appearances that most possess these qualities will be considered more “legitimately” Disaster Relief Organizations than those that do not. The organization that appears to most effectively assist victims of disasters, that most conforms to the concept of a Disaster Relief Organization, will appear “better” than the organization that does not. Thus in every appearance there is an implicit and distinct hierarchy at work that privileges some objects over others. Yet this hierarchizing is not created, as my example might suggest, simply by historical or cultural pragmatics; rather this hierarchizing is inherent within the very category of appearance.

The fact that morality arises with appearance, that there can be no appearing without circumscribing what is inside and outside, legitimate and illegitimate, good and evil, illustrates that questions of privilege and legitimacy are always already on the side of appearing. The delimiting of the concept of “appearing” emerges, like all appearances, from the separating of appearing from its opposite, non-appearing; this separation brings with it a morality in which appearance is privileged and protected from what is other than appearance, namely, non-appearance or absence. Thus, the co-arising of appearing and morality shows that appearing, in its concept, is necessarily privileged over not appearing. In fact, morality in its most basic form is nothing other than the defense of appearing against non-appearing, the shoring up of presence against absence, the sandbagging of the inside against the rising waters of the outside. It is in



this context that Derrida will everywhere maintain the unavoidability not only of privileging presence over absence, but of binary opposition more generally, and of phonocentrism and logocentrism in particular.

It is not an accident of culture or historicity that morality always privileges what appears against what does not appear, fortifying presence over absence:

The privilege of the *phonè* does not depend upon a choice that could have been avoided. It responds to a moment of *economy* (let us say of the ‘life’ of ‘history’ or of ‘being as self-relationship). The system of ‘hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak’ through the phonic substance [. . .] has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the very idea of the world, the idea of the world-origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc. (G 7-8/17)

The privileging of appearing over non-appearing emerges from the delimiting of opposites and the protection of that delimiting by a morality that always favors that which appears. The system of hearing and understanding oneself speak, because it appears to be “present,” here and now, has not only dominated a certain understanding of the world, but has actually given rise to the very concept of the “world,” as an internally consistent system organized around a logic of binary opposition. This system has, as Derrida emphasizes, arisen precisely out of the differentiation and exclusion of the outside from the inside, the non-worldly from the worldly, the non-appearing from the appearing, etc. Hence, the privileging of a certain set of phonocentric binaries is structurally unavoidable. Yet while unavoidable, this privileging remains paradoxical.

Although the privileging of presence over absence and inside over outside is necessary for appearance, this privileging ultimately is paradoxical, since the two sides of any binary opposition cannot remain completely and purely separated. For example, recall that appearing is established only through separating it from its other, non-appearing. This separation is defended by a set of moral assumptions that arises alongside it to protect the concept of appearing from its other by totally separating the two. Yet this total separation cannot be logically maintained, as the emergence of “appearing” as a concept requires that it have a relationship of opposition with “non-appearing.” “Appearing” can appear only in conjunction with “non-appearing.” Thus appearing must always, unavoidably, bring with it the notion of non-appearing. The impossibility of maintaining the absolute separation of any two binarily opposed concepts disrupts, fundamentally, the ability to privilege hierarchically one side of any binary over the other since each side is equally necessary to the other’s existence. We have thus seen that all appearing requires a morally reinforced separation of it from its opposite. However, this separation cannot be consistently maintained.

Because the necessary yet paradoxical separation of any appearance from its opposite is not consistently sustainable, every appearance retains some relation to its opposite. Nevertheless it can appear only by denying this relationship, by feigning separation. The possibility of appearance is based, then, on an unjustifiable and, therefore, violent moment of exclusion in which what is “other” to any particular appearance is occluded and denied in order to allow for the emergence of that particular appearance. Derrida presents this logic clearly in his discussion of speech and writing. There he shows that the defining of writing in opposition to speech, although the basis for the appearance of both speech and writing, operates to exclude writing entirely from domain of speech. This exclusion makes disappear those aspects of writing that do

not fit its characterization as speech's illegitimate double.<sup>23</sup> All appearing for Derrida contains a necessary moment of exclusion, and it is this exclusion that marks the beginning of the relationship between the openness of originary violence and concrete manifestations of violence.

The exploration of originary and reparatory violence shows that the first form of something resembling concrete violence is an exclusion. The move from the utterly abstract openness of originary violence to any form of physical or psychological violence must occur by way of a second violence of reparatory delimiting, an economic moment which, although allowing for the possibility of content, operates through a logic of exclusion. Hence, it is the exclusionary violence of reparation that provides the basic passage from the structural possibility of violence to violence in the world. It is evident that while exclusion defines the relationship between originary and concrete violence, the exclusionary violence outlined thus far is not particularly concrete. It does not prescribe a particular instance of exclusion but rather shows that there will always be a moment of exclusion in all appearance. In addition, this exclusionary "violence" must not be seen as purely negative because there can be no appearing without it. What should be clear at this point, however, is that a basic exclusionary structure is integral to Derrida's thinking on violence. To provide a fuller sketch of Derrida's understanding of exclusionary violence, let us turn to a textual example of the risk inherent in the relationship between the reparatory attempt to foreclose difference and the possibility of exclusionary violence. This relationship and its consequences can be illustrated through a close reading of Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss's "The Writing Lesson." In particular, one finds in this reading that it is Lévi-Strauss's reparatory denial of writing to the Nambikwara that, as Derrida argues, leads to the ethnocentric and violent denial of subjectivity to the Nambikwara.

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<sup>23</sup> See G 27/42 ff.

## II: Lévi-Strauss and The Violence of Ethnocentrism

Several sections in *Of Grammatology* are devoted to a detailed critique of a number of chapters from Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, a book of observations concerning the Nambikwara, an indigenous people living in the Brazilian Amazon.<sup>24</sup> In these observations, Lévi-Strauss makes two essential claims about Nambikwara society: first, that it does not possess writing and, second, that it is fundamentally peaceful and nonviolent. These two assertions are logically conjoined, as Lévi-Strauss attributes the introduction of writing by Western anthropologists in Nambikwara society with the introduction of violence (G 117/172). To maintain this argument, Lévi-Strauss is led to foreclose the possibility that Nambikwara culture had either writing or violence before their encounter with the West. Implicit in this position is a clearly defined answer to the question of what constitutes writing. In fact, Lévi-Strauss contends that the Nambikwara's lack of writing "goes without saying," suggesting that the nature of writing and the question of who does and does not possess it are self-evident (G 110/161). Derrida is dissatisfied with that position and goes on to show that Lévi-Strauss resolves the question of the Nambikwara's goodness and innocence in an equally suspicious manner (G 117/171-172). The importance of these claims to the present discussion is that one catches in them a glimpse of something like a reparatory moment in which the defining of an object allows a clear demarcation of that object as either inside or outside, possessed or unpossessed, present or absent. This is how Lévi-Strauss defines writing in relation to Nambikwara and Western society. Derrida's analysis explores this reparatory moment by challenging Lévi-Strauss's resolution of the question of the Nambikwara and writing.

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<sup>24</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*. Translated by John Weightman and Doreen Weightman. New York: Penguin Press, 1992; *Tristes Tropiques*. Paris: Pocket, 2001.

There are, for Derrida, a number of empirical reasons for contesting Lévi-Strauss's claims concerning the Nambikwara's apparent lack of writing and violence. For example, Lévi-Strauss himself documents the existence, albeit briefly, of "zigzags" and "dots" on the calabashes of the Nambikwara, prompting Derrida to wonder "up to what point it is legitimate not to call by the name writing these 'few dots' and 'zigzags'" (G 110/162). In addition, Lévi-Strauss documents and yet passes over explicit acts of physical violence between members of the Nambikwara (for example, the striking of a child by another [G113/166]) and ignores the fact that the existence of a social hierarchy in the Nambikwara society already implies the exercise of a certain violence or threat of authority. Yet Derrida's most pressing disagreement with Lévi-Strauss's position emerges from immanent rather than empirical grounds and involves the issue of proper names.

Lévi-Strauss relates an account of the way in which he manipulated some of the Nambikwara children into disclosing the secret and forbidden "proper names" of the various adult members of the tribe (G 110-111/162-163). He offers this account to illustrate the corrupting force the Western anthropologists had on the Nambikwara, lending support to the notion that it was they who introduced the Nambikwara to violence along with writing. However, Derrida sees in this story not an introduction of violence but rather the expression of a violence that was always already present. Analyzing the denial of writing to the Nambikwara, Derrida wonders "above all, how can we deny the practice of writing in general to a society capable of obliterating the proper, that is to say a violent society?" (G 110/162). How can Lévi-Strauss forbid violence and, consequently, writing to a society in which there can be, as Lévi-Strauss himself documents, a "revealing" of the proper, as the possibility of such revealing suggests already the possibility of corruption and violence?

The fact that the Nambikwara have “secret,” “proper” names and that the revealing of these names contains a danger, a danger so great that it must be forbidden, presumably by the threat of violence to the one who reveals these names, shows that the Nambikwara, despite Lévi-Strauss’s contention, were already a society infected with violence. Only an already violent society can have secrets and threat associated with disclosure of those secrets, for the possibility of threat necessitates the existence of violence. Lévi-Strauss’s story attests to a structural violence already at work in Nambikwara society prior to the arrival of the Western anthropologists—this violence being the threat opened by the inherent inability to fully secure the “proper.” (G 107/157)

There is a co-conditioning relationship in Lévi-Strauss’s work between writing and violence—the one always bringing with it the other. Therefore the notion of Nambikwara society as always already violent troubles fundamentally Lévi-Strauss’s entire characterization. If Nambikwara society contained violence prior to the arrival of Western anthropologists, then they must have also had some prior form of writing. Derrida writes:

[V]iolence here does not unexpectedly break in all at once, starting from some original innocence whose nakedness is *surprised* at the moment that the secret of the *so-called* proper names is violated. The structure of violence is complex and its possibility—writing—no less so. (G 111-112/164)

Lévi-Strauss’s inability to maintain his claim that Nambikwara society lacks violence fundamentally compromises his denial of writing to them. On this reading, writing and violence must have been a part of Nambikwara society long before the arrival of Lévi-Strauss or his crew. Having identified one difficulty in Lévi-Strauss’s analysis, Derrida raises another. The failure of

Lévi-Strauss's denial of writing to the Nambikwara throws into question his certainty about the nature of writing.

As discussed above, Lévi-Strauss's denial of writing to the Nambikwara emerges out of an implicit sureness about the nature of writing: he acts as though he already knows, self-evidently, what writing is and who does and does not possess it. This certainty operates as a kind of reparatory foreclosing of originary difference. By clearly defining the nature of writing, Lévi-Strauss's analysis gives the appearance of a resolution of all ambiguity concerning the Nambikwara's status as an illiterate and consequently nonviolent people. Derrida's exposure of the paradox of Lévi-Strauss's analysis undermines his certainty, since the inability to maintain the exclusion of writing and violence from the Nambikwara shows that writing must be something different from what Lévi-Strauss implicitly assumes. Derrida thus illustrates the logical failure of Lévi-Strauss's analysis and by extension the failure of the reparatory to foreclose originary violence. That is to say, Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss illustrates how the limiting of originary violence by reparatory violence will always suffer from an unavoidable incompleteness. There will be more to say about the inability to overcome, from a Derridean perspective, the logic of originary violence. However, the stakes of Derrida's analysis are much higher than simply exposing a logical inconsistency in the work of Lévi-Strauss. Derrida is interested in demonstrating that the kind of paradox illustrated in Lévi-Strauss's analysis implies a dangerous and ultimately ethnocentric "morality."

The denial of writing to the Nambikwara, the attempt to foreclose originary difference through a protective and reparatory certainty about the nature of writing, carries with it a certain morality, one in which the Nambikwara are seen as the bearers of an inherent innocence and goodness. As Derrida writes, "[t]he Nambikwara, around whom the 'Writing Lesson' will

unfold its scene, among whom evil will insinuate itself with the intrusion of writing come from without [. . .] the Nambikwara, who do not have writing, are good, we are told” (G 116/170). The interconnectedness of writing and violence assures that if the Nambikwara lack writing, then they also lack violence and must, therefore, be good. The certainty over the nature of writing paints a scene in which the Nambikwara are a good, non-violent, and innocent people, corrupted by the bad and violent influence of Westerners and their writing. Now this scene proves to be logically problematic, as the paradoxical nature of Lévi-Strauss’s analysis undermines the denial of both writing and violence on which this scene rests. However, the morality that structures this scene—the attempt to bestow unspoiled innocence and goodness on the Nambikwara and deny them writing—is instituted “in the name of” avoiding ethnocentrism.

Derrida writes:

One already suspects—and all of Levi-Strauss’s writings would confirm it—that the critique of ethnocentrism, a theme so dear to the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of original and natural goodness, of accusing and humiliating oneself, of exhibiting its being unacceptable in an anti-ethnocentric mirror. (G 114/167)<sup>25</sup>

The making of the Nambikwara into the carriers of goodness, peace, and innocence is an attempt to honor their “otherness,” to avoid the cultural bias of ethnocentrism by making the “other” the bearer of all the positive qualities which are found lacking in one’s own culture or society. Yet this construction of “the other,” for all its good intentions, produces the very kind of ethnocentric violence it was designed to prevent insofar as it constructs the Other only in relation to Western culture. The result of Lévi-Strauss’s characterization of the Nambikwara is that they become

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<sup>25</sup> For a concise account of this logic in Lévi-Strauss as well as Margaret Mead and others see Rey Chow. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993, 27-54.



nothing but “a ‘zero degree’ with reference to which one could outline the structure, the growth, and above all the degradation of our [Lévi-Strauss’s] society and our culture” (G 115/168). The move to see the other as the locus of goodness turns the other into a mirror in which “I” am able to see not the “other” but only another, “better” version of “myself.” The logic of Lévi-Strauss’s reading results in ethnocentric violence being done to the Nambikwara precisely in the name of saving them from this kind of violence. Here then is a contextualized example of the danger inherent in any reparatory moment: the risk of doing exclusionary violence to the very thing that one most wishes to secure beyond the threat of violence. Contextualizing the danger of the reparatory moment with its penchant for exclusionary violence does render this violence somewhat visible by giving it content.

Returning to the Nambikwara children’s disclosure of the proper names, one can see how the characterization of these children as good and innocent constructs the Nambikwara as the hapless victims of Lévi-Strauss’s manipulation. The giving up of the proper names of the adults is not, in any meaningful sense, done by the children. Rather, the disclosure is entirely Lévi-Strauss’s fault and his doing:

The first little girl was trying to tell me her enemy’s name, and when the enemy found out what was going on she decided to tell me the other girl’s name, by way of reprisal. Thenceforward it was easy enough, though not very scrupulous, to egg the children on, one against the other, till in time I knew all their names.

When this was completed and we were all, in a sense, one another’s accomplices,

I soon got them to give me the adults’ names too. (G 114/167)

The Nambikwara children are presented in this story as having no real agency, no real culpability, as they can do nothing truly violent and thus nothing truly wrong. This basic lack of

agency extends to all the Nambikwara, as the construction of them as good and innocent robs them of the ability to be culpable, responsible agents. If one is essentially and self-evidently innocent, nonviolent, illiterate, and good, then one cannot possibly inflict any harm nor be responsible for any harm inflicted. Derrida recognizes a problem in Lévi-Strauss's failure to acknowledge the hitting that goes on among the Nambikwara children as a real kind of violence (G 113/166). Ironically, precisely in the name of protecting the Nambikwara from ethnocentrism, from the violent reduction of their culture in comparison to the West, Lévi-Strauss does a very real ethnocentric violence to the Nambikwara by foreclosing their claim to agency and excluding them from the realm of agency. This foreclosure of agency and the reversal of Lévi-Strauss's attempt to avoid ethnocentrism has everything to do with the "suppression of contradiction and difference," with the attempted foreclosure of the question of writing and the naturalization of the morality that results from it. Lévi-Strauss's implicit certainty and premature foreclosure of the question of writing allows him to present the Nambikwara as a people without Western agency and, thus, as a people reduced and excluded from the humanity of the West. Derrida makes visible here the connection between the structural violence of originary difference and more concrete manifestations of violence, allowing one to see how the logical force of Lévi-Strauss's assumption about the nature of writing plays itself out in the violent denial of agency to the Nambikwara. However as I will show, Lévi-Strauss's work is not the only venue in which Derrida connects the problem of logocentrism to the exclusionary violence of ethnocentrism.

### III: Four Characteristics of Reparatory Violence

Throughout his early work, Derrida consistently associates the problems of logocentrism and ethnocentrism. The first pages of *Of Grammatology* concern “logocentrism: the metaphysics of phonetic writing (for example, of the alphabet) which was fundamentally [. . .] nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world” (G 3/11). Later on Derrida writes, “[i]n an original and non-‘relativist’ sense, logocentrism is an ethnocentric metaphysics” (G 79/117). Logocentrism is ethnocentric because it “is related to the history of the West” (G 79/117). It is indebted to a specific cultural and linguistic conception of the world, which, as specific, inevitably excludes other possible notions and definitions. Yet, this link is more than a mere historical accident, since ethnocentrism shares the same structural logic as logocentrism.

Ethnocentrism (*l’ethnocentrisme*) derives from a modern combining form of the Greek words “*ethnos*,” meaning nation, and “*kent ron*,” “pertaining to the center.”<sup>26</sup> Ethnocentrism describes something that applies to the center of the nation, to that which is at the center or concerns the center. However, “*kent ron*” shares a root with the verb “*kentein*,” meaning “to prick,” “goad,” or “stab.”<sup>27</sup> The center, etymologically, orients or commands that of which it is the center. It is that element which “goads” or motivates the system. However, it commands only through a certain violence, one which punctures, pricks, or stabs the very thing which the center commands. Ethnocentrism thus marks the way in which the founding and structuring of a nation occurs only through the exercise of an organizational violence, one which gives structure and form to the nation but also damages it. Derrida exposes that the element or principle that makes a structure or system possible will always threaten that structure or system. This is the

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<sup>26</sup> OED.

<sup>27</sup> OED.

logic Derrida exposes in his critique of logocentrism, where the attempt to secure the *logos* beyond the corrupting influence of writing fundamentally undermines the purity of the *logos*. This logic also mirrors the paradoxical nature of the “center.”

In his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Social Sciences” Derrida analyzes the logic of the center, arguing that the center is that element within a structure that gives form and stability to the structure:

The function of the center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *play* of the structure. (WD 278/409)

The center organizes the structure by clearly establishing that structure’s boundaries, marking out the form of the structure in opposition to what it is not. In addition, the center defends this organization through an interdiction against play or difference. The center is that part of any structure that establishes and regulates the unique form of the structure, meaning that if the center changes the entire nature of the structure shifts. This is why the center functions to limit the “play” [*jeu*] or propensity for change and difference within any structure. But as the organizing principle of a structure, the center has the peculiar characteristic of not actually being part of the structure.

Writing of the place of the center, Derrida says “it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality” (WD 279/410). The center, as that which makes a structure possible through the organization of its elements, cannot be part of the structure it organizes; in the same way that the founding of a system must always be anterior to and

excluded from the system it founds.<sup>28</sup> Derrida describes this absence of the center as an “escape” [*échappe*], a being “elsewhere” [*ailleurs*] suggesting a lack or hole created by the necessary absence of the center. The center is a puncture wound, a violent absence that disrupts the completeness of any system or structure. In the case of ethnocentrism, this puncture wounds the *ethnos*. It shows the *ethnos* to be always already wounded, to be always already less dominant than it takes itself to be. Yet the tendency of the center to damage that which it structures is not a mere aspect of ethnocentrism but a facet of all structures or systems.

The ethnocentric violence that occurs in Lévi-Strauss account of the Nambikwara, the puncturing violence that occurs in the etymology of ethnocentrism, and the excluding violence recorded in Derrida’s writings on the center are not simply examples of violence. Rather, in all these cases, violence involves an exclusion that threatens the very thing purported to be in need of saving. This logic was already implied in the moral moment of reparations, the “in the name of” which qualifies every appearance. In Lévi-Strauss, it is precisely in the name of avoiding ethnocentrism that an ethnocentric violence is done. It is in the name of protecting the *ethnos* that the violent goading of the *ethnos* occurs. It is in the name of securing structurality that the wounding exemption of the center takes place. These examples gesture toward a first qualification of the exclusionary violence of reparations: that such exclusion always involves the risk of defiling the very thing that the morality of the reparatory moment purports to save.<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that one can reduce all empirical violence to this logic. For example, one being punched in the face may not indicate that one’s assailant really just wanted to protect one’s face

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<sup>28</sup> This logic will return with a vengeance in the discussion of *ipseity*, sovereignty, and the founding of nation-states. See for example, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005; “Declarations of Independence,” *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Edited and Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002; *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Translated by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. London: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> This is what Derrida’s later work will call autoimmunity.

all along. Rather, these examples show that the relationship of structural and empirical violence points necessarily in this direction. The exclusionary move out of the merely structural involves the threat of defiling what is thought to be most in need of saving. However, I would like to pause for a moment as I do not wish to abandon quite yet the question of the *ethnos*.

The structural link between logocentrism and ethnocentrism and Derrida's extensive focus on the problem of ethnocentrism in his early work shows that the question of the *ethnos*, of race, of nationality, and of nationhood are, like those of the center, essentially connected to logocentric metaphysics and the exclusionary violence endemic to it.<sup>30</sup> I take Derrida quite seriously when he says that logocentrism is, fundamentally, ethnocentric, that where logocentrism goes ethnocentric violence is sure to follow. Hence, a second qualification can be added to the moment of reparatory violence, that such violence will involve or be concentrated around questions of the *ethnos*, of race, language, and nationhood. These questions are privileged sites of exclusionary violence and, thus, require investigation. Yet, having argued that questions of the *ethnos* are necessarily enmeshed with the logic of logocentrism, Derrida suggests that such questions are also intrinsically connected to the critique of logocentric metaphysics.

Writing of the effects the paradoxical logic of the center has on the social sciences and having affirmed again the privileged position of *ethnos* within this discussion, Derrida says in *Writing and Difference*:

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<sup>30</sup> Although the term ethnocentrism appears with much less frequency in Derrida's later texts, it does reemerge in his final set of lectures, *Séminaire La Bête et le souverain Volume II (2002-2003)*. Édition établie par Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet et Ginette Michaud. Paris: Galilée, 2010; *Beast and the Sovereign: Volume Two*. Edited by Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. This suggests that the concern for ethnocentrism remained a constant in Derrida's thinking from first to last.

one can assume that ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture—and, in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts—had been *dislocated*, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the cultural reference. (WD 282/414)

Ethnology and questions of the relationship between nations, races, and ethnicities emerge simultaneously with the critique of logocentric metaphysics. Such questions can occur only after there is a recognized plurality of *ethnē*, the point at which the absoluteness of European culture and European Metaphysics has already, in some sense, been challenged and rejected. Ethnology enters the scientific field at the exact moment that the place, superiority, and legitimacy of European culture and its logocentric metaphysics become questionable. Thus, if ethnocentrism is always present in the threat of reparatory violence, then questioning the *ethnos* would be a potential site of resistance to ethnocentrism. To question the *ethnos* is to challenge the centrality of the *ethnos*, and, consequently, to challenge the implied superiority of one *ethnos* over another. This could equally be said of all the human sciences, since such sciences arise only at the point when a certain dislocation and uncertainty concerning the *human* is already on the scene.

One can, thus, add a third qualifications to the exclusionary violence of the reparatory moment: this violence and resistance to this violence will always involve not only questions of the *ethnos* but, perhaps even more fundamentally, questions of the *human* and *the animal*, questions of who or what counts as *human*, and who or what will be included in the *human* community. Derrida understands this questioning of the *human* and *the animal*, as necessarily a questioning of *life*. As he says in *Of Grammatology*, “[w]hat writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life” (G 25/40). The link between the *logos* and *ethnos* assures that what is

at stake in writing's challenge to the presence of speech, at stake in the irreducibility of exclusionary violence, is life. The violence of writing marks a necessary limiting of presence and appearance, a "cutting breath short," which is also a cutting short of life. Reparatory exclusion will always involve questions of *life* because it is itself "a principle of death and of difference in the becoming of being" (G 25/40). I shall return to the question of life momentarily. However, it is also in this discussion of critique and resistance that Derrida puts forward what seems to be the most critical qualification concerning reparatory violence—its unavoidability or inevitability.

Ethnology and the human sciences generally offer sites of resistance to the exclusionary violence of logocentrism. Yet Derrida is quick to remind us that this chance for resistance does not spell a moving beyond logocentric or ethnocentric violence:

Now, ethnology—like any science—comes about within a discourse. And it is primarily a European science employing traditional concepts, however much it may struggle against them. Consequently, whether he wants to or not—and this does not depend on a decision on his part—the ethnologist [and this could equally be said of any and all participates in any of the human sciences] accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them. This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency. (WD 282/414)

The exclusionary violence of the reparatory moment, an exclusion circling around a threat to the very thing purported to need protection, a violence of exclusion from the *ethnos*, the nation, the race, the community of *the human*, and *life* is irreducible. Derrida's thinking emphasizes the unavoidability of violence. It reminds us constantly of our inability to overcome by some force



of action, will, or reason the exclusionary violence of the reparatory moment with all its paradoxical resonances. This unavoidability of violence has everything to do with the way in which every discourse against *violence*, in order to appear as a discourse *against*, must pass by way of the structures of exclusion and determination from which the categories of *violence* and *non-violence* emerge.

This is not to say that there is nothing to be done concerning violence, nothing to be done concerning those forms of violence, e.g. war, famine, abuse, rape (just to name a few), which destroy the lives of so many. Derrida's is not a nihilistic or relativistic position. However, Derrida's is not a position of overcoming *violence* or of getting beyond the possibility of the worst forms of violence and abuse. It is precisely this commitment to acknowledging the unavoidability of *violence*, this commitment to critiquing any discourse that claims on any level to move beyond *violence*, that not only defines the deconstructive project but also puts Derrida at odds with other accounts of violence.

A deconstructive engagement is not one of reversal or overcoming—it does not attempt to get beyond the irreducible possibility of violence and, in particular, to get past the possibility of the *worst* violence: the possibility of absolute evil. Yet it is concerned first and foremost with violence and with certain kinds of violence: the violence of exclusion and its many manifestations in the national, social, and *living* scene. Hence when faced with the question, “why engage in a deconstructive critique,” part of one's answer, even if one can never give a complete answer, would have to be, out of a concern for exclusionary violence. Out of a concern for what is excluded from our calculations, laws, and rules concerning violence, and, perhaps most importantly, out of a concern that one not deny “violence,” that one attempt to keep, however impossibly, the question of violence alive and at the fore of one's thinking.

What would it mean to keep the question of violence at the front of one's thinking? To put the question of exclusion as the first step of one's thought? At minimum would this not involve beginning from a question, advancing in an always questioning manner? This is how Derrida speaks of the possibility of philosophy at the beginning of "Violence and Metaphysics" where, in order to found the community of "those who are still called philosophers," it would be necessary to bend ourselves to the "discipline of the question." It would mean following an injunction: "the question must be maintained. As a question. The liberty of the question (double genitive) must be stated and protected" (WD 79-80/118-119).<sup>31</sup> Philosophy is a maintaining of the question. It keeps open the question, providing a habitat for questioning in the double genitive sense of both asking questions and being put into question.<sup>32</sup> The question of the question, the need and importance of the question will, thus, be a theme throughout Derrida's corpus.<sup>33</sup> In light of the discussion of violence, I believe that we can begin to see that Derrida's focus on the question orients itself around a certain set of questions.

Derrida's work revolves around keeping open certain questions: questions concerning borders, boundaries, and lines of demarcation. In particular, Derrida purposed a questioning of the borders establishing the difference between the *violent* and the *non-violent*, a questioning of the paradoxical, self-undermining, autoimmune logic at work in every marking and maintaining of the *violent*. Derrida is particularly concerned with the power or force at work in the determining or foreclosing of the question of violence. By what means can one claim to know

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<sup>31</sup> The word translated as "protected" here is "*abritée*," which means "to shelter, to provide a habitat for." Derrida is not talking about protecting the question in the sense of keeping it from harm but rather in the sense of giving it a place to be. One must give the question a place or space to exist as a question, that is, as constantly in question.

<sup>32</sup> Of this community of the question Derrida writes, "[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" (WD 80/118).

<sup>33</sup> See in particular, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989 and *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.

and understand the *violent* or *non-violent* well enough to say where the one ends and the other begins? This was clearly illustrated in the example of Lévi-Strauss, where it was precisely by designating the Nambikwara as non-violent, by foreclosing the question of violence and non-violence, that Lévi-Strauss's analysis led to ethnocentric violence—the reductive characterization of the Nambikwara as a people denied *Western* subjectivity. However, Derrida is equally interested in the way in which this marking of the *violent* and *non-violent* is always a marking of *life*. Tied up with the question of *violence* is questions of *life*. One thing that emerges from this combining of the unavoidability of violence with a certain commitment to keeping open the question of violence is that it frames the way in which Derrida is going to be critical of discourses of *non-violence*, insofar as such discourses attempt to overcome violence, to resolve or put to rest the question of violence (double genitive).

Given Derrida's commitment to the unavoidability of violence and his orientation toward questioning, it seems obvious that he would be reticent to embrace any discourse of non-violence. Derrida is critical of such positions, since they imply the foreclosure of the question of violence, the resolving or getting beyond of such questions, the resolving of what *lives* count as morally relevant and, in fact, what counts as *alive* as such. The process of deconstructing, if there is such a thing, is not a process or project of non-violence, and this puts Derrida's thought at odds with a number of thinkers who are explicitly interested in the possibility of non-violence: Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt, and Walter Benjamin. In what follows, I show the ways in which, from a Derridean perspective, all three of these thinkers attempt an ultimately paradoxical move beyond violence, a move in which the figures of undecidability, purity, law, and sovereignty will be of central importance.

## **Chapter Two: Derrida and the Critique of Non-Violence**

Derrida argues from his earliest writings that *violence* is a structural and inevitable part of all modes of signification. It is the unavoidable possibility of corruption and misrepresentation within every system of signification. This violence is, for Derrida, operative at the empirical level, through what he names the “reparatory” attempt to foreclose the openness of originary violence resulting in the violent exclusion of certain elements of those objects being identified. The link between logocentrism and ethnocentrism insures that the play of exclusion is always already at work in every discourse both logically and empirically. This passage from the structural to the empirical is, as I outlined in Chapter One, organized around a series of qualifications that shape but do not absolutely determine the more recognizable forms of physical and psychological violence. These qualifications and the question of the relationship between structural and empirical violence bring us to the issue of non-violence and more particularly to the question of Derrida’s relationship to the discourse of non-violence. His position on non-violence is more complex than that of a simple opposition, for Derrida is neither a pacifist nor a proponent of violence as the desire for harm. This chapter looks at Derrida's position on non-violence, particularly with respect to his resistance to the discourses of non-violence put forward by Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt, and Walter Benjamin.

Both Levinas and Arendt put forward what I call a traditional conception of non-violence, that is, they envision non-violence as the antithesis of violence. On this account, something is non-violent only if it is free from violence, only if it is separated from or purified of all violence. They attempt in different contexts to maintain a notion of non-violence in opposition to violence. Derrida's position begins from a fundamentally different place as he resists this basic conception of non-violence. In particular, he objects to the way in which these articulations of non-violence,

while purporting to do away with violence altogether, in fact operate only by recourse to a violent, reparatory force that is able to name, determine, and circumscribe the violent in opposition to the non-violence. In his discussion of Levinas's early work in "Violence and Metaphysics," we will see Derrida's resistance to the possibility of circumscribing a truly non-violent space or discourse.<sup>34</sup> I argue that Derrida's concern with non-violence is linked particularly to the figure of the subject. I then turn to a reading of Arendt in which I will explore the possibility of separating violence and power. I argue that from a Derridean perspective Arendt's position shows, contra Arendt, the need to think of violence and power together. Lastly, I turn to Derrida's critique of Benjamin in "Force of Law." I argue that Derrida's critique of Benjamin's attempt to separate "divine" and "mythical violence" illustrates the stakes of Derrida's concern for non-violence, as one there sees the link between discourses of non-violence and the possibility of total annihilation. Looking at Derrida's conception of non-violence in contrast to each of these thinkers allows us to see the scope of Derrida's concern with non-violence and the way in which this concern relates to his critique of sovereignty and his general understanding of politics.

## **I: Philosophy at the Threshold of Death: Levinas, Violence, and Subjectivity**

In his most sustained engagement with the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida characterizes Levinas' project as one that "seeks to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the Same and the One (other names for the light of Being and of the phenomenon) as if from

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<sup>34</sup> My reading is focused primarily around Derrida's critique of Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics," although I think that there is a deep affinity between their works, one which I try to touch on a bit more in my discussion of Derrida's debt to Levinas.

oppression itself” (Derrida, WD 83/122-123).<sup>35</sup> The history of Western Metaphysics has, through its nearly unfailing commitment to a discourse of light and Being, violently reduced all thinking and all phenomenality to the orders of sameness and unity. Levinas desires to combat or silence this violence by liberating Metaphysics from the destructive categories of the Same and the One. This liberation becomes possible through the explication of “the ethical relationship—a nonviolent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other [*autrui*]” (WD 83/123). It is through rethinking ethics that Levinas hopes to disengage metaphysics from violence. The first step in this liberation is a critique of the predominance of light within the Western philosophical tradition.

Levinas understands Greek philosophy and the tradition that it spawns as grounded on a privileging of light, sight, and theory.<sup>36</sup> This privileging has led throughout the history of Western thought to a violent reduction of Being to the tyranny of sameness. This reduction occurs because the privileging of light and sight tends to spatialize the category of Being and in particular the relation of the self to others. To think of Being spatially is coextensive with thinking of Being as a set of relations between the self and the world. A spatial conceptualization of Being causes all categories of Being to be understood in relation to the self. This conceptualization creates a mode of understanding in which everything appears as either inside or outside of the self and, thus, as defined by its relation to the self. As Derrida writes,

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<sup>35</sup> In his article, “The trace of Levinas in Derrida” Robert Bernasconi contends that Derrida’s reading of Levinas shifts from what he says in *Writing and Difference* to what he says in “Différance.” While I find Bernasconi’s argument compelling on some level, I do not think that Derrida’s basic critique of Levinas changes. That is to say, Derrida consistently maintains that Levinas, although presenting the Other as radically other, actually violates in various ways the radical otherness that he himself suggests.

<sup>36</sup> In the etymology of theory there is an interesting connection between sight and conceptualization. Theory is derived from the Latin *theōria* and the Greek *θεωρία* meaning “a looking at, a viewing, contemplation, speculation.” Theory is a kind contemplation or speculation that always already involves a certain seeing, that is, a certain reference to light and visibility. This connection between visibility and thought or between discourses of light and discourses of subjectivity is, in some sense, what Levinas’s thinking attempt to overcome. Derrida’s critique of Levinas constantly returns to this connection: the idea that one cannot separate absolutely the operations of light, seeing, and spatialization, from the operations of conceptualization, subjectivity, discourse, and ultimately violence.

“[t]o see and to know, to have and to will, unfold only within the oppressive and luminous identity of the same [ . . . ] Everything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself” (WD 91-92/136). In a philosophy of light, the self, the one who sees, becomes the measure of all Being, aggressively reducing other beings and relations of Being to the category of the “not I.” In such thinking there can be no true otherness, Levinas argues, as one never moves beyond the confines of the self, beyond a measuring of Being as a variation of the self.<sup>37</sup> The force of Levinas’s critique is thus directed at forsaking the spatializing logic of light and the entire series of concepts that would reinforce the Greek privileging of this logic: sight, relationality, sameness, inside/outside, egoity, exteriority, etc. Each of these concepts is, for Levinas, a force of light and violence leading necessarily back to the violent reduction of otherness to some notion of the self.

Derrida’s critique will revolve around precisely the issue of Levinas’s seeming insistence on an absolute break with these Greek concepts. In short, Derrida argues that Levinas cannot maintain a clear separation between the forces of light and “a certain non-light before which all violence is to be quieted and disarmed” (WD 85/126). The heart of Derrida’s critique highlights the ways in which Levinas is unable to eschew the forces of light from his discourse, seeming compelled by the logic of his argument to give place to the enlightenment he desires to overcome. One of the most telling moments in which the forces of light overtake Levinas’s argument occurs in his discussion of exteriority, a term necessarily linked to the violent, spatial binary of inside-outside.

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<sup>37</sup> This concern over the reduction of all otherness to the category of the self parallels in important respects Derrida’s critique of Levi-Strauss, since it is precisely Levi-Strauss’ attempt to honor the otherness of the Nambikwara that, Derrida contends, operates to construct them as merely the innocent and pure *doubles* of Western subjectivity. This logic will also reemerge in my discussion of Adorno.

The reductive spatializing of all relations of the self and others arises, for Levinas, from a privileging of the inside-outside binary. A spatial account of Being must necessarily present all relations and categories of Being as concordances of what is either inside or outside of the self: “I” or “not I”. The violence of this binary arises from its elimination of space for any true diversity. It admits nothing that is not ultimately reducible to some version of the inside or “self” at the expense of the outside or “other.” Levinas wishes to challenge this privileged binary as well as any kind of thinking that proceeds from it. If successful, however, this challenge would have to “expel” the idea of “exteriority,” an idea that is “referred to an enlightened unity of space which neutraliz[es] radical alterity” (WD 112/165). Derrida points out that Levinas clearly associates exteriority with the violence of spatialization, saying in *Totality and Infinity* that “exteriority is a property of space, and brings the subject back to himself through the light which constitutes his entire being” (WD 112/165). Given the enlightened character of exteriority, one would expect Levinas to abandon the concept altogether. However, while condemning the essentially spatial nature of “exteriority,” Levinas refuses to abandon the term, going so far as to attempt its rehabilitation.

One of the mainlines of argumentation in *Totality and Infinity*—which as Derrida points out is subtitled *Essay on Exteriority*—is the claim that exteriority is not, in itself, a necessarily spatial concept: “*Totality and Infinity* [ . . . ] does not only abundantly employ the notion of exteriority. Levinas intends to show that *true* exteriority is not spatial, for space is the Site of the Same” (WD 112/165). There is a need to purify rather than reject outright the notion of exteriority, a desire to get back to exteriority’s “true” meaning, one that refers to a non-spatial relationship of alterity.<sup>38</sup> The need for this recuperation emerges because Levinas is attempting

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<sup>38</sup> Derrida also points out that Levinas continues to use the term “relationship” to mark “the respect which absolves the other” even though such a notion seems by necessity to invoke something spatial (WD 112/165). Hence, it



not only to move beyond the confines of any possible interiority or exteriority, but to articulate some beyond of the spatial, a beyond that must be figured as something essentially exterior to the dichotomy of inside-outside. Levinas's project, therefore, enacts a simultaneous rejection and recuperation of the concept of exteriority, insofar as he attempts to sever the relation between exteriority and spatiality, while still retaining the possibility of something outside or beyond the spatial. Derrida sees this double gesture raising certain difficulties, for "if it [exteriority] has a meaning, if it is not an algebraic X, [it] obstinately beckons towards light and space" (WD 112/165). On Levinas's own terms the exterior should be inherently inseparable from the spatial, inseparable from some interior, and, consequently, inseparable from violence. It is remarkable that Levinas, while desiring to avoid recourse to the inside-outside distinction, precisely retains the language of inside-outside, interior-exterior. Derrida suggests that this strange linguistic retention points not only to the impossibility of recovering exteriority as a purely non-spatial concept but to a more general impossibility.

Having questioned Levinas's paradoxical reluctance to abandon the notion of exteriority, Derrida concludes:

that it is necessary to state the other in the language of the Same; that it is necessary to think *true* exteriority as non-*exteriority*, that is, still by means of the Inside-Outside structure and by spatial metaphor; and that it is necessary still to inhabit the metaphor in ruins, to dress oneself in tradition's shreds and the devil's patches—all this means, perhaps, that there is no philosophical logos which must not *first* let itself be expatriated into the structure Inside-Outside. This

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seems that one could critique Levinas' unwillingness to give up the language of "relationship" on the same grounds that Derrida critiques his reluctance to abandon the language of "exteriority."

deportation from its own site toward the Site, towards spatial locality is the  
*metaphor* congenital to the philosophical logos. (WD 112/165-166)

Levinas' inability to give up the spatial language of exteriority at the very moment he wishes to forsake any reference to the spatial is not simply an inconsistency of the Levinasian system; rather it is a structural necessity of philosophical knowledge itself. There is no possibility of moving, once and for all, beyond the logic of the inside-outside, beyond a structure of borders and boundaries, since in order for knowledge, language, or thought to appear at all, they must have a certain *locality*, a specific place or site that distinguishes each instance from all other knowledge, language, and thought. This is not to suggest, as Levinas in fact shows us, that spatiality is not everywhere challenged and constituted by what is non-spatial, that light is not everywhere eclipsed by darkness, that the other does not everywhere make an undeniable call on us. Yet, it does mean that all thought, language, and discourse are always already "expatriated" into the logic of inside-outside. Thus, resistance to traditional ways of thinking, speaking, and acting can only emerge by precisely engaging in those traditions. Critical thinking is "the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it" (WD 111/164).<sup>39</sup> Hence, the Levinasian project of getting beyond a philosophy of light opens a more general problematic of the "beyond" of thought and language. Because it must always already be spoken in the logic of inside-outside, the articulation of a beyond of thought and language exposes its own impossibility. This impossibility, according to Derrida, worms its way through the entire chain of demarcations Levinas puts into action: the separation of language from light<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For a concise explanation of this logic in Derrida, see Michael Naas *Taking on The Tradition*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003, xvii-xxx.

<sup>40</sup> WD 113/167.

and space,<sup>41</sup> the dividing of the infinitely other from the finite,<sup>42</sup> and, most importantly for our discussion, the separation of discourse from violence.

Let us recall that the intention of Levinas's analysis was to avoid the violence inherent in luminous discourses. Levinas hoped to provide, through ethics and a metaphysics based on a truly ethical relation to the other, a discourse devoid of light and consequently devoid of violence (WD 111/164). In a footnote to "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida further develops this commitment to non-violence. He argues that Levinas marks a distinction between violence and discourse (WD 315/171-172). Peace can be found for Levinas only in the absolute alterity of the Other, an alterity only announceable in discourse. Levinas stakes the possibility of peace, the possibility of a truly non-violent relationship to the Other, on the separation of discourse from violence: on a "discourse which respects separation and rejects the horizon of ontological coherence" (WD 315/171-172). In order for true peace to be articulated, it would be necessary that discourse be at least potentially separable from violence, for if discourse cannot be clearly separated from violence, then how could peace be clearly separated from war? In Derrida's reading of Levinas, the possibility of separating violence from discourse takes a number of forms. Derrida is particularly interested in the purification of language of all rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> However, such a separation appears exceedingly problematic if it is impossible to move beyond the spatial logic of the inside-outside.

Given the difficulty of moving thought, language, and knowledge beyond the inside-outside binary, it follows that discourse suffers from the same difficulty, for it cannot be divorced from spatiality. For a discourse to appear, it must be spatially demarcated from other discourses. There can be no categories of "discourse" in general; no discourse having meaning

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<sup>41</sup> WD 113/167.

<sup>42</sup> WD 114/168.

<sup>43</sup> WD 147/218.

or content can appear without a distinct spatial-temporal location. If every discourse occurs in a distinct space and time, then on Levinas' own terms every discourse must be violent, the spatial being inseparable from violence. As Derrida writes "[i]f, as Levinas says, only discourse [. . .] is righteous, and if, moreover, all discourse essentially retains within it space and the Same—does this not mean that discourse is originally violent?" (WD 116/171).

Thus we have established that the necessary spatial dimension of discourse undermines Levinas's attempt to maintain an absolutely present distinction between discourse and violence. I say present here because, as Derrida points out, it is certainly reasonable to maintain that discourse aims for peace, that peace is the "*telos*" of discourse. In fact, it makes perfect sense to say that the *telos* of discourse is resolution, a process of working towards peace. However, if this is the case, it follows that discourse is not itself essentially non-violent. Instead, it is in the silencing of discourse that peace emerges. Peace would be "a *certain* silence, a certain beyond of speech" insofar as peace would emerge only in the resolution and, consequently, dissolution of discourse: the point where there is no further need to discuss and negotiate. Hence for Derrida, discourse aims for peace only insofar as it aims for its own end, its own death. What does it mean for the traditional discourses of non-violence and for Levinas's in particular that peace is the handmaiden of death? Can one speak of a non-violent death? The question of silence and violence will reemerge in our examination of Arendt. However, for now it is possible to see in this suicidal tendency of discourse, this collusion of the longing for peace with the longing for death, an expression of the inability for discourse to be clearly demarcated from the spatial, and it is this inability that undermines the possibility of a peace beyond the threat of war—the possibility of a true non-violence.

Given the impossibility of absolutely separating any discourse from the colonizing, reductive logic of the spatial, Derrida concludes that there can be no discourse that is not inhabited by violence: “There is war only after the opening of discourse, and war dies out only at the end of discourse” (WD 117/172). To speak, write, and act, to engage in any discursive practice is to engage in violence. “Violence appears with articulation,” because articulation is a locating, a positioning in time and space, and thus an unavoidable fall into the violent logic of inside-outside (WD 147/218).<sup>44</sup> At the same time, articulation is the only possibility of peace, as it is only through continuing to articulate that one delays the death of discourse: the fall into an “absolute peace” that is also an “absolute violence.”<sup>45</sup>

The recognition of the irreducible co-arising of violence and articulation returns us to the logic of originary and reparatory violence explored in Chapter One. Here too it is a question of the way in which the possibility of appearance or articulation requires the introduction of a boundary and a morality that will always already privilege what is inside over what is outside, what appears over what does not, what is present over what is absent. This privileging and the moment of circumscription that makes it possible are irreducible moments of violence, moments in which the resistance to a discourse of light, sight, and theory must succumb to the very violence it seeks to contest. Thus Derrida concludes that Levinas's argument for the possibility of non-violence founders because its claim to establish a site purified of violence requires recourse to a logic that is always already violent. Insofar as the establishment of such a site requires the ability to name, determine, and circumscribe that site, it cannot be separated from a violence of exclusion, a logic of the inside-outside, and a recourse to light. Note that the concept

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<sup>44</sup> One can also articulate this issue in terms of time rather than space in the sense that discourse, speech acts, and moments of inscription are finite. They are never total, complete, or beyond the possibility of alteration. If every discourse must always be open to change or iterability, then every particular discourse contains violence.

<sup>45</sup> WD 146-147/218.

that trips up Levinas's discourse of non-violence is a certain power of identification, a reparatory violence which discourse cannot, despite itself, live without. This power has much in common with what Derrida in other places names sovereignty.

The word *souveraineté* [sovereignty] does not appear a single time in “Violence and Metaphysics,” nor is it a major category of Derrida’s early work. Yet I find it hard to ignore a resonance between the identifying recourse to light in Levinas and Derrida’s articulation of the notion of sovereignty.<sup>46</sup> In *Rogues* Derrida describes sovereignty as “the act” that “must and can, by force, put an end in a single, indivisible stroke to the endless discussion” (R/V 10/29). Sovereignty is the power to end discussion insofar as it is an act that proclaims the identity of a thing—an act that establishes that x is x, silencing the need for further debate. Sovereignty “is a circularity, indeed a sphericity. Sovereignty is round; it is a rounding off” (R/V 13/33). A sovereign act establishes the line that separates what is inside from what is outside by circling back, recoiling around its point of departure, tracing a circle around that point, a circle that makes possible the recognition of that origin as something distinct from what is outside it. This encircling gesture of sovereignty mirrors in principle the circumscribing of reparatory violence discussed in Chapter One, the conditioning of the openness of originary violence that marks the border between inside and outside. It is this marking that allows for the appearance of violence and non-violence. Thus, for Derrida, sovereignty names not just every “decision” on the inside

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<sup>46</sup> Although sovereignty is not a major term in his early work, Derrida does have one essay in *Writing and Difference* devoted to the notion of sovereignty: “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve.” This essay explores Bataille’s notion of sovereignty, a discussion that graphs onto Derrida’s later concern with sovereignty, particularly concerning the distinction between sovereignty and lordship. In addition, although the words “sovereignty” and “sovereign” only appear twelve times in *Of Grammatology*, all of these occurrences are confined to two very short sections at the very end of the book called “The Alphabet and Absolute Representation” and “The Theorem and the Theater” (295-313/416-441). It is in these sections that Derrida marks the passage from “graphics to politics,” showing how questions of representation are necessarily political problems. Hence, the question of sovereignty emerges in Derrida’s early work precisely at the site where the logical structures of writing, representation, and violence intersect with the empirical. This suggests that sovereignty was always for Derrida an important site in the passage from structural to empirical violence.

and outside, every “decision” on what will be allowed to stay and what must go, but also the originary structure that creates the possibility for such a decision as such, the power to decide as such. The relationship between the notion of reparatory violence, the question of non-violence, and the logic of sovereignty is further developed as Levinas everywhere links the reparatory power of identification to the question of subjectivity, particularly through the notion of ipseity.

There is, as indicated earlier, a link in Levinas’s work between subjectivity and the notions of identity, sameness, and light. When Levinas speaks of “exteriority” as “bring[ing] the subject back to himself through the light that constitutes his being” he is identifying what Derrida, following Heidegger and Hyppolite, calls ipseity—the power of the subject to understand itself as self-same.<sup>47</sup> Michael Naas defines Derrida’s notion of ipseity as the “conjunction of self and sovereignty,” that is, the conjunction of the self with the power of identification.<sup>48</sup> Ipseity marks the necessary collusion of the self with the sovereign power of identification, the notion that the category of the self along with its correlate notions of freedom, will, self-identity, etc, requires recourse to the sovereign power to decide what something is. This necessary link between subjectivity and identity is already at work when Levinas equates the *I* with the attempt to bring everything the subject encounters under its sway and is, as Derrida points out, “immediately practiced in the Greek concept of *autos* and the German concept of *selbst*” (WD 109/162). Thus there is, for both Derrida and Levinas, a necessary link between identity and subjectivity, a link between sovereignty and the self. However, while Levinas’s sees a necessary connection between the power of identity and the self, he works to resist this connection.

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<sup>47</sup> In a footnote of *Writing and Difference*, Derrida references Hyppolite’s *Genèse et structure de la phénoménologie de l’esprit* and Heidegger’s *Identity and Difference* “[o]n these decisive themes of identity, ipseity, and equality” (WD, 315/162).

<sup>48</sup> Michael Naas. *Derrida From Now On*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 126.

Derrida says, “[w]ithout using these terms themselves, Levinas often warned us against confusing *identity* and *ipseity*, Same and Ego” (WD 109/162). Levinas seeks the possibility of a subjectivity that would not operate to objectify the Other, a subjectivity not reducible to a logic of identity. This is in fact what the notion of radical alterity attempts to trace, a subjectivity that does not determine the Other but is determined by the Other.<sup>49</sup> Levinas postulates a subject that understands itself as constituted not by self-identity (*ipseity*) but by difference, thus exhibiting a subjectivity that could in principle forsake the identitarian reduction of the other to itself. He dreams of a subject that could in principle, I think, renounce sovereignty. One sees this, for example, in Levinas’s critique of Husserl.

Levinas’s fundamental disagreement with Husserl has to do with the status of the other and whether or not the other appears to the self as an “alter ego.” Levinas argues that, particularly in the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl presents the other as an “alter ego,” that is, as “the ego’s phenomenon” and as “belonging to the ego’s own sphere” (WD 123/180-181). For Husserl, the other is, as a phenomenon, related to the ego, insofar as it appears to the ego as something both like and unlike itself—an “alter ego.” Levinas’s concern with this articulation is that it “neutralize[s] its [the other’s] absolute alterity,” for if the other is simply an ego *like me*, then it is nothing but a reflection *of me* (WD 123/180-181). This concern follows from Levinas’s general worry over the reductive force of the inside-outside, subject-object dichotomy and his basic commitment to the link between subjectivity and the logic of identity. Levinas contends that Husserl’s articulation fails to honor the radical alterity of the other, as it refuses to abandon conceptualizing the other on the model of the ego. Returning to the question of *ipseity* and identity, Levinas seems to desire a clear separation of otherness from *ipseity* and identity on the grounds that the identifying tendencies of subjectivity (the necessary collusion of sovereignty

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<sup>49</sup> This is the distinction, for example, between the “I” and the “me” in Levinas.



and self) will undermine the possibility of honoring the alterity of the other. In contesting Levinas's critique, Derrida addresses himself to this question of what it would mean to honor the otherness of the other.

Derrida contests Levinas's reading of Husserl on the ground that honoring the otherness of the other requires, contra Levinas, articulating the other as in some sense an "ego" or at minimum as related to egoity in general:

For it is impossible to encounter the alter ego (in the very form of encounter described by Levinas), impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general). One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other, if there was not a phenomenon of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such. No one more than Husserl has been sensitive to the singular and irreducible style of this evidence, and to the original non-phenomenalization indicated within it. (WD 123/181)

Derrida reads Husserl's insistence on the egoity of the other as an attempt precisely to honor the radical otherness of the other. What Husserl saw so clearly, for Derrida, is that the possibility of real otherness requires a relationship between the other and an ego, for if the other does not in fact encounter or appear to an ego, it is impossible to respect the otherness of the other. Derrida never stopped commenting on the importance of this Husserlian insight. In both his 1988 interview with Jean Luc Nancy, "Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject" and in *Gift of Death*, Derrida returns to this language of the "alter ego" as a way to express the essential logic

of otherness.<sup>50</sup> Yet, this is also an insight that Derrida takes from Levinas himself, saying for instance in “Adieu,” a piece read at Levinas’s funeral:

Each time I read and reread Emmanuel Levinas, I am overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration, overwhelmed by this necessity, which is not a constraint but a very gentle force that obligates, and obligates us not to bend or curve otherwise the space of thought in its respect for the other, but to yield to this other, heteronomous curvature that relates us to the completely other [. . .] according to the law that thus calls us to yield to the other infinite precedence of the completely other. (WM/A 206-207/23)<sup>51</sup>

It is from Husserl but also from Levinas that Derrida comes to see the vital importance of the relationship between self and other, the way in which the other calls for a limiting of the power of subjectivity, showing the “subject” to be a figure always already shaped and molded by the “force” of otherness. It is precisely this debt, this call “not to bend or curve otherwise” the relationship between the self and other, that compels Derrida to resist that current in Levinas’s thought that attempts to deny the essential relationship between the ego and the other. To suggest that the appearance of the other is not, as Levinas would have it, predicated on its relationship to an ego would be to contort this relationship beyond recognition, foreclosing the very possibility that otherness might appear at all. This remains true even if one contends, as both Derrida and Levinas do, that one is never able to “thematize” the otherness of the other, since even the imperative not to thematize the other requires “a certain appearance of the other as

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<sup>50</sup> *Points . . . Interviews, 1974-1994*. Edited by Elizabeth Weber. Translated by Peggy Kamuf and Others. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995, 263-264; *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 78.

<sup>51</sup> *The Work of Mourning*. Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Hereafter abbreviated WM. *Adieu: A Emmanuel Levinas*. Paris: Galilée, 1997, 11-27. Hereafter abbreviated A.

other for an ego” (WD 123/181). Hence, on Derrida’s account, Levinas’s denial of the egoity of the other cannot be maintained without simultaneously compromising the notion of radical alterity and “depriving himself [Levinas] of the very foundation and possibility of his own language” (WD 125/183).

For Derrida, what Husserl and Levinas show us is that there can be no otherness without identity, without an ego to identify and recognize that otherness. The interplay of ego and other, of subject-object, and of internal-external must remain irreducible within all discourse, but perhaps most particularly in the discourse of radical alterity. If the word *other* is to have any meaning at all, every recognition of the other is necessarily the recognition of the other in relationship to “myself.” It is his commitment to this relationship of the ego and the other that shapes and positions Derrida’s resistance to Levinas’s claim that non-violence is possible. Derrida’s concern is for the way in which Levinas seems unwilling to account for his ability to clearly identify, name, and know the violent and non-violent, for this ability that cannot, by his own account, appear except through violence and subjectivity. Derrida’s reading of Levinas positions in important respects his general resistance towards the discourses of non-violence.

In his reading of Levinas, Derrida articulates more emphatically than almost anywhere else his committed belief that there is no way to think or speak that does not, by necessity, involve a certain violence, as “language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it” (Derrida, WD 117/172). Derrida sees Levinas’s notion of radical alterity and his limiting of the power of the Enlightenment subject as exposing rather than eradicating this necessity for violence. The constitutive role of the wholly Other implies an unimpeachable limit to the discourses of light in their attempt to explain fully and expose the truth of the world through the power of reason. It implies a limit to the power

and control of the Enlightenment subject, a limit to the subject's ability to secure itself, its actions, or its discourses beyond the possibility of violence—beyond the possibilities of distortion or misrepresentation. The constitutive role of the Other shows us that the violence within action, language, and discourse is not something chosen or controlled by the subject but is the condition for acting, speaking, and subjectivity as such.<sup>52</sup> It does this by showing that there is no relationship between the self and the Other that is not always already contaminated by the homogenizing, reparatory power of identification, a light that attempts to reveal *all* and to reveal to *all* that *we* are *all* in some sense the same. This is the truth that Levinas's thinking exposes, then attempts to circumvent by trying to get beyond the discourses of light and the categories of the Enlightenment subject. Furthermore in Derrida's commentary on Levinas one glimpses an early emergence of the problematics of sovereignty, the link between ipseity and identity, that will obsess a number of Derrida's later works. Derrida is here already arguing that it is impossible to separate power from violence, identification from exclusion, and ipseity from domination or terror. He maintains that there is no "place" from which to identify or make such a separation that does not always already draw its "authority" from the very confusion of power and violence, ipseity and terror it would seek to settle. Hence, Derrida's reading of Levinas and his dispute with any traditional notion of non-violence puts him at odds with other projects that claim absolutely to separate violence and power. One such project is that of Hannah Arendt.

## **II: Arendt and the Tortuous Dream of Non-Violent Power**

Hannah Arendt's work is in many respects oriented by questions concerning the relationship of political power to violence. As Keith Breen says, "it is no overstatement to argue that the different currents of her [Hannah Arendt's] thought are united by a sustained attempt to

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<sup>52</sup> WD 117/172.

distinguish violence from power and to resurrect an alternative concept of the ‘political’” (Breen, 344).<sup>53</sup> This concern for distinguishing power from violence emerges from Arendt’s belief that the problem of modern politics rests on the “misunderstanding” that “politics is essentially a matter of ruling and being ruled, of domination” (Breen, 344 and Arendt, V 43). In fact, for her, modernity has been defined by this misunderstanding that takes as its grounding principle the idea that power and violence are two forms of the same thing, thus equating politics with domination. This misunderstanding reduces politics to a play of competing violences in which politics becomes nothing but political realism, a thinly veiled justification for rule by the strongest. A conception of politics that equates legitimate political power with violence is, for Arendt, already on the road to fascism. Hence, a central tenet of her work will be the attempt to conceive a notion of legitimate political power that would not derive its force from a logic of domination, which is to say, a notion of political power that would have nothing to do with violence. It is her effort to think a positive response to political realism, and most notably to Max Weber, that has led a number of authors, including Habermas, to embrace to varying degrees Arendt’s project of redefining political power in opposition to violence.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, this project has garnered a good deal of criticism from those who see Arendt as unable to maintain her rigid and seemingly ontological distinctions, not just between power and violence, but more often between the political and the social, the public and the private.<sup>55</sup> It seems to me

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<sup>53</sup> Keith Breen. “Violence and Power: A critique of Hannah Arendt on the ‘political.’” *Philosophy Social Criticism*, Volume 33, Number 3, (2007), 343-372.

<sup>54</sup> See Jürgen Habermas. “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power,” *Social Research*, Volume 44, Number 1 (1977), 3-24; George Kateb. “Political Action: Its Nature and Advantages,” *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*. Edited by Dana Villa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 130-48; John McGowan. “Must Politics be Violent? Arendt’s Utopian Vision,” *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*. Edited Craig Calhoun and John McGowan, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 263-296.

<sup>55</sup> See Seyla Benhabib. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996; Richard Bernstein. “Rethinking the Social and the Political,” in *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode*. Edited by Richard Bernstein, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 238-259; Keith Breen. “Violence and Power: A critique of Hannah Arendt on the ‘political,’” *Philosophy Social Criticism*, Volume 33, Number 3, (2007), 343-

that the argument between these two camps, although quite diverse, comes down to a basic questioning of Arendt's insistence on marking a strict separation between a series of dialectically related terms: power and violence, public and private, etc.

Given the critique of Levinas outlined above and particularly Derrida's concern with Levinas's attempt to separate what is violent from what is non-violent, one would imagine that Derrida would share with other critics a basic reservation about the general trajectory of Arendt's project, insofar as she attempts to separate violence from power, the violent from the non-violent. This suspicion is supported by the small body of literature that directly addresses Derrida's and Arendt's work. Although none of it looks explicitly at the separation of violence and power, the theme of Derrida's resistance to Arendt's demand for a strict set of oppositions occurs again and again.<sup>56</sup> In addition, Derrida's only article dedicated to Arendt's work, "History of the Lie: Prolegomena," implicitly raises this issue. In this piece Derrida is critical of Arendt's rendering of self-deception on the grounds that it relies on an unthought commitment to a relatively classical notion of the subject as unproblematically self-same, capable of more or less clear knowledge about itself and the world.<sup>57</sup> Close to the end of this piece, Derrida lists four "motifs" that seem to him to "have played an inhibiting, if not prohibiting role in the attempt to take such a history [Arendt's history of the lie] seriously" (WA 67). The first of these motifs is that Arendt (and also Koyre) "proceed as if they knew what 'lying' meant" (WA 67). Here, as in several other places throughout his analysis, Derrida cites the way in which Arendt's thinking

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372; and Sheldon Wolin. "Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political," in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*. Edited by Lewis P. Hitchman and Sandra K. Hitchman. New York: SUNY Press, 1994, 289-306.

<sup>56</sup> See particularly B. Honig "Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic," *The American Political Science Review*, Volume 85, Number 1 (March, 1991), 97-113 and Samir Haddad "Arendt, Derrida, and the Inheritance of Forgiveness," *Philosophy Today*, Volume 51, Number 4, (Winter, 2007), 416-426.

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Derrida. "History of the Lie: Prolegomena," in *Without Alibi*. Edited and Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, 28-70. Hereafter abbreviated WA.

operates on the implicit assumption that one can more or less clearly separate truth from lying, an assumption that resonates with a certain logic of separation and demand for strict opposition. Derrida associates this implicit demand with an “indestructible *optimism*” in Arendt’s work, not in the sense that Arendt was herself an optimist, but in the sense that her account presupposes optimism:

But the conceptual and problematic apparatus here put in place or accredited is ‘optimistic.’ What is at stake is the determination of the political lie but also, above all the truth in general. The truth must always win out and end up being revealed because, as Arendt repeats frequently, in its structure it is assured stability, irreversibility; it indefinitely outlives lies, fictions, and images (WA 68).

Derrida argues that Arendt’s account of self-deception works under the sign of an implicit optimism, the assurance that truth must ultimately win out over lies. This kind of optimism seems implicitly at odds with a certain other tone of Arendt’s work, one that would see human action as ultimately indeterminable, for example. However in addition, Derrida’s claim suggests that Arendt’s drive to separate truth from falsity, and by extension the violent from the non-violent or the public from the private is fundamentally not simply a *political* issue. Thus, the tension between Arendt’s inherent “optimism” and certain other aspects of her thought strikes to the very heart of the question of truth, to the philosophical as well as political questions of violence, thought, and society.

In what follows, I develop and explore this tension between Arendt and Derrida, examining in detail Arendt’s attempt to articulate a notion of political power separable from violence and domination. I show the way in which this project falls prey to the kind of confusion highlighted in Derrida’s critique of Levinas. This exploration of Arendt is important as it helps

to clarify and explore the relationship between Derrida's and Arendt's work, unearthing what might seem to be a fundamental impasse in their modes of thinking. However, I argue that this impasse is somewhat negotiable based on their shared commitment to a strong notion of undecidability in the realm of human action. Additionally, I believe this question of the relationship between violence and power helps to clarify Derrida's resistance to a traditional discourse of non-violence, and begins to develop the character of Derrida's political engagement, which is shaped fundamentally by his resistance to the notion of a non-violent politics. I begin with Arendt's conception of violence and power.

In *On Violence*, Arendt defines violence as “acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences.”<sup>58</sup> For an act to be violent it must be done to achieve a specific end, and it cannot consider the effects it may have on others. The fact that acts of violence exclude negotiation and speech points to the always individualistic character of violence. A violent act is directed by a particular desire or end that is not discussed with the individuals for whom it will have consequences. This antagonism between violence and any possibility of speech, discussion, or deliberation is so fundamental that Arendt will constantly associate violence with silence, saying in *On Revolution* that “violence itself is incapable of speech.”<sup>59</sup> Violence is something done to a group of people who are made silent insofar as they cannot participate in the discussion about what is being done. Hence violent acts are “ruled by the means-end category,” shunning any deliberative or group dynamic. It is the reliance of violence on means-ends thinking that necessitates the relationship of violence and technology.

The means-end thinking that characterizes violent acts requires the assistance of technology. For Arendt: “violence—as distinct from power, force, or strength—always needs

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<sup>58</sup> Hannah Arendt. *On Violence*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970, 64.

<sup>59</sup> Hannah Arendt. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books, 1963, 19.



*implements*” (OV 4). It is through the use of implements that one group or individual foists its ends onto others. Arendt envisions acts of violence as structurally similar to modes of individual aggression, which, with the addition of technological devices, can extend their harm over a large number of people (OV 46). From this perspective, the only difference between fighting with one’s fists and fighting with a gun is that a gun perpetrates harm on a greater number of people, thereby increasing an individual’s ability to further his own self-interested and violent goals. Thus, violent acts are ones that pursue individual ends with the help of technological devices and which do not consider the damage they may cause those not involved in deliberations about such actions. One could, I think, open an intriguing parenthesis here on the linking in Arendt’s work between violence, silence, and technology.

[This link emerges at least in part from her exploration of the association of technology with the development of atomic weapons and emergence of the worry that humanity will, through the use of its technology, ultimately silence itself entirely.<sup>60</sup> This link also raises questions concerning the relationship between technology and speech in Arendt’s work. Her association of technology and silence coupled with her opposition of violence and speech suggest that Arendt has perhaps a fundamentally non-technological notion of speech. One of the possible implications of such a conception would be that speech would appear in Arendt’s work as non-prosthetic. For Arendt, speech would certainly shun the addition or supplementation of technology as a means to enhance or multiply its range or effects, but it seems that it would also be non-prosthetic and non-supplementary in itself. The power of speech can be drawn in no way from technology. This exploration might suggest another way to explore the impasse between Derrida’s and Arendt’s positions, since for Derrida language is fundamentally prosthetic. Furthermore, this returns us to one of the basic concerns of Derrida’s reading of Levinas,

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<sup>60</sup> See for example, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 4ff.

namely, how Levinas establishes the “right” to speak of the other as such. Where does the power to speak come from? Close parenthesis].

Whatever Arendt’s position on technology and speech more generally, it is clear that she sees the notion of violence outlined above as opposed to the notion of power. Power is “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert” (OV 44). An individual never performs a powerful action, nor does such an action further an individual end. Such actions are the result of a group of people working together. In addition, such acts are in no way instrumental, but are rather ends in themselves: “Power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities” (OV 52). An action is powerful when it is the undertaking of a group of people working together for a common goal, and it remains powerful only so long as it considers its potential consequences on the community at large. Under this definition, power is inherently non-violent, for power is never an expression of individual interest and does not require technological prostheses. In fact, Arendt goes so far as to say that “to speak of non-violent power is actually redundant” (OV 56). Hence, Arendt believes that it is possible and necessary to carefully separate power and violence or non-violent doing from violent doing. Failure to make this distinction risks confusing ethical action with unethical action. Arendt’s conception of power as a non-violent force, purified of any element of violence, is dependent upon her assumption that violence and power are absolutely separable. This demand has a direct correlation to Levinas, insofar as Levinas’s hope of non-violence was also grounded on an absolute separation of violence from non-violence. Like Levinas, Arendt will struggle to maintain this absolute separation of power and violence and, consequently, will struggle to articulate a non-violent notion of power.

Having argued for the clear separation of power from violence, Arendt's text begins immediately to backtrack on this claim. She argues that, although separate, violence and power are often confused with one another because they share certain qualities:

Behind the apparent confusion [of violence and power] is a firm conviction in whose light all distinctions would be, at best, of minor importance: the conviction that the most crucial political issue is, and always has been, the question of Who rules Whom? Power, strength, force, authority, violence—these are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man; they are held to be synonyms because they serve the same function. (OV 43)

The confusion between power and violence occurs because traditionally they are seen to have the same function, both being ways of articulating the manner in which humans organize their political and social structures through domination. Arendt returns here to her diagnosis of the basic guiding tenet of modern politics: the confusion of political power with domination. Note, however, that this passage brings up more than one issue of interest to our analysis. Clearly Arendt is questioning the notion that politics ought to be understood in terms of domination or as a ruling of some by others. At the same time, this passage marks the fundamental influence that an assumed certainty about the true nature of the political can have on our understanding of the entire series of political concepts and on the notion of political action. Arendt recognizes the important function that claims to certainty have in our ability to pose not only questions regarding politics, but questions regarding thought and human action more generally. This discussion is important to my analysis insofar as I am keenly interested in the question of Arendt's own certainty concerning the separability of violence and power. The passage above allows us to see glimmerings of the tension in her work between her commitment to strict and

certain oppositions and her explicit worry about such strictness and certainty. I shall return to this point shortly. However, in a more basic sense, this paragraph makes the point that violence and power are often able to serve the same function, a notion that seems already to suggest that their separation might not be as watertight as Arendt contends.

Having just defined violence and power as utterly discrete, she goes on to say that despite their absolute distinctness, they are almost always found together. Rarely, she acknowledges, does an actual distinction between power and violence exist in the “real world:” “[m]oreover, nothing, as we shall see, is more common than the combination of violence and power, nothing less frequent than to find them in their pure and therefore extreme forms” (OV 46-47). Power and violence, although distinct, exist always in close proximity to one another. In fact, “nothing [is] less frequent” than their appearance in isolation. Taking Arendt at her word, one could say that the separation of power and violence borders on the impossible, being the thing least likely to occur in the entire world. Now this might appear as an overzealous literalizing of Arendt’s text, and undeniably there is a certain rhetorical element to her claim. That in this case, Arendt is not being hyperbolic seems corroborated by the fact that she goes on to contend that there has never been a single government, no matter how violent, that did not have a certain element of power:

No government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed.

Even the totalitarian ruler, whose chief instrument of rule is torture, needs a power basis—the secret police and its net of informers. Only the development of robot soldiers, which, as previously mentioned, would eliminate the human factor completely and, conceivably, permit one man with a push button to destroy

whomever he pleased, could change this fundamental ascendancy of power over violence. (OV 50)

This passage suggests that the individualist character of violence, of which Arendt makes so much, has in fact never been a historical or political reality, since political violence has always been the action of a group of people. Arendt goes so far as to say that for violence to not be the work of a group of people would require the utter mechanization of society. We, thus, return to the fundamental link between violence and technology and the fundamental separation in Arendt's thinking of technology from power and speech. However, the more basic point, the notion that historically violence has always had an element of power, seems to challenge Arendt's claim that violence and power ought to be understood as distinct phenomena, and falls more in line with her assertion that it is almost impossible to find power and violence in isolation from each other. Her claim that power has a fundamental "ascendancy" or control over violence suggests that the coexistence of power and violence, more than a mere historical contingency, is in fact a necessary collusion. This notion is reinforced by Arendt's assertion that power opens the possibility of violence.

As stated above, violent action is conducted according to means-end logic. However, Arendt adds to this that power is the condition for the possibility of means-end reasoning: "power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category" (OV 51). Power, the basic ability of people to join together in action, makes possible actions directed by means-end logic, since violence, actions directed against the many by the "one," requires that there be a "many," a group, or community to be directed against. This is why Arendt states that "[p]ower is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not" (OV 51). Power is the condition for the

possibility of political organization and, therefore, must logically precede the anti-political exercise of violence. Following from Arendt's claims concerning means-end logic is the notion that the relationship of power to violence is not simply one of opposition but is in fact one of constitutive priority—power precedes violence as its condition of political possibility. This relationship of constitutive priority makes it much more difficult to see how Arendt can maintain her fundamental separation of power and violence.

The constitutive priority Arendt cedes to power in relation to means-end logic entails that power must have an equally constitutive relation to violence. There can be no exercise of violence without the existence of means-end logic and, therefore, without the existence of power. Arendt paints a picture here in which power would be silently at work in every act of violence, opening the space in which violence is able to appear. Power gives birth to the political communities against which and in whose name violent action will be directed. Without these communities, without the space opened up by the binding force of power, violence could neither be exercised nor, in fact, exist at all. Hence every act of violence, on Arendt's account, is made possible by a more fundamental act of power and, consequently, every powerful act would seem to harbor the irreducible possibility of violence. Two things seem immediately troubling about the claim that power is the condition for the possibility of violence. First, this claim appears at odds with what Arendt says in *On Revolution*, where it is precisely a kind of "violence" that founds the political. Second, this account is inscribed in a dialectical logic, one that Arendt specifically contests. Let us begin with the second of these problems.

Having defined power and violence as opposites, Arendt continues by arguing against understanding this opposition as dialectic:

Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it. Hegel's and Marx's great trust in the dialectical "power of negation," by virtue of which opposites do not destroy but smoothly develop into each other because contradictions promote and do not paralyze development, rests on a much older philosophical prejudice: that evil is no more than a privative *modus* of the good, that good can come out of evil; that, in short, evil is but a temporary manifestation of a still-hidden good. Such time-honored opinions have become dangerous. They are shared by many who have never heard of Hegel or Marx, for the simple reason that they dispel legitimate fear. By this, I do not mean to equate violence with evil; I only wish to stress that violence cannot be derived from its opposite, which is power. (OV 56)

Despite the oppositional character of power's relationship to violence, power in no way admits of any violence nor can a violent act lead to or assist in the formation of any true form of power. This claim emerges naturally from the notion that power is the action of a group of people working to achieve a collective end and, thus, is not something that can emerge from an action directed at the achievement of some individual goal; powerful and violent doings simply begin from different and incommensurate locations.<sup>61</sup> Inherent in this line of thinking is a total rejection of any dialectical relationship between power and violence. In fact, Arendt presents dialectics as not only logically incorrect, in the sense that something cannot come from its opposite, but as immanently dangerous, as it promotes the idea that one could engage in immoral

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<sup>61</sup> This beginning from incommensurate locations is the most compelling reason, I think, for seeing Arendt's distinction between power and violence as in a significant sense ontological or material. It is not that power is simply logically, conceptually, or regulatively opposed to violence; rather it is necessarily materially or ontologically different. Power and violence emerge from and occupy spatially different locations.

acts as a means to achieve moral results.<sup>62</sup> This concern about dialectics is compelling in some sense, as there is clearly something dangerous about a logic that contends one has a right to do immoral things for the sake of the moral. However, Arendt's wholesale rejection of any dialectical reciprocity between power and violence appears at odds with the way in which she articulates their relationship.

Arendt's anti-dialectical position, that no pair of opposites can ever morph into one another, that good, for example, cannot give rise to evil, sits uneasily with the claim that violence emerges from the space opened by power. The idea that power and violence are related in a totally non-dialectical way, which is to say, they exist utterly independently of one another, is difficult to square with the notion that power has constitutive "ascendancy" over violence. For power to have command (dare one say dominion) over violence means that it must have some relation and some contact with violence, and where there is contact there is always the possibility of contagion, mixing, and confusion. This issue of the relation of power and violence, of the possibility of their interaction, mixing, and co-contagion is developed further in *On Revolution*, where, in opposition to what she says in *On Violence*, it will be a moment of "violence" that founds the possibility of political power.

In the introduction to *On Revolution*, Arendt writes about the revolutionary founding of a new political organization:

That such a beginning must be intimately connected with violence seems vouched for by the legendary beginning of our history as both biblical and classical antiquity report it: Cain slew Abel, and Romulus slew Remus; violence was the beginning and, by the same token, no beginning could be made without using

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<sup>62</sup> It is interesting that Arendt's claim that dialectics operates on an old philosophical dogma, that evil is just a privative form of the good, seems itself to be based on a similarly old philosophical notion, namely that something cannot give what it does not have.



violence, without violating [. . .] whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men may have achieved has its origin in crime. (OR 19-20)

What one sees in Western religious and secular founding myths is the truth that beginnings are necessarily violent, since they can only emerge anterior to the establishment of the law that governs them. Arendt is claiming that the beginnings of law and politics will always be extra-legal and extra-political. Because they are prior to the law, such beginnings are necessarily outside the law and as such are violations of the law. Arendt's argument here is very close in kind to ones Derrida will himself make in several places, insofar as both thinkers argue that political foundations are impossible to ground in the legitimacy of law.<sup>63</sup> Yet this notion of political beginnings as necessarily violent seems at odds with what Arendt says in *On Violence*, where it is power that not only grounds the possibility of violence but also commands violence.

One will recall that Arendt's *On Violence* argues that power has a fundamental "ascendancy" over violence, an ascendancy that emerges from power's constitutive relationship to the means-ends logic. Yet, in *On Revolution* it is precisely violence that founds the political. This leaves us with a seeming paradox, namely, if power must come before violence, then how could violence found the political? One way to at least begin answering this question is to note that Arendt discusses violence in *On Revolution* in multiple ways, the first having to do with war and revolution. She frames her remarks concerning the relationship between violence and the political by outlining the commonalities of war and revolution. In particular, she is interested in the way in which they share the "common denominator" of violence. It is this shared

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<sup>63</sup> For example, Derrida writes in "On Forgiveness", "All Nation-States are born and found themselves in violence. I believe that truth to be irrecusable. Without even exhibiting atrocious spectacles on this subject, it suffices to underline a law of structure: the moment of foundation, the instituting moment, is anterior to the law or legitimacy which it founds. It is thus *outside the law*, and violent by that very fact" (CF 57).

participation in violence that explains why wars so often lead to revolutions and vice versa (OR 18). In addition, the necessary relationship between wars, revolutions, and violence “set[s] them apart from all other political phenomena” since “[i]n so far as violence plays a predominant role in wars and revolutions, both occur outside the political realm, strictly speaking” (OR 18, 19). Arendt marks a fundamental distinction here between violence and political power, similar to the one she articulates in *On Violence*, insofar as she maintains that violence is necessarily outside the political realm and outside the domain of power. However, Arendt seems to understand the existence of violence outside of politics and power in two different but related senses.

On the one hand, she articulates violence as that which founds the possibility of political power. This violence is outside the political realm, as it comes before the possibility of politics. Arendt associates this kind of “being outside” the political with the pre-political moment of “the state of nature,” although she is quick to say that this “state of nature” is not a historical fact, but rather a “theoretically purified paraphrase” standing in for the unannounceable moment of founding violence. On the other hand, Arendt characterizes violence as that which can fracture an already existing political sphere. This violence is outside the political realm insofar as it is an “anti-political” violence (OR 19). Such violence would come after the establishment of political power and would, thus, find its ground in the possibility opened for it by power. It is this second sense of violence that concerns Arendt primarily in *On Violence*. This distinction may explain why in that text she writes of power as having a fundamental ascendancy over violence. This articulation of violence as being outside the political in two senses makes it possible to see *On Violence* as an extension of Arendt's investigation into the phenomenon of violence in *On Revolution*, rather than as in conflict with it. One can read *On Violence* as an exploration of anti-political violence rather than of pre-political violence, a reading that lessens the tension created

by what first appears as a blatant contradiction where violence both founds and does not found the political. Nevertheless, this reading fails to address the tension created in both essays by Arendt's articulation of violence and power as utterly separate yet constantly enmeshed phenomena.

There is a tension in both *On Violence* and *On Revolution* concerning the relationship between power and violence. Now one can read *On Revolution* as an attempt to grapple with this tension, insofar as that text presents “revolution” as having a kind of mediational relationship between power and violence. In *On Revolution*, Arendt characterizes revolution as being both political and violent. On the one hand, it is clear that revolution is understood as fundamentally violent, since it is excluded “strictly speaking” from the realm of political power. On the other hand, Arendt writes that “we must not fail to note that the mere fact that revolutions and wars are not even conceivable outside the domain of violence is enough to set them apart from *all other political phenomena*” (OR 18. My italics). The notion that revolution is different from “other political phenomena” suggests that, despite its differences, revolution is a political event. Revolution does, after all, have some political efficacy. Revolution seems to operate on a middle ground between violence and power—participating in both realms simultaneously. Arendt furthers this notion of revolution’s mediating character by suggesting that revolutions are never exclusively violent.

Having established that the role violence plays in revolution separates revolution from other political events, Arendt says “not even wars, let alone revolutions, are ever completely determined by violence. Where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only the laws [. . .] but everything and everyone must fall silent” (OR 18). Revolution is not in its totality violent for, if that were the case, it would be

impossible even to speak of revolution. True violence, for Arendt, is unspeakable and always silent, insofar as it is by definition a doing beyond negotiation or dialogue. It is only at the point that dialogue ends, the point at which one stops speaking and negotiating with others that the possibility of violence emerges. It is precisely the inability of violence to negotiate, its inability to speak, that places it outside politics, a realm that is, for Arendt, defined by speech, constant negotiation, and, let us remember, a constant assessment of consequences. Thus, Arendt sees revolution as fundamentally constituted by violence but at the same time functioning in the political realm. It is a phenomenon that traffics both in power and violence, and therefore calls into question to her strict separation of power and violence.

While seeing revolution as a concept that mediates between power and violence, Arendt remains committed even in this discussion to the fundamental separation of power and violence, the separation of the political from that which is outside politics. Thus, despite her statements to the contrary, revolution remains, "strictly speaking," outside the political realm. Nonetheless her use of the qualifier, "strictly speaking," does little to remove the impression that her work, taken as a whole, cannot maintain her separation of power and violence. Whether it comes in the form of her contention in *On Violence* that not a single government, no matter how violent, has ever existed without some element of power or in the similar claim in *On Revolution* that revolutions are never completely violent, Arendt paints a picture of violence and power as being far less distinct than she constantly maintains. However, the most striking evidence against the possibility of this separation comes from Arendt's conception of human action.

Inherent in the attempt to separate actions of power from actions of violence is the notion that it is possible to assure that an act will not lead to violence, possible to know that, properly executed and under the proper circumstances, a particular action is certain to be powerful and not

violent. This certainty is derived from the defining characteristics of powerful action: its emergence from a group, its commitment to a communal good, its lack of any need for technological prostheses and its ability to count its consequences. Thus, Arendt's distinction between power and violence depends on the notion that a group of people can know with certainty the character of their actions and that they can through deliberation (non-prosthetic speech) clearly account for the consequences of their actions. It is satisfaction of these four conditions that establishes true political power for Arendt and makes possible the appearance of a non-violent politics. Now I believe one could show through careful analysis that all four of these conditions of power prove impossible to maintain in absolute opposition to their violent counterparts. Take, for instance, the concept of non-prosthetic speech: it is, as I suggested earlier, difficult to maintain convincingly the notion that language and speech are non-prosthetic, for speech, the very condition of powerful action, always appears in some sense as a supplement. The present discussion does not allow for thorough analysis of all four of these conditions of power. I will thus look in detail only at the last one, the notion that a group could calculate the consequences of its actions. This requirement seems particularly odd in Arendt's analysis given that her own conception of action denies the possibility of certainty concerning the outcome of human actions.

All forms of human action contain within them a radical uncertainty concerning their outcomes. This is why means-ends logic appears so dangerous to Arendt: "[s]ince the ends of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals" (OV 4). Action is something that can never have an absolutely determined outcome, since there is no means by which unequivocally to predict the effects one's

doing may have. This is why action is so closely linked with natality and ultimately with freedom, for Arendt.<sup>64</sup> It is the fact that action is fundamentally undetermined that allows humans to be creatures who can start new causal chains: who can be “beginners.”<sup>65</sup> However, if all human action contains an irreducible uncertainty, there seems to be no way to assure that seemingly powerful actions will not, in some way or another, lead to violence or will not have been violent all along.

The notion that every human action involves a radical uncertainty concerning its outcome threatens, in advance, the possibility of securing action beyond the potential of violence. There should be no way, on Arendt’s own terms, to guarantee the non-violent character of action, as the ends of action are beyond absolute prediction. This lack of certainty involves both the ends and the ground of action. One can neither guarantee a non-violent outcome nor can one guarantee that an action was not, despite appearances, violent from the beginning. One of the lessons of Arendt’s conception of action (and in fact its very resource) is that there is no form of action and no set of conditions that could exempt any act from having a radically uncertain and therefore potentially violent result. Therefore, in order to honor Arendt’s insights into the character of human action, one seems compelled to contest her insistence on the possibility of a clearly non-violent power.

Arendt’s insistence on the indeterminacy of action, freedom, and politics makes it difficult to read her as a thinker of surety, calculation, stability, and ultimately non-violence. In fact, Arendt appears to be much more a thinker of fragility and instability, which is why she is so committed to the “promise” and the “miracle” as essential categories of free political action. The Arendtian notion of action along with its correlates, freedom and politics, stands necessarily

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<sup>64</sup> See *The Human Condition* 9.

<sup>65</sup> See “On Freedom.” *Beyond Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993, 167.

opposed to any notion of absolute determination or calculability and, thus, opposed to the project of establishing a form of power or action beyond the possibility of violence. Hence, we see an uneasiness in Arendt's thinking similar to that Derrida marked in Levinas. Both these thinkers, although committed in different ways to some notion of radical uncertainty concerning the possibility that subjects can control and master their world, remain insistent on the possibility of non-violence. This uncertainty, this concern for the way in which the discourses of certainty house a potential for violence, is the knot that connects Arendt's, Levinas's, and Derrida's work, for Derrida shares a worry over the fundamental limits of the possibilities of determination and completeness.

There is an affinity between Derrida's notion of undecidability and Levinas's and Arendt's notions of radical alterity and action respectively. For Derrida, undecidability marks a fundamental lack of completeness: "Above all, no completeness is possible for undecidability" (LI 116).<sup>66</sup> This incompleteness can be understood schematically, Derrida says, in three ways. First, it marks "that which resists binarity or even triplicity" (LI 116). It marks the element within a system that cannot be simply reduced to either the inside or the outside of that system, the element that is not clearly inside, outside, or somewhere else in relationship to the system of which it nevertheless appears to be a part.<sup>67</sup> Second, undecidability marks the determining of the limits of the calculable: "the *limits* of decidability, of calculability or formalizable completeness" (LI 116). It marks that which, because it is neither clearly inside nor outside of a system, traverses and illuminates the borders that demarcate the inside from the outside. Third, it marks the paradox that opens the field of decision as such: "in accordance with what is only ostensibly a paradox, *this particular* undecidable opens the field of decision or of decidability" (LI 116).

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<sup>66</sup> *Limited INC*. Edited by Samuel Weber. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988. Hereafter abbreviated LI.

<sup>67</sup> In this sense, "undecidability" is another term or iteration of the notion of the "center" discussed earlier.

Undecidability names the paradoxical logic by which every particular decision, in order to be a decision, must contain the possibility that it could be otherwise, undermining its completeness and pointing to a more originary undecidability, which makes all moments of decision and indecision possible. If every decision or act can be otherwise, then every decision or action remains in a profound sense always already undecidable. This basic conception of undecidability seems to function not unlike Levinas's notion of radical alterity or Arendt's notion of action. What all three of these figurations of undecidability have in common is that they are opposed to the possibilities of totalization and completeness, which is another way of saying that they challenge any notion of "decision" or "action" that could overcome the inherent indetermination, incompleteness, and passivity which makes them possible. This is not to suggest that "undecidability" is somehow an example of Levinasian alterity or Arendtian action, for these terms relate to a complex of concepts which not only require in each case a careful reading but also emerge from different fields of inquiry. Yet, there is some affinity between these notions, and this affinity allows one to see Derrida's relationship to Levinas and Arendt less as a critique, and more as a following out of a current in their thinking, a current that stands opposed to the possibility of any notion of purely non-violent action, decision, or space.

Staying faithful to a certain insistence in the letter and logic of Levinas's and Arendt's texts leads one, from a Derridean perspective, to become unfaithful to them, unfaithful to their insistence on non-violence. The current of undecidability that passes through the thinking of Levinas and Arendt must give one pause before their desire to establish some space, logic, or power devoid of the possibility of violence. This desire, in both their cases, is belied by their inability to maintain the sets of oppositions that ground their claims to non-violence. In Levinas this is the opposition between discourse and violence and more fundamentally between discourse



and spatiality. In Arendt it is the opposition between power and violence and, ultimately, the separation of action from any form of indetermination. My analysis shows that the desire for non-violence rests on a gesture of separation, the power of thought or will to separate the violent from the non-violent. Derrida, via Levinas, associated this power of separation, this force of identification with the notion of subjectivity, suggesting that a traditional discourse of non-violence falters precisely insofar as it requires recourse to a logic of identity, a logic always laced with exclusion and violence. In Arendt and Levinas, this logic emerges both at the level of human action and at the level of their own attempts to separate violence from power. Hence, one can, I think, draw a number of general conclusions concerning Derrida's relationship to the discourse of non-violence:

First, Derrida's is suspicious of discourses of non-violence insofar as they appear as discourses of purity—as attempts to separate, indemnify, and secure a force, discourse, or space beyond the possibility of violence. Non-violence is, on Derrida's account, a dream of the safe and sound, a dream of something that would be beyond the possibility of contamination or corruption. In Levinas, it is the dream of an exteriority that would create no outside, and in Arendt, the dream of political action that would not go astray. Derrida's critique of the discourse of non-violence thus links to his general critique of purity and properness, a critique that was always central to his work.<sup>68</sup>

Second, given that the discourses of non-violence are discourses of purity, and given Derrida's relentless critique of the categories, conception, and application of purity and properness, it follows that Derrida's thinking would be an equally relentless critique of the

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<sup>68</sup> The question of the proper emerges across Derrida's *oeuvre*. See particularly *Of Grammatology*; "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*. Edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo. Translated by Samuel Weber. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 1-78; *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume One*. Edited by Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

categories, concept, and uses of non-violence. The logic that falls under the name “deconstruction,” because of its reliance on the unavailability of difference and iterability, will never be a discourse of purity: “There is no idealization without (identificatory) iterability: but for the same reason, for reasons of (altering) iterability, there is no idealization that keeps itself pure, safe from all contamination” (LI 119). Hence, the logic that falls under the name deconstruction will never be a discourse of non-violence. In fact, the critique of non-violence would seem to be at the very heart of the deconstructive endeavor.

Third, Derrida’s questioning and critique of any discourse of non-violence is connected to his critique of sovereignty, insofar as Derrida’s concern with non-violence revolves around the power of identification and its link to subjectivity. For Derrida, sovereignty, whether in the form of the *I*, the nation-state, or God is nothing but the ability to make definitive separations, the ability to “put an end in a single, indivisible stroke to the endless discussion” (R 10/?). The separating of the violent from the non-violent is a sovereign decision and, as we shall see, perhaps the sovereign decision *par excellence*. Hence, the critique of non-violence links to one of the central concerns of Derrida’s later “political” writings. There is much more to be said about this link between questions of violence and questions of sovereignty. However, before pursuing those questions, I would like to dwell on Derrida’s critique of non-violence and its relationship to politics generally.

One of the clear implications of what has been said above is that Derrida’s thinking does not advocate for non-violence, at least not as traditionally understood, nor is his thinking pacifist in the sense of an attempt to abstain totally from violence. However, he is certainly not a proponent of violence, an apologist for the various forms of cruel, bloody, and bellicose speech and action that so often define, in particular, the discourses of politics. Derrida's position of

neither completely condoning nor completely condemning violence emerges necessarily from the conclusions drawn above. It is not a matter of being wholly for or against violence for Derrida; rather his critique of non-violence, of purity, and of sovereignty proceeds by relentlessly examining the processes, concepts, and logics that attempt to decide what is violent and what is non-violent. The question of non-violence in Derrida's work thus finds a place in the longstanding debate over his politics, the question of whether what is collected under the name "deconstruction" or "Jacques Derrida" is political or apolitical, ethical or unconcerned with ethics.

### **III: Benjamin's Violences Divine and Otherwise**

There is a huge body of literature stretching back to at least the mid-nineteen eighties on the political possibilities of Derrida's thinking. This work can be loosely divided up into one of two camps: that which sees political possibilities in Derrida's work and that which does not.<sup>69</sup> Thinkers critical of the "politics of deconstruction" have historically tended to dismiss Derrida as "reactionary,"<sup>70</sup> "merely aesthetic"<sup>71</sup> or, in more extreme cases, as "dangerously ecstatic or vitalist proto-totalitarian."<sup>72</sup> In opposition to this critical reaction, throughout the nineteen-eighties and nineties a large number of works appeared that were aimed at exposing the political significance of deconstruction. All of these works argue in a myriad of ways that the deconstructive engagement offers a means to expose and challenge traditional assumptions, hierarchies, and power relations. A sampling of these writings includes the work of Geoffrey

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<sup>69</sup> For a brief account of the early development of these two readings see Richard Beardworth's *Derrida & the Political*. New York: Routledge, 1996, 1-4.

<sup>70</sup> See for example, L. Ferry and A. Renaut *Heidegger et les modernes*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1988 and Jürgen Habermas *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

<sup>71</sup> Jürgen Habermas *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988.

<sup>72</sup> John P. McCormick. "Derrida on Law; Or, Poststructuralism Gets Serious" *Political Theory*, Volume 29, Number 3, (June 2001), 395-423.

Bennington, Drucila Cornell, Catherine Malabou, and Richard Beardsworth.<sup>73</sup> These works and others like them, along with a series of explicitly political texts published by Derrida himself, have dramatically shifted the current terrain of the discussion regarding Derrida's "politics." Despite the fact that the days of preaching the apolitical nature of deconstruction have in many respects passed, the question of Derrida's politics persists, reemerging in recent essays and books devoted to his work.<sup>74</sup> It is not my purpose to rehash the arguments past or present for the political possibilities of Derrida's thought. It seems to me that it is not difficult to decide whether Derrida's work and deconstruction have political import. It is fairly obvious that they do. However, the question of why this debate continues is interesting. Why is this question so difficult to let go or move on from? The lesson of this nearly thirty year debate is perhaps the reaffirmation of the long standing notion that, for Derrida, "there can be no end to politics" (Bennington, L 3). It might seem difficult to talk of explicating a politics without end, particularly if one takes this "without end" in the double sense of being always on going and having no determinable *telos*. Certainly the "politics of deconstruction" are not as simple as applying a rule or set of laws and then calling it a day. However, neither is it an aimless wondering about politics. This question of the orientation of Derrida's "politics" relates back to an issue raised only implicitly in my discussion of non-violence, namely, what is the problem with a desire for non-violence? What is the importance of proceeding in the way that Derrida does, and what does deconstruction contribute to the body of thought regarding the problems of

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<sup>73</sup> Geoffrey Bennington. *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction*, New York: Verso Press, 1994. Hereafter abbreviated L; Drucilla Cornell. *The Philosophy of The Limit*. London: Routledge, 1992; Catherine Malabou, "Economy of Violence, Violence of Economy (Derrida and Marx)" in *Jacques Derrida: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers Volume Three*. Edited by Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor, London: Routledge, 2002; Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida & The Political*. London: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>74</sup> See for example, *Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the Other of Philosophy*. Edited by Martin McQuillan, London: Pluto Press, 2007; Michael Thomas *The Reception of Derrida: Translation and Transformation*. New York: Palgrave, 2006; and *Derrida: Negotiating the Legacy*. Edited by Fagan, Madeleine et al, ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 97-111.

violence and also politics? One way to approach this question would be to ask what is at stake in the attempt to differentiate the violent from the non-violent. What does Derrida see as being at risk in the act of making claims, as Levinas and Arendt do, to have the power to clearly differentiate, identify, and name violence? The advantage of posing the question in this way is that it respects the fact that, for Derrida, the question of *politics* is by no means unrelated to the question of violence more generally. The slippage between political violence and all other forms of violence is a result of the fact that the demarcation of violence is already a question of political violence. There is no political violence that does not draw its resources from more structural forms of violence. In what follows, I explore this question of the stakes of Derrida's concern for discourses of non-violence through a reading of his critique of Walter Benjamin in "Force of Law."

As suggested at the end of the last section, Derrida's concern with discourses of non-violence has everything to do with the connections between such discourses and a logic of purity. Implicit in these discourses is a desire to eliminate the violent elements of a system, space, or discourse, a desire to cleanse the system of violence. Derrida's concern with projects of purity and cleansing is that they appear necessarily connected to the possibility of absolute violence—to the possibility of total annihilation. Thus, I argue that what Derrida finds so worrisome about the discourses of non-violence is not that they risk violence (all discourses do that) but that they risk committing and justifying the worst kind of violence. To see the link between non-violence, purity, and annihilation reveals the high stakes of determination of violence. In fact, Derrida's awareness of this link explains in significant ways the orientation of his own work. Hence in the final part of this chapter, I suggest that questions of violence comprise a fundamental category of Derrida's thought. I argue that exploring Derrida's work with an eye to violence allows one

clarify the character of Derrida's project, to recast the logic of sovereignty as a question about identifying the violent and the non-violent, and to ultimately expose the inherently ecological orientation of "deconstruction." I begin with Derrida's critique of Benjamin.

"Force of Law: The 'Mythical Foundations of Authority'" is a reading of Benjamin's "*Zur Kritik Der Gewalt*." I introduce Benjamin's essay by its German title in order both to highlight and to delay, if only for a moment, an impossible decision around which Derrida's entire reading of Benjamin revolves. This decision concerns the translation of *Gewalt*, a word that, like the *pharmakon* of "Plato's Pharmacy," houses in a single articulation two antithetical meanings. One may render *Gewalt* as either illegitimate "violence" or legitimate "force." Derrida's reading demonstrates the way in which the polysemic character of *Gewalt* complicates Benjamin's attempt to articulate a notion of non-violent force, what Benjamin comes to call "divine violence" (*göttliche Gewalt*). Derrida's reading of Benjamin and particularly the notion of "divine violence" illustrates more emphatically than in Levinas or Arendt how the discourse of non-violence, as a discourse of purity, comes to resemble and, thus, justify a discourse of absolute annihilation. Derrida writes at the end of his essay:

What I find, in conclusion, the most redoubtable, indeed perhaps almost unbearable in this text, even beyond the affinities it maintains with the worst [. . .] is a temptation that it would leave open, and leave open notably to the survivors or victims of the 'final solution,' to its past, present, or potential victims. Which temptation? The temptation to think the holocaust as an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence insofar as this divine violence would be at the same time annihilating, expiatory and bloodless, says Benjamin, a divine violence

that would destroy current law, here I re-cite Benjamin, ‘through a bloodless process that strikes and causes to expiate.’ (FoL 298/145)<sup>75</sup>

Derrida’s concern with Benjamin’s critique of violence is that, in its attempt to articulate a notion of non-violent, bloodless, expiating force, it reveals that such a force is essentially indistinguishable from absolute annihilation, indistinguishable from what could be gathered under the name of the “final solution.” There is, for Derrida, a fundamental and concerning collusion in Benjamin’s text between “divine violence” and absolute violence, which emerges unavoidably from the polysemic character of *Gewalt*. Derrida’s reading shows that the articulation of a certifiably non-violent force ultimately is indistinguishable from an absolutely violent force, a force of total annihilation. However, in order to see this one must first follow Benjamin’s argument for non-violent force, which begins with the relation between violence and law.

Violence appears, according to Benjamin, only in relationship to some form of moral law: “For a cause, however effective, becomes violent [*Gewalt*], in the precise sense of the word, only when it bears on moral issues” (R/GSII 277/179).<sup>76</sup> The notion of *Gewalt*, whether understood as legitimate force or illegitimate violence, requires reference to some system of law. For something to appear justified or unjustified presupposes a set of rules against which its justification may be considered. In the same way that *Gewalt* presupposes law, the existence of

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<sup>75</sup> Jacques Derrida. “Force of Law: The ‘Mythical Foundations of Authority’” in *Acts of Religion*. Translated by Mary Quaintance. Edited by Gil Anidjar. New York: Routledge, 2002, 228-298; *Force de loi: Le «Foulement mystique de l’autorité»*. Paris: Galilée, 1994. Hereafter abbreviated FoL.

<sup>76</sup> Walter Benjamin. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books, 1978. Hereafter abbreviated R. Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften Vol. II*. Herausgegeben von Rolf Tiedemann und Herman Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp Verlag, 1977. Hereafter abbreviated GSII.

law is dependent upon *Gewalt*, for there can be no law without the possibility of a force capable of either founding a new law or enforcing an existing law (in the face of its violation).<sup>77</sup>

Of particular interest to Derrida is the way in which Benjamin's "philosophy of law" organizes itself around a series of distinctions concerning the relationship of violence to law. The first of these distinctions is the one described above between "founding violence, the one that institutes and posits law (*die rechtsetzende Gewalt*) and the violence that preserves, the one that maintains, confirms, insures the permanence and enforceability of law (*die rechtserhaltende Gewalt*)" (FoL 264/79). For Benjamin, "[a]ll violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving" (R/GSII 287/190).<sup>78</sup> Through a discussion of state violence, Benjamin concludes that these are the two basic relations of violence to law. This discussion also illuminates his further distinction between "mythic violence" and "divine violence."

The division between founding and preserving violence emerges from Benjamin's discussion of the way in which states attempt to "monopolize" violence.<sup>79</sup> Benjamin argues that modern European states preserve themselves by attempting to convert all claims to founding violence into the language of preserving violence or by converting "natural ends" into "legal ends."<sup>80</sup> States protect their legitimacy—the legitimacy of their own founding violence—by trying to remove the right of other entities to engage in alternative acts of founding. By limiting the ability of people to challenge the law except through the avenues of the legal system (legal ends), the state eliminates peoples' recourse to a founding violence (natural ends) that could

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<sup>77</sup> This is also what is at stake in Benjamin's notion of natural and legal ends. Natural ends having to do with the establishing of law and legal ends with the preserving of law.

<sup>78</sup> All violence for Benjamin is a question of means rather than ends.

<sup>79</sup> R/GSII 280-281/183.

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin posits that "[s]ince the acknowledgement of legal violence [*Rechtsgewalten*] is most tangibly evident in a deliberate submission to its ends, a hypothetical distinction between kinds of violence [*Gewalten*] must be based on the presence or absence of a general historical acknowledgement of its ends. Ends that lack such acknowledgement may be called natural ends, the other legal ends" (R/GSII 280/182). Natural ends are equated here with founding violence, insofar as such ends, because they are foundings, lack any account of their justification, while legal ends can always appeal to the history of the law or the constitution to justify them.



challenge and, consequently, endanger the state. Thus, states attempt to replace a violence that disrupts their legitimacy with a violence that necessarily reinforces it. This logic interests Benjamin because it shows that violence cannot only found and preserve law but can also destroy it. This operation makes the question of “strikes” interesting to him as well because strikes are instances in which the state sanctions the recourse of entities other than itself to violence.<sup>81</sup> That states attempt to control the use of founding violence indicates that “violence when not in the hands of the law, threatens it [law] not by the ends that it may pursue but by its very existence outside the law” (R/GSII 281/183). What is intolerable to the state about allowing individuals recourse to founding violence is that such violence challenges the very existence of the law as such. The possibility of establishing a totally new law does more than contest a particular law, it also shows that law itself is contestable. This inherent contestability of law allows the notion of violence to be further distinguished into “mythic violence” (*mythische Gewalt*) and “divine violence” (*göttliche Gewalt*).

The fact that violence can found as well as destroy law means that the division between founding and preserving violence is inadequate to encompass the character of violence in its entirety. In order to address this inadequacy, Benjamin introduces what Derrida calls the second of his key distinctions, namely that between a “mythic violence” that founds the law and a “divine violence” that destroys all law.<sup>82</sup> Writing about these two forms of violence, Benjamin says:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence [*mythischen Gewalt*] is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects.

If mythical violence [*mythische Gewalt*] is lawmaking, divine violence is law-

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<sup>81</sup> R/GSII 281-282/183-185.

<sup>82</sup> FoL 265/80.

destroying [*so die göttliche rechtsvernichtend*]; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (R/GSII 297/199)

Mythic violence concerns questions of law and the protection of law through the threat of guilt and bloody punishment. In this sense, mythic violence combines, in a single expression, founding and preserving violence. Benjamin presents this notion of violence in opposition to divine violence, which is never concerned with order or rules, and which simply strikes without warning, justification, or blood. It is important to note here that Benjamin does not say, as in the English translation, that “divine violence is law-destroying” but rather that “the divine is law-destroying [*so die göttliche rechtsvernichtend*].” This difference of translation is important as it saves Benjamin from saying something that on its face would appear radically contradictory, namely that divine violence is non-violent. However, the bloodlessness of this divinity will be one of the important factors that leads Benjamin ultimately to speak of the force of divinity as non-violent.

Divinity’s force appears bloodless, for Benjamin, in two senses. On the one hand, the “bloodiness” of violence, its brutality, is understood through its link to the law, to some notion of morality, and thus to the evaluative matrix of the mythical. It is only within the framework of the mythical that one can attempt to calculate the cost of violence. With divine force all such calculation is impossible, because divine force denies all law, all rules, and consequently all means of calculation. For that reason, Benjamin asserts that the only human option in relation to

divine force is acceptance.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, divine violence appears bloodless insofar as it is connected to atonement, expiation, and purity:

But in annihilating it [divine violence] also expiates [*entsühnend*], and a deep connection between the lack of bloodshed and the expiating [*entsühnenden*] character of this violence [*Gewalt*] is unmistakable. The dissolution of legal violence [*Rechtsgewalt*] stems [. . .] from the guilt of mere natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to retribution that “expiates” [*shünt*] the guilt of mere life—and doubtless also purifies [*entsühnt*] the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law. (R/GSII 297/199)

The *Gewalt* of the divine is “bloodless” insofar as it is inseparable from a purifying expiation of “life” from law. Divine violence purifies that upon which it is wrought by annihilating not just some living being or set of beings but the law that circumscribes life as such. Hence, it purifies “life” by freeing it from the constraints of law, meaning, and value, allowing it simply to be.

This is why Benjamin says, “divine violence [is] pure power [*reine Gewalt*] over all life for the sake of the living” (R/GSII 297/200).<sup>84</sup> It is in connection with this notion of divine violence, as a pure and expiating power beyond the possibility of any law, that Benjamin puts forward the possibility of a non-violent labor strike.

Just before his discussion of mythical and divine violence Benjamin outlines, following Sorel, two forms of worker strikes: “political strikes” and “proletarian strikes.”<sup>85</sup> Benjamin argues that these two forms of strike have necessary but opposing relationships to violence. On the one hand, a general political strike attempts to win certain concessions from those in power. This form of strike uses violence as a means to gain some determinable ends. Yet, this form of

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<sup>83</sup> R/GSII 297/200.

<sup>84</sup> This is one of the few instances where the English translator renders *Gewalt* as “power” rather than “violence.”

<sup>85</sup> R/GSII 291/193.

strike does nothing, on Benjamin's account, to contest the structure of power, as it attempts not to change those structures, but to force the wielders of power to act in a certain way. On the other hand, the proletarian strike has no set goals and desires no set of concessions; it is an "anarchistic" (*anarchistisch*) endeavor that in its goalless upheaval challenges the power structure as such. Benjamin writes of these two forms of strike:

[w]hile the first form of interruption of work is violent [*Gewalt*] since it causes only an external modification of labor conditions, the second as a pure means, is non-violent [*gewaltlos*]. For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state. (R/GSII 291-292/194)

Political and proletarian strikes are opposed in their relationship to violence insofar as the political strike is violent and the proletarian strike is not, for the appearance of violence requires some reference to law and the proletarian strike is precisely the contestation of all laws. For Benjamin, in order for an action to be classified as non-violent, it must be unconstrained by law, outside the grips of any law.

Given that the appearance of violence has this necessary relationship to law, it is clear that there is a basic affinity between the notion of divine violence and the proletarian strike insofar as each functions fundamentally to contest the law and as such are necessarily non-violent, *gewaltlos*. As Benjamin says concerning the proletarian strike, "[a]gainst this deep, moral, and genuinely revolutionary conception, no objection can stand that seeks, on grounds of its possibly catastrophic consequences, to brand such a general strike as violent [*Gewalt*]" (R/GSII 292/194). At the end of this essay he writes concerning the notion of divine violence:

But if the existence of violence [*Gewalt*] outside the law, as pure immediate violence [*reine unmittelbare*], is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence [*revolutionäre Gewalt*], the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence [*reiner Gewalt*] by man, is possible, and by what means.

(R/GSII 300/202-203)

Parenthetically anticipating the coming discussion of Derrida's writings on Benjamin, it is possible to point to these passages as raising the questions that shape Derrida's critique of Benjamin's notion of non-violent power: For what does it mean to speak of an act that in the face of the most "catastrophic" of consequences resists the label of violence, an act whose effects are inconsequential to its character? And why in order to show Benjamin's argument for non-violent force is one led to quote a passage so thoroughly saturated with the word violence? In short, why is it necessary to name violence in order to erase it? We shall return to these questions momentarily. For the moment, it is salient to see that Benjamin postulates in the proletarian strike the possibility for an act of "*revolutionäre Gewalt*," in which human beings might wield a pure force (*reiner Gewalt*) akin to divine force. In challenging all structures of law, this human act would transcend the categorization of "violence," which is understood in relation to a system of law and therefore is seen as morally questionable and thus potentially reprehensible. This correlation between the proletarian strike and the concept of divine *force* would provide human access to a force that is at least in principle non-violent, non-coercive, and purifying.

Benjamin's further discussion, however, muddies the clarity of his argument, for he says that "only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men" (R/GSII

300/203). Mortals are unable to see with certainty the purifying nature of divine violence, presumably because they are unable to free their understanding from the mythical confines of law. This would seem to deny them access to intentional use of divine force. Yet Benjamin suggests that such a *Gewalt* still offers some kind of alternative to the always tyrannical violence of the mythical. Allow me now to quote the above passage in its entirety:

But if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and by what means. Less possible and also less urgent for humankind, however, is to decide when unalloyed violence has been realized in particular cases. For only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men. Once again all the eternal forms are open to pure divine violence, which myth bastardized with law. It may manifest itself in a true war exactly as in the divine judgment of the multitudes on a criminal. But all mythical, lawmaking violence, which we may call executive, is pernicious. Pernicious, too, is the law-preserving, administrative violence that serves it. (R/GSII 300/203)

Mythical violence, whatever else it may be, is deeply and inexorably tyrannical, for it reduces the openness of divine force and limits the possibilities of “life.” Hence, while mortals certainly have a less than transparent relationship to divine violence, Benjamin seems to see such purifying, non-violent force as giving humans some “possibility” and some “means” to resist the pernicious and tyrannical violence of the mythical. Thus, like Levinas and Arendt, Benjamin puts forward a discourse of non-violence, the possibility of a “force” purified of all “violence,”

and, like Levinas and Arendt, this possibility of non-violent force rests on the strictness and purity of an entire set of more or less absolute distinctions: between divine force and mythical violence, non-violent force and violent force, proletarian strike and political strike, purity and impurity. Not surprisingly, Derrida's critique of Benjamin proceeds by showing that Benjamin's discourse cannot maintain the purity of the distinction on which it rests.

The second half of Derrida's "Force of Law" essay is an analysis of the way in which all the distinctions Benjamin puts into play regarding violence by his own logic merge necessarily into their opposites. In relation to the separation of founding and preserving violence Derrida writes:

What I am saying here is anything but conservative or antirevolutionary. For beyond Benjamin's explicit purpose, I shall propose the interpretation according to which the very violence of the foundation or *positing of law* (*Rechtsetzende Gewalt*) must envelop the violence of the *preservation of law* (*Rechtserhaltende Gewalt*) and cannot break with it. (FoL 272/93-94)

The distinction between founding and preserving violence cannot be strictly maintained because every founding necessarily inscribes the possibility of its own preservation, for "[p]ositing is already iterability, a call for self-preserving repetition" (FoL 272/94). Every founding of the law must constantly be reaffirmed in order to be preserved. In fact preservation is nothing other than a reaffirmation of the force and legitimacy of founding. Thus Derrida points to a fundamental moment of identity in the differential relationship of founding and preserving violence, insofar as every preserving violence, although necessarily different from the founding it preserves, appears as a repetition of that founding. The force of this logic of iterability is that it compromises the supposed purity of these two forms of violence.

If every founding violence appears as simultaneously a preserving violence and every preserving violence appears as simultaneously a founding violence, then these concepts are not completely distinct, pure, or self-contained: “What threatens the rigor of the distinction between these two types of violence [. . .] is, at bottom, the paradox of iterability. Iterability makes it so that the origin must repeat itself originarily, must alter itself to count *as origin*, that is to say, to preserve itself” (FoL 277-278/104). Iterability undermines a conception of the relationship of founding and preserving violence that allows these concepts to be maintained in pure opposition to one another. The iterability of the “origin” shows that the “origin” is never purely present, never purely original, since to be an “origin” requires the possibility of repetition. Derrida will go on to dissect in a similar manner the entire set of distinctions put into play by Benjamin's argument, showing in each case that the purity of the distinction cannot be maintained in the face of iterability. But the most definitive instance of this iterability, the most compelling argument against the possibility of clearly differentiating violent and non-violent force in Benjamin's work, emerges from Derrida's reading of the polysemic character of *Gewalt*.

As I briefly outlined at the beginning of this section, what interests Derrida about *Gewalt* is the word itself. It is a single term that houses the impossibility of clearly distinguishing legitimate force from violence, for it signifies “both violence and legitimate power, justified authority” (FoL 234/18). The polysemic character of *Gewalt* makes questionable and undecidable any absolute separation of force from violence, since one could always translate *Gewalt* as either. There is no means to determine absolutely what kind of “force” one is invoking by using the term *Gewalt*, and, therefore, no way to assure that one's invocation of force is not an invocation of violence. This indeterminacy, this limit of control, was evident in my attempt to rearticulate Benjamin's assertion of the possibility of pure, divine, non-violent



force, an effort that led me to cite a passage which, in English translation, contains the word “violence” no less than four times. Furthermore, I justified my claims that, for Benjamin, *göttliche Gewalt* is fundamentally non-violent, with a passage that throughout its English translation uses the term “divine violence.” I appeared, thus, to be espousing a blatant contradiction, saying that divine violence is non-violent, that *göttliche Gewalt ist gewaltlos*, that A is not A. The apparent oddity in this can be explained in some degree by recognizing that it rests on the decision of the English translator, Edmund Jephcott, who renders almost every occurrence of “*Gewalt*” or “*Gewalten*” as the English “violence.”<sup>86</sup>

In pursuing the present argument, there is something to be gained from delving a bit further into this translation conundrum. Jephcott’s decision makes good sense, as it saves both himself and the reader from the problem of deciding when the author meant “violence” and when he meant “force.” It has the added advantage of appeasing academics, like myself, who appreciate terminological consistency. However, the price paid for the decision is that it renders as nonsense the push in Benjamin’s argument to articulate divine *Gewalt* as non-violent, since it leads to the paradoxical claim that “divine violence” is no “violence” at all. There are of course alternatives to Jephcott’s translation. For example, in order to capture the tendency toward non-violence in Benjamin’s text one could retranslate the above passage to read “[b]ut if the existence of *force* outside the law, as pure immediate *force*, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary *force*, the highest manifestation of *pure force* by man, is possible, and by what means.” This translation would certainly be justifiable insofar as Benjamin clearly understands

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<sup>86</sup> The few exceptions to this fall into two categories. First, there are five instances in which Jephcott translates *Gewalt* or *Gewalten* as “force” (278/180, 282/184, 284/187, 288/190, 300/202), these are generally moments in which “force” is being used in a general sense. Second, there are seven instances in which Jephcott opts to translate *Gewalt* or *Gewalten* as “power” (287/189-190 twice, 289/192, 295/198, 297/200, 298/200 twice). In almost all of these cases “power” is used in moments when Benjamin is pairing *Gewalt* with the divine. Hence, Jephcott seems in these instances to be following out the current in Benjamin’s text that would attempt to disassociate the divine from “violence.”

divine *Gewalt* as non-violent, but it introduces a new problem. For one could hardly generalize this rendering because the word “force” does not capture the “violence” of *mythical Gewalt* or *founding Gewalt*. A third possibility would be simply to leave every instance of “*Gewalt*” or “*Gewalten*” in German, and provide a footnote that explains the ambiguity, allowing readers to decide for themselves what Benjamin is up to. However, this suggestion does nothing to address the irresolvable ambiguity of *Gewalt*, opting instead simply to pass it on for others to struggle with. In fact, and this will be Derrida’s contention, there is no translation of *Gewalt* that does not run into this ambiguity, and hence no way to be faithful to Benjamin’s intentions or text without simultaneously being unfaithful.

The beauty and elegance of Derrida’s reading of Benjamin is that it shows that even if one grants all of Benjamin’s historical and empirical analysis, grants that states, strikes, the police, myth, and divinity function in the way that he suggests (and there are many reasons to think this), it still seems impossible to affirm the existence of a purely non-violent or revolutionary force, a force that would be beyond violence. The argument is betrayed by the very language that attempts to outline, demarcate, and define such a “force.” The very language in which one would attempt to be faithful to Benjamin’s intentions carries within it undecidability and unfaithfulness, always already carries the possibility of a force become violence. Any attempt to resolve the undecidability through an interpretive decision concerning the meaning of *Gewalt* performs an unjustifiable reduction of the polyvalent and contradictory meaning of the word. This is why Derrida describes his reading of Benjamin as tracing “*a kind of self-destruction, if not a suicide of the text, that lets no other legacy appear than the violence of its signature—as divine signature*” (FoL 262/75). Derrida thus reveals Benjamin’s position as self-destructive, justifying its separation of force and violence only through the interpretive

violence of a “*divine signature*,” a singular and God-like decision on the part of Walter Benjamin to determine the character of *Gewalt*, circumscribing it as either “violence” or “authorized force.” Here we find ourselves returning to a familiar logic exposed in the critique of Levinas and Arendt, namely, that to posit some form of non-violence requires a power of identification, a reparatory and sovereign decision inseparable from violent exclusion. Such discourses of non-violence remain always already violent because, like all discourses of purity, they require an unacknowledged appeal to this sovereign power of identification, this “divine signature” that can clarify only by distorting, compel by violating, and purify by annihilating. This connection to sovereignty is also what makes discourses of non-violence inseparable from the risk of absolute annihilation.

The attempt to move beyond violence, to establish a space of non-violence, and, thus, to overcome the inherent potential for violence lodged at the heart of all language, thought, and action is, from a Derridean perspective, problematic not simply because it proves to be logically impossible, but rather because such an approach appears to justify the worst violence. As Derrida writes at the end of his reading of Benjamin:

When one thinks of gas chambers and the cremation ovens, this allusion to an extermination that would be expiatory because bloodless must cause one to shudder. One is terrified at the idea of an interpretation that would make of the holocaust an expiation and an indecipherable signature of the just and violent anger of God. (FoL 298/145)

One does not “shudder” at Benjamin’s argument because of the contradictory notion of “divine violence” nor the difficulty of imagining the human uses for such “power” as Benjamin describes. It is, rather, the way in which this kind of “force” existing outside of any law, striking

without justification, and destroying utterly those it strikes, appears as a mirror image of absolute violence, a justification for what has come to be collected under the name “the final solution.” For Derrida, an absolutely non-violent “force,” a “force” beyond all qualification by law, is, because of its extra-legal position, indistinguishable from an absolute violence. Hence, Derrida resists the discourses of non-violence not because they contradict themselves but because, by denying their inherent contradiction, such discourses come to resemble and, more terrifyingly, to justify the possibility of the worst violence.<sup>87</sup>

In Derrida’s critiques of Levinas, Arendt, and Benjamin we see his resistance to articulating a discourse of non-violence, whether understood as non-violent power or the creation of a space of non-violence. This resistance emerges from his worry over the way in which such discourses attempt to foreclose the question of violence through an unjustifiable, sovereign decision concerning the character of the violent and the non-violent. This *decision* operates to create the possibility of more or greater violence, insofar as such sovereign decisions attempt to cover over their inherent illegitimacy, purporting to settle, once for all, the question of violence and, thus, purporting to silence any debate concerning the violent and non-violent. It is this silencing of debate, the putting an end to questioning through a sovereign decision over what will and will not count as *violence*, that Derrida constantly associates with the worst. Hence, this link between Derrida’s concern over violence and its connection to the ability to decide the violent and the non-violent situates his general concerns over violence and sovereignty and allows us to begin to see the contours of a deconstructive ecology.

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<sup>87</sup> See also *A Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy*.

#### **IV: Defining Sovereignty in Light of Violence and Life**

Exploring Derrida's work from the perspective of violence reveals a number of things: First, it clarifies Derrida's relationship to the question of non-violence by showing his resistance to such discourses and to any discourse that attempts to deny its own moment of force. Hence, the question of violence positions Derrida's project away from pacifism, understood as the attempt to act without violence. For Derrida, thinking, critique, and certainly political action is not a non-violent activity.

Second, it shows that fundamental to the deconstructive process is a concern for violence, and in particular a concern for the border separating the violent and the non-violent. Whether in the form of the reparatory violence outlined in *Of Grammatology*, the concern over discourses of non-violence, or the question of sovereignty one sees that deconstruction is always already a critique of the separating of the violent from the non-violent. This concern motivates Derrida's critique of the discourses of non-violence, showing that the way in which one takes on the question of violence, the way one orients one's thinking in relationship to violence, radically affects the nature of one's critical project.

In a thinking like that of Levinas, Arendt, or Benjamin, a thinking that attempts to overcome violence through the clear differentiation of the violent from non-violent, there is a focus on establishing and maintaining a non-violent discourse or set of practices by removing or excluding the violent elements. These projects attempt in different ways to develop their critical agenda out of the separation of violence from non-violence, an attempt that establishes their agenda as one of purity, security, surveillance, etc. These kinds of project are worrisome insofar as they operate on the basis of an unthought moment of sovereignty, an authoritarian settling of the question of what will count as violence. This settling increases the potential for violence,

according to Derrida, insofar as the attempt to identify and exclude violence requires an uncritical recourse to the sovereign power of exclusion. Hence, the question of violence is what separates Derrida's critical project from those of Levinas, Arendt, Benjamin, and a certain tradition of Western philosophy. Whatever else Derrida's project may be, it is, first and foremost, an attempt to explore, contest, and acknowledge the irreducibility of violence in all practices of thought. It takes violence as a fundamental category of thought and action. Hence the question of violence is at the very heart of the deconstructive project, marking out both the orientation and stakes of that project.

Third, the question of violence clarifies the nature and logic of sovereignty. As outlined earlier, sovereignty is one of the names Derrida gives to the power of identity, the ability to mark the character of a thing by circumscribing its borders: it is a "*kurios* or *kuros*, having the power to decide, to be decisive, to prevail, to have reason over or win out over [*avoir raison de*] and to give the force of law, *kuroō*" (R/V 13/33). Sovereignty is a decisional force that distinguishes the inside in opposition to the outside, and as such it is a decision on what will count as violent and non-violent. In fact, sovereignty is in many ways nothing but a deciding of the boundary separating the violent and the non-violent, insofar as the separating of any inside from its outside is always simultaneously the establishing of a morality, a defending of the inside against the outside, a violent marking of inclusion and exclusion. Hence, the question of violence clarifies the logic of sovereignty, showing it to be a necessary but also concrete circumscribing, marking, and deciding on the violent.

Fourth, the question of violence also helps one clarify Derrida's questioning of sovereignty. If the danger of sovereignty is that it attempts to foreclose the question of violence, to proclaim once and for all what will count as violence and what will count as force, then the

contestation of sovereignty will take the form of fighting against sovereign violence with sovereign violence. This is because any claim to contest sovereignty, any claim that would hope to challenge the sovereign demarcation, can only enact such a contestation through recourse to its own moment of sovereignty. This was already implied in the structural necessity of originary and reparatory violence, in the logic of autoimmunity, and in the emphasis on questioning. It is only through violently keeping open the question of violence, of keeping open the possibility of debate and discussion, that one can hope to avoid the passage from violence into absolute night. Yet such a keeping open requires a sovereign operation, a divine signature that would demand that the question of violence remain unresolved. Hence, Derrida suggests that although one cannot do away with violence, one can resist violence only by violently exposing the questionableness of every sovereign decision. There is a need when the logic of sovereignty to renounce always already its appeal to unconditionality, to renounce the uncontestability of any claim. The character of such a renunciation is particularly well articulated in a passage from *The Gift of Death*.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida takes up again the paradoxical logic of decision making, the paradox that is inscribed in every sovereign act and in the very logic of sovereignty. Speaking of the way in which duty, responsibility, and decision are “condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia” (Derrida, GD 68).<sup>88</sup> Derrida writes:

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. I offer a gift of death, I betray, I don't need to raise my knife over my son on Mount Moriah for that. Day and night, at

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<sup>88</sup> *The Gift of Death*. Translated by David Wills. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably. (GD 68)

Entering into a relationship with the other, which is the very condition of subjectivity and ipseity, requires recourse to a logic of decision. This “decision” will involve demarcating who or what one will honor, who or what one will give moral consideration, and, conversely, who or what will be excluded from such consideration. This is why response and decision must “sacrifice ethics,” the logic of decision, which is to say the logic of sovereignty, demands that one can give consideration to some only by excluding others. Every decision is at every instance as much a securing as a sacrificing, a pre-ontological decision on the border that will separate the considered from the unconsidered. The pre-ontological nature of this “decision” means that it cannot be reduced to a mere logic of choice, a thing that might be avoided; one sacrifices whether one wants to or not. One must always already betray, being unfaithful in the very act of fidelity, this is the truth of originary and reparatory violence explored in Chapter One, it is the truth with which Derrida critiques the discourses of non-violence and the logic of sovereignty in Chapter Two. Let me be clear, the *decisionary* structure that Derrida is exploring is passive as much as active—one sacrifices whether one *decides* to or not. However, this hardly means that one is left with nothing to do nor does it mean that all decisions are equally violent. In fact, every cut is unique in the profoundest sense.

In the case of Abraham, the decision to honor God’s command at the expense of his duty to Isaac is certainly an example of the irreducibility of violence—the fact that the honoring of one relation demands the betrayal of another. Likewise, Abraham’s ultimate recourse to the sacrificing of a ram in the place of his son is also a moment of this logic of betrayal. However,



these moments hardly have the same material consequences. Disobeying God, killing your son, and killing a ram are not materially equivalent, even if they are all moments of decision, moments of exclusion, and moments of violence. It makes a difference what Abraham does and how one understands his actions, even if his action cannot be secured beyond violence. For Derrida, it always matters what one does, on every Mount Moriah, and this is precisely because every decision is a decision on violence, a decision of who or what can be sacrificed. Hence, the question of violence helps to situate the stakes of Derrida's project by showing the way in which Derrida is challenging us to take seriously the question of violence.

What if, as Derrida's thinking suggests, one thinks of every decision, every marking of a border, as an unavoidable decision on violence, a deciding on who or what can and must be excluded, degraded, and sacrificed? One of the results of this thinking would be a reinterpretation of Derrida's project and the concept of sovereignty. Such thinking reveals deconstruction to be oriented by the concern for violence. The act of "deconstructing" is an exploring and resisting of violence; it is an attempt to resist the worst violence with lesser violence. Derrida's thinking is from this perspective a relentless critique of the logic of sovereignty, a critique of the power to demarcate borders and boundaries, a critique of the force that establishes what will be included and excluded. Reading Derrida's work with an eye to violence shows that the sovereign cut is more than a logical demarcating of borders and more than a mere logic of decision. It is always already a marking of who or what deserves to be included, a marking of who or what's death counts as an ethical issue, a marking of which *life* can be sacrificed with impunity. This reading orients us necessarily towards the question of *life* and to other forms or possible forms of *life*—toward other *animals* and toward the otherness of *animality* as such. Hence, the advantages of reading the deconstructive project in this way is that

it allows one to bring out a more concrete side of the deconstructive project, a more concrete way to understand what it might mean to attempt a renunciation of the unconditionality of sovereignty. However, it also points to the way in which Derrida's thinking, insofar as it was always already concerned with violence, is also always already concerned with a certain ecology—a "revolution in our dwelling together with these living things we can animals" (F 180/54).

To take up Derrida's call concerning decision and violence returns us to the question of "the animal" and to the possibility of a critical or deconstructive ecology outlined in the introduction to this project. There is a way in which the deconstructive project calls always already for a challenging of the categories of "the animal" as a means to challenge the category of "the human." However, this call also returns us to the relationship between the thinking of Derrida and Adorno, the relationship between negative dialectics and the deconstructive project. In the following two chapters, I explore this connection by tracing the centrality of violence to Adorno's work, highlighting the numerous similarities between his and Derrida's project.

### Chapter Three: Violence in the Work of T.W. Adorno

I hope it is not too late. Maybe I should have said this earlier. Derrida hears voices. These voices speak to him in his “dreams.” They ask him to confess. “Announce,” they demand, “clearly and publicly, once and for all, the affinity between your work and Adorno’s.” They insist, “[a]ren’t you an heir of the Frankfurt school?” (F 176/43). On the urgings of these voices, Derrida concedes, in his Adorno prize address, his inheritance from the Frankfurt School: “I can and must say ‘yes’ to my debt to Adorno” (F 176/43). However, Derrida gives only schematic indications of the character and scope of this debt. To understand Derrida’s inheritance from Adorno, perhaps it is wise to listen to some of the voices that one can imagine urging Derrida to own this debt. Perhaps one is the voice of Lyotard, saying “No” to this inheritance (from Adorno to Derrida) insisting that postmodern theory avoid Adorno like the devil.<sup>89</sup> One can imagine the voice of Fredric Jameson echoing Lyotard’s “No” but from the other side, precisely in order to save from postmodern confusion what is modern and most importantly Marxist in Adorno.<sup>90</sup> Certainly one can imagine Habermas’s voice. Against Lyotard and Jameson, he would, like Derrida, mouth a resounding “Yes” to this inheritance, but only to dismiss both progenitor and heir as fundamentally “irrational.”<sup>91</sup> In this cacophony, for and against, one would hear the murmur of other voices whispering along with Derrida of the affinity between his work and Adorno’s.<sup>92</sup> Rising out of this chorus, the voice of Drucilla Cornell will have spoken most definitively on this inheritance.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard. “Adorno as the Devil” in *Telos* 19 (1974), 127-137.

<sup>90</sup> Fredric Jameson. *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic*. London: Verso, 1990.

<sup>91</sup> Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985. Also, for a very concise account of the scholarly debate concerning Adorno’s relationship to poststructuralist thought see *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*. Edited by Max Pensky. Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1997, 1-19.

<sup>92</sup> Rainer Nägele. “The scene of the other: Theodor W. Adorno’s negative dialectic in the context of poststructuralism.” *Theodor W. Adorno: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory Volume III*. Edited by Simon

Cornell's *The Philosophy of the Limit* is to date the single most sustained exploration of the kinship between Adorno's critical theory and Derrida's deconstructive project. For Cornell, the intersection between their thinking is apparent in the logical and ethical resonances between Adorno's insights into non-identity and Derrida's critique of alterity and law. In particular, Cornell examines their shared critique of community and the logocentrism of *Geist*. She shows that their mutual suspicions of community, totality, and identity are not simple rejections of these notions in the name of alterity or non-identity. What separates Cornell's work from others who have taken up the relationship between Derrida and Adorno is that Cornell's analysis takes seriously the intricacies of both thinkers. She refuses to reduce or caricature either position.<sup>94</sup> This is not to suggest that Cornell thinks that they are *doing the same thing* or that ultimately she finds their accounts equally compelling. She, in fact, concludes that Adorno's insistence on "redemption" [*Erlösung*] and "negativity" separates him fundamentally from Derrida.

Although Adorno's thinking opens the question of non-identity in a fashion quite similar to Derrida's, Cornell finds that Adorno's critique remains solely negative. At the end of her book, Cornell writes, "[w]e come now to the ethical, legal, and political significance of [Derrida's] difference from Adorno [...] For Adorno, the 'end of philosophy,' which must come with the full acknowledgment of the horror of the Holocaust, left him only with 'negative dialectics'" (POL 181). Adorno's insistence on negativity and the need to acknowledge the

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Jarvis. London: Routledge, 2007, 405-426; Miriam Bratu Hansen. "Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer," *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*. Edited by Max Pensky. Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1997, 83-111; Gerhard Richter. *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007.

<sup>93</sup> Another interesting thinking of Adorno and Derrida together comes from Christoph Menke. For Menke, it is over the questions of negativity, autonomy, and sovereignty that Adorno and Derrida meet; Derrida's discussion of writing and signification offering a means to clarify some of the deficiencies of Adorno's notion of aesthetic negativity. See *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*. Translated by Neil Solomon. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999, xi-xii.

<sup>94</sup> Although Peter Dew's work was one of the first to argue for an affinity between Adorno's and Derrida's work, Dew's reading of Derrida is so problematic that it cannot be said to provide a fair account of the potential affinities between their works. See Peter Dews. *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claim of Critical Theory*. New York: Verso, 1987, 1-46.

absolute violence of the Holocaust leads him into a position from which he cannot, on Cornell's account, formulate a positive position on ethics, law, or justice. His resistance to any claim that would appear to justify the violence of the twentieth century means that any "possibility of redemption can only be shown negatively" (POL 181). For Cornell, Adorno can tell us only what redemption is not, foreclosing the possibility of a positive critical project. This critique resonates with her concern for *redemption* in Adorno more generally. She argues, via Derrida, that Adorno is overly committed to an "apocalyptic" notion of redemption by which she seems to mean that Adorno remains too uncritical of the sovereign messianic tone of the redemptive (POL 57-61). In contrast, Cornell's suggests that Derrida offers a way to honor in a positive fashion the ethical possibilities disclosed by the critique of radical alterity without succumbing to this "apocalyptic tone." It will be part of my project to contest her characterization of Adorno as one that overplays the "purely" negative side of his endeavor. However, it is important to point out that Cornell's claims are in many ways consistent with the Habermasian critique of Adorno.

The longstanding notion that Adorno's thought breaks down precisely at the point where the critique of identity would touch on positive material or concrete political and ethical issues is widely accepted particularly by his successors in critical theory. As Lambert Zuidervaart puts it, "[i]n the polite language of critical theory after the communicative turn, they [his successors] find Adorno's philosophy inappropriately 'metaphysical' or 'theological' or 'utopian'" (Zuidervaart 133).<sup>95</sup> Following the work of Jürgen Habermas, there emerges a general concern that Adorno's thinking lacks material specificity. In particular, his emphasis on aesthetics is read

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<sup>95</sup> "Metaphysics after Auschwitz: Suffering and Hope in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*." *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*. Edited by Donald A. Burke, Colin J. Campbell, Kathy Kiloh, et al. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 133-166.

as occluding, confusing, or at worst mystifying the ethical and political force of critical theory.<sup>96</sup> Although Cornell is herself critical of Habermas's position, she seems to share his basic concern. The claim that Adorno's purely negative position precludes the possibility of a positive critique seems to concede that there is something problematic about the relationship between metaphysics and the empirical in Adorno. Cornell is not alone here. J.M. Bernstein and Christoph Menke, thinkers also quite critical of the Habermasian reading of Adorno, readily admit that there is something unclear or baffling in the way Adorno positions his philosophical and ethical project.<sup>97</sup> However, given that Adorno constantly points to a direct link between negative dialectics and the possibility of addressing suffering and violence, I am less quick to concede this lack of clarity. It is certainly the case that Adorno's work is complex and yes, difficult to follow at times. However, it is not clear to me that this difficulty emerges at the junction of Adorno's "metaphysical" and "practical" positions. In fact, he is remarkably clear on how these two realms are interconnected, insofar as he argues that the purpose of philosophy is to alleviate suffering and violence.

Adorno's thinking constantly revolves around a worry over violence and in particular the extreme forms of violence indicated by the name "Auschwitz." In his lectures on Metaphysics, Adorno writes "there can be no one, whose organ of experience has not entirely atrophied, for whom the world *after* Auschwitz, that is, the world in which Auschwitz was possible, is the same world as it was before" (M 104/162).<sup>98</sup> The world and our understanding of it are necessarily altered in light of the violences of the twentieth century. To live in a world in which

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<sup>96</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Translated by F.G. Lawrence, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987, 117-118.

<sup>97</sup> J.M. Bernstein. *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*. Cambridge, Mass: University of Cambridge Press, 2001, xi. Christoph Menke. *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*. Translated by Neil Solomon. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999, xi-ix.

<sup>98</sup> *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001; *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme, Nachgelassene Schriften, Abteilung IV, Vorlesungen, Band 14*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998.

“Auschwitz” is possible is to live in a world fundamentally at odds with any traditional metaphysics that sees the story of the world or humanity as one of inherent progress:

In the face of the experiences we have had, not only through Auschwitz but through the introduction of torture as a permanent institution and through the atomic bomb—all these things form a kind of coherence, a hellish unity—in the face of these experiences the assertion that what is has meaning, and the affirmative character which has been attributed to metaphysics almost without exception, becomes a mockery; and in the face of the victims it becomes downright immoral. (M 104/162)

The traditional story of metaphysics, that humanity is progressing, becoming “better” whether technologically, scientifically, or morally is, in the face of a world *after* Auschwitz, simply an untenable and immoral fable. One can no longer maintain that “in a secret world of being” or in some metaphysical way “all of this [violence] will have had some kind of purpose” (M 104/162). Yet, Adorno’s concern for violence is not merely historical or pragmatic. He sees the possibility of violence as constitutive of thinking and metaphysics generally.

There are many passages where Adorno links the problem of violence to the structure of thought and metaphysics. At the opening of *Negative Dialectics*, for example, he argues that thought is dialectical in nature precisely because it is driven by “guilt” for the violence it has perpetrated on its objects (ND 5/17). A bit further on, he writes, “[t]he need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” (ND 18/29). There is a constitutive relationship between suffering and thought such that any possibility of truth, and by extension any knowledge about the world, brings with it a certain suffering. Because of the inherent insufficiency of thought to capture or represent objects fully, one cannot think without involving oneself in suffering and

violence. It is precisely in this sense that Adorno designates “pain” and “negativity” as “the moving forces of dialectical thinking,” which is to say, the moving forces of thought in general (ND 202/202). For Adorno, the question and figure of violence is what connects metaphysics to the empirical world. Hence one of the goals of the next chapter will be to follow the question of violence in Adorno’s work as a guide to exploring the link between his *metaphysical* and *empirical* projects. I will argue that, for Adorno, violence in the form of exclusion and the domination of life marks the shared space of the metaphysical, empirical, and ethical. Given the importance of violence in Derrida’s thinking, this exploration will allow one to see more clearly the similarities between their projects. By clarifying the notion of violence in Adorno’s work, I hope both to contest the Habermas-inspired critique of Adorno and to explore further the link between Adorno’s and Derrida’s thinking. I begin with the question of violence in relationship to dialectics.

## **I: Guilty Dialectics**

*Negative Dialectics* begins with a definition: “The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norms of adequacy” (ND 5/17). In its most elementary form, dialectics names the non-identity between objects and their concepts. It articulates the structural fact that concepts cannot fully capture their objects. It represents a fundamental challenge to the traditional construction of truth and knowledge on the model of the *adequatio intellectus et rei*. The first breath of dialectics whispers of a fundamental and necessary distance or difference between objects and their concepts—the impossibility of an identity without difference. The result of this accompaniment of non-identity with identity is that the relation of thought to



objects necessarily takes the form of contradiction: “[c]ontradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity” (ND 5/17). Dialectics marks the same paradox as *writing* in Derrida, namely that all forms of representation, whether conceptual or textual, require that something always already escapes representation, undermining the ability of concepts to capture their objects fully and without remainder. Here one sees a relation between Adorno’s thinking and Saussurian linguistics, so influential on Derrida’s thought, namely that the unity represented by the sign requires difference. Saussure, Adorno, and Derrida all tell us that unity is inseparable from difference. However, Adorno and Derrida go further than Saussure by emphasizing the contradictory character of the demand for difference within similarity.<sup>99</sup> The contradictory character of dialectics, like the paradoxical character of writing, necessarily creates the link between dialectics and violence.

Having established the contradictory character of dialectics, Adorno writes, “[d]ialectics is the consistent sense of nonidentity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint. My thought is driven to it by its own inevitable insufficiency, by my guilt [*Schuld*] of what I am thinking” (ND 5/17). Dialectics follows out the inherent logic of the relation between objects and concepts.<sup>100</sup> In following out this contradictory relation, dialectics exposes the necessary insufficiency of

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<sup>99</sup> For an good introduction to Adorno’s conception of language see Michael K. Palamarek. “Adorno’s Dialectics of Language.” *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*. Edited by Donald A. Burke, Colin J. Campbell, Kathy Kolah, et al. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 41-77; Samir Gandesha “The ‘Aesthetic Dignity of Words’: Adorno’s Philosophy of Language.” *Adorno and the Need in Thinking: New Critical Essays*. Edited by Donald A. Burke, Colin J. Campbell, Kathy Kolah, et al. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 78-102; Peter Uwe Hohendahl. “Adorno: The Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language.” *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*. Edited by Max Pensky. New York: SUNY Press, 1997, 62-82.

<sup>100</sup> In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida describes the work of deconstruction in a nearly identical manner: “The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from old the structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work” (G 24/39).

concepts to capture their objects without leaving a remainder. The driving force of dialectics is this insufficiency—the failure of thought to represent objects in their totality. Adorno characterizes this necessary and motivating insufficiency as “guilt” (*Schuld*), implying an “offence” or “fault” as well as a “debt,” “owing,” or “obligation.”<sup>101</sup> The relationship of thought to any object inevitably involves a moment of wrong-doing in that, by failing to capture the object fully, the process of conceptualization necessitates some misrepresentation. Dialectics names the violent fact that “no object is wholly known” (ND 14/26). Yet, guilt cannot exist without the acknowledgement that something wrong has been done.

In the context of the relation between concepts and objects, the notion of debt (*Schuld*) indicates that thought not only misrepresents objects but also registers, in some sense, its own violent misrepresentation. The self-reflexive character of thinking necessitates that both thought’s attempt to cognize objects and its inevitable failure to do so must be visible to thought: “[w]hile doing violence [*Gewalt*] to the object of its syntheses, our thinking heeds a potential that waits in the object, and it unconsciously [*bewußtlos*] obeys the idea of making amends to the pieces for what it has done” (ND 19/30-31). Thought, on an unconscious (*bewußtlos*) level, acknowledges the violence it does to objects. It desires to “make amends” precisely to those “pieces” it excludes. However, this amending remains unconscious. Thought cannot recognize its reparatory endeavor because the pieces of objects that are excluded in the process of conceptualization, the pieces to which thought is driven to make amends, are precisely the non-identical elements that thought cannot identify, and, consequently, cannot account for or recognize. The importance of this notion of “unconscious” amending is that it indicates once again the unavoidability of violence within the process of conceptualization. For Adorno, as for Derrida, thinking, signification, and representation involve an irreducible violence, insofar as

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<sup>101</sup> German dictionary, 193.

thought and signification are structurally unable to represent their objects in fullness. Hence, the first lesson of dialectics is that something of objects is always left out in the process of conceptualization. However, it is important to note that this unavoidable exclusion is not purely negative.

Thought is necessarily violent, for Adorno, insofar as the process of conceptualization operates only through a certain failure. Adorno acknowledges, however, that this failure, this violence, is necessary in order for anything to appear to us at all, as the appearance of objects requires the mediation of thought. As Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, “[i]n principle, philosophy can always go astray, which is the sole reason why it can go forward” (ND 14/26). The possibility of thought comes only at the cost of violence. This inevitability renders the violence of dialectics productive as well as destructive. Dialectics map the way in which objects appear only by simultaneously being misrepresented or distorted. Here one can see already the outline of my resistance to Cornell’s characterization of Adorno as a purely negative thinker. Cornell underestimates Adorno’s commitment to the foundational as well as problematic character of violence. Both Derrida and Adorno recognize this paradoxical relationship between thought and objects and share the notion that without this risk of violence one is left with a thinking that cannot go forward and is doomed simply to accept the world as it appears. We shall have more to say about this question of inertia in Adorno's work after a look at his precise characterization of the violent exclusion inherent in thought.

In his course on metaphysics, Adorno writes explicitly of the kind of violence entailed in the failure of objects to go completely into their concepts without remainder. He first characterizes this violence as a movement of abstraction, a distancing of thought from the unique time and space of its object. In order to render the similarities between objects visible, in order

to produce, for example, the concept “1” it is necessary, Adorno says, to abstract: “For in referring to the items which I have just called ‘1’ as the concept [. . .] I generally disregard the special spatial and temporal position of the elements subsumed under the concept” (M 70/110). The formation of concepts is, first and foremost, a grouping by similarity, an amalgamation of shared attributes. In order to form a concept, therefore, it is necessary that one exclude or mute the differences between the elements grouped under that concept. In particular, one must exclude the unique spatial and temporal specificity of those objects: those elements that are in no way sharable. For Adorno, the process of conceptualization does not randomly exclude some aspect or part of objects; rather, it necessarily excludes the singular spatial and temporal specificity of those objects. Here one can already see marked similarities between the abstracting violence outlined by Adorno and Derrida’s notion of reparatory violence, which, one will recall, he figures as a violence of exclusion. Adorno then goes on to identify a second form of violence perpetrated on objects by the process of conceptualization that again resonates with Derrida’s reparatory violence.

It then follows from Adorno’s understanding of the abstracting process of conceptualization that concepts appear timeless: “The concept as such, once established, is not temporal” (M 70/110). Concepts certainly refer to something temporal and themselves have unique histories; yet they appear, through the abstracting process of their construction, to transcend any particular time and space. This apparent independence from time emerges from the fact that concepts are the result of a process of detemporalization—concepts are the detemporalized similarities of a set of objects. In this sense, *timelessness* marks both the great utility and the great failure of conceptualization. It usefully allows concepts to be applied to objects irrespective of their differences in time and space. At the same time it marks

unmistakably the inability of concepts to represent objects as they exist in their own unique time and space. The unifying and universalizing tendency of conceptualization allows the appearance and ordering of the world, but falls short of capturing the essence of that world.<sup>102</sup> Further, in a distorting move that Adorno describes as “the crucial fallacy in traditional philosophy as a whole,” the apparent timelessness of concepts comes to be ascribed to the objects they subsume. (M 71/111).

The ability of concepts to subsume particular objects under a set of common elements leads to a conceptual sleight of hand in which the elements grouped together in the formation of concepts come to be counted as the very essence of the objects they subsume. As Adorno says,

And what could be described as the greatest paralogism of all in metaphysics [. . .] is nothing other than this de-temporalization of the meaning of concepts, which is produced by the way in which concepts are formed, but is attributed as an inherent property to that which they subsume. (M 71/112)

The logic of conceptualization not only gathers objects together through a set of abstract elements; it comes fallaciously to attribute those elements to objects as their very essence. The falsehood in this tendency is that it forgets the abstract nature of conceptualization, operating as though the particularities of each object were merely accidental, inessential attributes.

Conceptualization thus perpetrates against its objects two interrelated acts of violence. The first is the theft of the objects' spatio-temporal specificity. The second is the substitution of a set of abstract attributes that come to be understood as the essence of each object. This second act of violence works to justify and naturalize the first abstracting violence of conceptualization. It covers over the original moment of exclusionary violence insofar as it reinscribes the exclusion of the unique spatio-temporal specificity of objects as a *clarification* of the essence of those

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<sup>102</sup> M 71/111.

objects. These two moments of violence are the necessary extension of the “guilty,” “unconscious” logic of thought outlined in *Negative Dialectics*. They reveal the inability of thought either to capture its object in completeness or to admit its inability to do so.

Furthermore, they mirror substantially the two moments Derrida figures as reparatory violence.

Recall from Chapter One that Derrida’s notion of reparatory violence marked a twofold violence. On the one hand, it described a basic ordering of appearance, the exclusionary logic by which an object comes to appear by opposing and excluding other, dissimilar objects or elements. On the other hand, it marked a moral violence, the establishment of the rules that circumscribe the relative *legitimacy* of any appearance. These two moments seem to be remarkably similar to the two forms of violence Adorno details in his lectures on metaphysics. Both Adorno and Derrida understand the logic of thought, representation, and signification to involve, first and foremost, a moment of exclusion. In this violent moment, some unique aspects of objects are excluded from their concept in order to allow those objects to *appear*. Adorno details more clearly than Derrida the exact nature of this violence, showing that it involves exclusion of the spatio-temporal specificities of objects. However, this conclusion is in no way at odds with Derrida’s thinking. In fact, Derrida reaches a similar conclusion insofar as he argues that what is always excluded from the logic of signification are those very things that logic claims to attend to most. In the case of conceptualization, thinking aims to capture the essence of objects and yet it is precisely some part of the particularity of what it is to be *this object* here and now, some part of the object's essence, that thought must necessarily exclude. In addition, both thinkers argue that this exclusionary violence is accompanied by a second violence that justifies and naturalizes the moment of exclusionary violence.

In Adorno, this naturalization occurs when the elements of the concept are attributed to objects as their essence. For Derrida, this justification emerges as the rules defining objects come to be understood as determining the object's legitimacy. Despite the difference between the language of naturalization and that legitimation, Adorno and Derrida are remarkably close to one another here, for the set of rules that Derrida describes is nothing other than the elements of the concept—those attributes that define an object in opposition to other objects. Thus, an examination of the logic at work in Adorno's discussion of the process of conceptualization and Derrida's notion of reparatory violence shows fundamental similarities not just in the logic of their arguments but also in their conclusions. For both Adorno and Derrida, the logic of conceptualization and signification operates violently to exclude the singularity of objects and simultaneously to justify this exclusion. This justifying moment will have important implications for Adorno's thinking on violence, particularly as it shows thought's inherent tendency toward ideology.

For Adorno, thought necessarily tends towards ideology. This tendency emerges around the question of primacy: "ideology lies in the substruction of something primary [. . .] it lies in the implicit identity of concepts and things, an identity justified by the world even when a doctrine summarily teaches that consciousness depends on being" (ND 40/50). Ideology emerges out of the perceived identity between concepts and their objects, an identity that places thought in a primary position relative to objects. This claim to primacy is necessarily built into the logic of conceptualization because thought is structurally unable to recognize those elements of objects that cannot be reduced to its general categories. Hence, even though the primacy of thought is denied by the dialectical relationship between concepts and objects, thought, nevertheless, cannot help but take itself as primary. Thought's tendency to justify its exclusion

of objects is fundamentally ideological: a setting up of thought as something primary in relationship to an always secondary objectivity. One will recall that Derrida too argues that there is an inherent moment of primacy built into the logic of thinking, insofar as such logic is structured hierarchically. It is on the basis of this inherent hierarchical ordering that Derrida contends that *phonologocentrism* is unavoidable, a notion that seems to echo Adorno's claim that the identity between concepts and objects is, despite its dialectical disruption, "justified by the world." The logic of hearing and understanding oneself speak, the phonic appearance of "presence," here and now, cannot be avoided or completely done away with. In the same way neither can the ideological tendency of thought be dismissed, justified as it is by the appearance of identity in the world. There is a fundamental kinship between Derrida's critique of logocentrism and Adorno's critique of ideology insofar as both fundamentally are attempts to identify and challenge a certain irreducible claim to *origin* within the logic of thought and appearance. However, the importance of this question of primacy and ideology goes beyond the connection between Adorno and Derrida as it also exposes the way in which Adorno understands the violence of exclusion as a precursor to the violence of domination.

The very notion of *origin* or of ontological or conceptual primacy is, according to Adorno, a corollary of domination:

The category of the root, the origin, is a category of domination. It confirms that a man ranks first because he was the first there; it confirms the autochthon against the newcomer, the settler against the migrant. The origin [. . .] is itself an ideological principle. (ND 155/158)

The notion of origin functions to support the unjustifiable claim that whoever or whatever came first has some kind of moral authority denied to those that come after. This moral authority



derives from the inherently anti-dialectical or ideological nature of origin claims. Such claims suggest that, since the origin is that which emerged *first*, it must necessarily be independent from that which comes after. This *independence* becomes the basis of the origin's supposed superiority. For Adorno, the violence of ideology leads to the violence of domination, insofar as ideology's claim to primacy constructs ideology's opposite as *inferior*, less worthy, subordinate: "Wherever a doctrine of some absolute 'first' is taught there will be talk of something inferior to it, of something absolutely heterogeneous to it, as its logical correlate. *Prima philosophia* and dualism go together" (ND 138/142). This connection further develops Adorno's understanding of the violence inherent in conceptualization. No longer is it simply an issue of the exclusion of some *pieces* of objects; rather the ideological bent of thought leads to the claim that thought has dominion over objects. This claim has particularly profound consequences not just for the logic of conceptualization and signification, but for the relationship between subject and object or those that think and *what they think about*.

In the section of his 1969 essay, "Dialectical Epilegomena," entitled "On Subject and Object," Adorno outlines the way in which the concept's claim to primacy fundamentally alters the relationship between subjects and objects. Having assumed its primacy over objects

Mind then arrogates to itself the status of being absolutely independent—which it is not: mind's claim to independence announces its claim to domination. Once radically separated from the object, subject reduces the object to itself; subject swallows object, forgetting (*vergißt*) how much it is object itself. (CM 246/742)<sup>103</sup>

In the relationship of the subject and object, the ideological relationship of concept and object expresses itself as the subject's claim to total independence from its object. The thinking

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<sup>103</sup> *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Translated by Henry W. Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998; *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2*. Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1969.

individual is led to see itself as independent from that which it thinks about because it sees its thought as an objective expression of the world. This claim to independence provides the grounds for thought's dominion over objects, as it establishes thought's claim, outlined above, that whatever cannot be captured by thought, whatever resists or disrupts conceptualization, is fundamentally inessential to the object and thus inferior and accidental to it. Adorno characterizes this domination as a reduction of objects to the subject: everything that is not reducible to the subject's conceptual categories becomes utterly superfluous. This operation of reduction and incorporation follows from the logic of justifying violence discussed above and remakes the object in the image of the concept. It is no longer simply an issue of thought excluding some aspects of objects but of thought dominating and excluding objectivity as such, including the objectivity of the subject.

The logical result of thought's claim to dominance and superiority over objects is the push to violently reduce objectivity to subjectivity. Thought is driven to dominate and exclude everything that cannot be reduced to its categories of origin, universality, totality, unity, and identity. Thought's structural intolerance of anything that is other than thought has particularly profound consequences not just for objects but, Adorno argues, for the objectivity of subjects. As he says,

The ideological side of thinking shows its permanent failure to make good on the claim that the non-I is finally the I: the more the I thinks, the more perfectly will it find itself debased into an object. Identity becomes the authority for a doctrine of adjustment, in which the object—which the subject is supposed to go by—repay the subject for what the subject has done to it. (ND 148/151)

The ideological push to identity necessarily fails to capture the non-identical, objectness of objects including the objectness that is the material subject. In the process of conceptualization, the subject, this living breathing human being here and now, must be devalued in order to allow it to fit into the abstract, universal schema of the “subject.” All the differences that separate one thinking subject from another, all the things that make one human being unlike the rest of its species, must be excluded and devalued, insofar as such differences cannot be the basis of any universal category. The ironic result of this exclusion is that the more the subject “thinks” about itself, the more it attempts to identify itself, the more surely it turns itself into a mere object of thought, and the more it eliminates the importance of its material existence. Hence, “[t]he spell cast by the subject becomes equally a spell cast over the subject” (ND 139/142). The process of conceptualization leads a thinker in the act of thought into a contradictory, self-destructive relation, in which the thinking subject is driven to dispossess itself of the very relationship to materiality that gives the thinking subject reality. For Adorno, the subject’s relationship to itself is what Derrida will three decades later refer to as *autoimmune*.

In the essay, “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida outlines, “a sort of general logic of autoimmunity” (Derrida, FK fn 27/67-68).<sup>104</sup> Autoimmunity describes a process by which an entity or system attacks its own principle of protection, tearing down the very thing that ensures its purity or indemnity. In the case of Adorno’s discussion of the subject, this assertion of purity is expressed in the claim that the *subject* is completely separate from the objects that it confronts. The identity principle ensures the purity of the subject by excluding from the subject all that is not identical to it. This exclusion, likewise, establishes and insures the indemnity and unity of the subject. The subject knows clearly what it is by knowing what it is not. This exclusion

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<sup>104</sup> “Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Religion*. Edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo. Translated by Samuel Weber. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 1-78. *Foi et Savoir suivi de Le Siècle et le Pardon*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999. Hereafter abbreviated FK.

ensures the whole ideological mechanism that subordinates objectivity to subjectivity. However, this separation of the subject from objects cannot be maintained. While establishing a unified subject, the separation of subject and object undermines the unity of the subject by leading the subject to exclude and deny its own objective moment. In being opposed to objectivity, the subject comes to be opposed to its own objectivity. It opposes its material *self*. The irony of the logic of subject, for Adorno, is that in being a *subject*, one is led to deny one's own material or objective moment. This denial leaves the *subject* with the appearance of unity at the cost of any real unity or objective existence. As Adorno describes this autoimmune process in *Negative Dialectics*,

[i]t is precisely the insatiable identity principle that perpetuates antagonism by suppressing contradiction. What tolerates nothing that is not like itself thwarts the reconciliation for which it mistakes itself. The violence of equality-mongering reproduces the contradiction it eliminates. (ND 143/146)

The principle of identity, with its insistence on the suppression of difference, can reconcile the difference between subject and object only by attacking and eliminating objectivity. Yet this solution reproduces the difference between subject and object on the level of the subject as such, eliminating the very materiality which thinking itself is. Hence, the relationship of the subject with itself is not merely contradictory but self-annihilating, that is, autoimmune. In addition to noting its affinity with Derrida, there are a number of things to be said about this current of autoimmunity in Adorno's thinking. Particularly important is the way in which Adorno's notion of the subject appears both structural and material.

Adorno's discussion of the way the thinking subject's drive to divest itself of its objective moment is, on the one hand, a structural claim. Adorno is keenly aware that neither subjectivity

nor the subject is identical to a living, breathing human being: “‘subject’ can refer to the particular individual as well as to universal attributes of ‘consciousness in general’” (CM 245/741). However, he remains committed to the notion that “[n]o concept of the subject can have the element of individual humanity [...] separated from it in thought; without any reference to it, subject would lose all significance” (CM 245/741). Subject and subjectivity refer simultaneously to the logical, abstract, universal notion of a *person* and to the particular human individual. Thus, Adorno’s claims concerning subjects always have concrete resonance. The domination of the objective by the subjective is not, for Adorno, a mere problem of logic. The devaluing of the objective elements of the subject is the concrete devaluing of peoples’s bodies and the material world in which they live and breathe. My intention now is to develop as clearly as possible the way in which Adorno sees the relationship between the structural, autoimmune violence of exclusion and domination to manifest itself as social and empirical domination. This connection is developed specifically in his concept of the “*Tauschprinzip*” or exchange principle.

## **II: A Society of Exchange is a Society of Violence**

Before delving into Adorno’s concept of *Tauschprinzip*, a note on translation is imperative. In the standard, English translation of *Negative Dialectics*, *Tauschprinzip* is almost universally rendered as “barter principle.” This is of course a reasonable translation, as *Tausch* means “exchange” or “barter.” However, there are several philosophical reasons to prefer “exchange” over “barter.” First off, *Tausch* has important Marxist connotations, being the word Marx uses for “exchange” in his notion of “exchange value” [*Tauschwert*], for example. The translation “exchange” thus clarifies the link between negative dialectics and Marxism that is camouflaged by the use of the word “barter.” One never speaks in English of Marx’s concept of

“barter value.” Secondly, the notion of “exchange” better captures the relationship, crucial for Adorno, between *das Tauschprinzip* and *das Identifikationsprinzip*, the principle of exchange and the principle of identification.

In English, “barter” has the connotation of a kind of pre-capitalist economic arrangement that existed before capitalism reduced value to the equivalency of currency exchange. This reduction to general equivalency is precisely where Adorno sees the significant correlation between exchange and identity. This correlation forms the basis for Adorno's understanding of exchange as the social form of the identity principle. Thus I translate every use of *Tausch* as exchange.

The principle of identity, with all of its implications of violence and autoimmunity, is not, for Adorno, a mere theoretical entity. It is expressed socially in the concept of the exchange principle:

The exchange principle [*Tauschprinzip*], the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification [*Identifikationsprinzip*]. Exchange [*Tausch*] is the social model of the principle [. . .] it is through exchange [*Tausch*] that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical.

(ND 146/149. Translation modified.)

The exchange principle reduces all labor to the abstract category of “working hours” and ultimately to the notion of the hourly wage. Through the exchange system all individuals and their labor are made commensurable via the common denominator of wages. This reduction of individuals and their labor is, for Adorno, the social expression of the conceptual notion of identification. The systematic reduction of the value of work to wages comprises the practical

expression of the reduction of all individuals to the concept of the *subject* and all that is non-conceptual to the categories of the conceptual. Identity and exchange are two expressions of the same logic, both of which operate to reduce a diverse field of objects to a common, conceptual denominator. The reduction of work to wages, like the reduction of objects to the conceptual, violently excludes the unique spatio-temporal aspects of both workers and their labor.

The principle of exchange, like every identity principle, amounts to a reduction of diversity to a singular set of categories or single system of value.<sup>105</sup> The exchange principle reduces all forms of labor to the abstract category of wages. This operation makes diverse forms of work comparable by excluding those aspects of them that are not identical, which is to say, by excluding the unique spatio-temporal aspects of their occurrence. For example, in the system of exchange one meatpacker becomes identical to any other insofar as their work is reducible to a similar wage. What the categories of *wages* identifies is not the essence of any particular worker or the essence of their work, but rather the abstract role or site they and their work occupy within the system of exchange. This exchangeability of work and workers applies to all forms of labor because, within a system of wage labor, every form of work and every worker is comparable. This does not preclude some workers making a higher wage than others. This difference is certainly possible, but it does nothing to disrupt the basic identitarian exchangeability of the wage system. To take an example, a veterinarian may be paid more for her labor than a meatpacker, but this difference only reinforces the exchangeability of these workers and their labor by suggesting that the difference between a veterinarian and a meatpacker is quantifiable as a mere difference in wage. In the same way that the difference between a larger and smaller

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<sup>105</sup> Concerning the question of exchange in Derrida see “On the ‘Priceless,’ or the ‘Going Rate’ of the Transaction” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Edited and Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, 315-328.

triangle does nothing to challenge the conceptual category *triangle* nor to inhibit the reducibility of every triangle to this category, a difference in wages does nothing to contest exchangeability within a logic of exchange. Hence the principle of exchange has the same empirical effects as identity. The conceptual exercises domination over the objective by excluding all objective differences that cannot be rendered as differences of wage.

The notion of wage labor functions, like the categories of the concept, violently to exclude and reduce to differences of wage all the material differences separating workers and their labor. Exchange renders all qualitative differences as quantitative differences, which in effect reduces all difference. Speaking of the dominating system of exchange, Adorno writes:

The universal domination of mankind by the exchange value [*Tauschwert*]*s*—a domination which a priori keeps the subjects from being subjects and degrades subjectivity itself to a mere object—makes an untruth of the general principle that claims to establish the subject’s predominance. The surplus of the transcendental subject is the deficit of the utterly reduced empirical subject. (ND 178/180)

In a world reduced to a system of exchange, the individual human being has value only insofar as it conforms to the standard of wage labor and is rendered identical to all other workers. This reduction undermines the subject’s claim to any unique subjective specificity, effectively reducing the living, breathing subject to the “worker.” The push to conform to the transcendental category of the wage-earning subject makes any claim to *empirical* subjectivity false. In a system of exchange, one can express one’s *individuality* and *subjectivity*, “the surplus of the transcendental subject,” only by earning a larger wage. One can be an individual only by conforming ever more fully to the concept of the wage earning subject, that is, by reducing one’s



empirical specificity. This system reduces the subject to a mere object, a node in the system of social value, a means rather than an end. Here one sees the extent of Adorno's Marxism.

Adorno's critique of the system of exchange maps directly onto Marx's critique of wage labor. Marx showed that the system of wage labor under capitalism leads the working class to sell their labor at ever lower wages, leading ever more fully to the domination of workers by the system of exchange.<sup>106</sup> Adorno argues in parallel that the more the individual conforms to the notion of the wage earning subject, the more surely is the subject reduced to a mere object by the system of exchange. If what defines one as a subject is one's labor, and if one is constantly forced to devalue that labor, then effectively one is forced to devalue one's subjectivity. Adorno says that this reduction is "a priori." It is not simply a matter of choice or decision. The subject cannot choose not to devalue its material self. This is because we are talking about a structural logic of the class system and of the economy of subjectivity. Some subjects or wage workers could theoretically not have their material existence reduced much at all. However, this does nothing to change the fact that, as a class and on the whole, subjects and wage workers have their material existence devalued. This devaluing is always already built into the logic of exchange. For Adorno, like Marx, the system of exchange dominates empirical subjects under the guise of elevating the subject through wage labor irrespective of their choices within that system. As evidence of this domination of the empirical subject, Adorno points out that in the system of exchange every subject, every wage worker, becomes radically fungible.

Adorno's concern with the domination inherent in the exchange system is not merely that it limits the potentialities of living and breathing human beings but, more dramatically, that it makes the individual human being superfluous:

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<sup>106</sup> See for instances, "Wage, Labor, Capital." *The Marx-Engels Reader (Second Edition)*. Edited by Robert Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978, 203-217.

A situation has been reached today, in the present form of the organization of work in conjunction with the maintenance of the existing relations of production, in which every person is absolutely fungible or replaceable, even under the conditions of formal freedom. (M 109/170-171)

By reducing every subject to the mere category of its earning potential, the system of exchange creates a situation in which every subject, insofar as she is a “worker,” becomes replaceable by any other subject. This is true even under formal conditions of freedom. Any formally free subject is still exchangeable with other wage earning subjects. Returning to his emphasis on the “a priori” nature of the exchange system's dominating violence, Adorno argues that formal freedom does little to protect the subject from radical fungibility. In a system in which the objective substance of subjects is excluded and degraded, so too will the subject’s objective freedom be excluded and degraded. This explains, for Adorno, why workers can be subject to this “experience” of fungibility even in highly developed, affluent, and politically progressive societies.<sup>107</sup> Within the system of exchange, a formally free meatpacker is still exchangeable, despite his freedom, with any other meatpacker, since they do the same work for a similar wage. Like all systems of identity, the system of exchange operates to insure the exchangeability of the elements subsumed under that system by relegating to absolute unimportance the particularity of any of its elements. Fungibility reigns within a system of exchange. Hence, the very abstracting identifying force attributed to the subject contradictorily becomes the force that liquidates the subject. Furthermore, in a move that Adorno again describes as contradictory, the subject is led to embrace its own liquidation.

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<sup>107</sup> “In my view, these experiences [of fungibility] have such deep objective reasons that they are actually untouched even by political forms of rule, that is, by the difference between formal democracy on the one hand and totalitarian control on the other” (M 109/171).

An antinomy emerges from Adorno's discussion of the question of exchange and its fundamental relationship to subjectivity. The first contradictory move is that the "truth" moment of subjectivity, its ability to abstract, comes to be used against the subject for the purpose of the subject's liquidation. The principle of exchange, the social corollary of the subject's power of conceptual abstraction, must ultimately be turned against the objective elements of the subject itself, leading to its liquidation. Adorno sees the subject's disappearance expressed abstractly in the reduction of all subjects into objects, and concretely in the reduction of the subject to the wage laborer. In a second contradictory move, the subject is led to embrace its liquidated form as its very essence. As Adorno puts it,

Yet what he [the subject] knows to be meaningless is forced on him as the meaning of his life; indeed, a life which is really no more than the means to the end of his self-preservation is, by that very fact, bewitched and fetishized as an end. And in this antinomy—on the one hand the debasement of the individual, of the self, to something insignificant, his liquidation, and on the other, his being thrown back on the fact that he no longer has anything but this atomized self which lives our life—in this contradiction lies the horror of the development which I regard it as my duty to present to you today. (M 110/171-172)

The subject, reduced to an exchangeable unit of labor power, is compelled to identify this wisp, this "atomized self" as self, for without participation in the wage labor system, the subject cannot preserve itself. The need to survive makes the system of exchange seem, if not natural, at least necessary. Adorno's description shows not only how the system of exchange comes to dominate the subject externally, but how the subject, unwittingly, internalizes this domination and its logic of subjectivity along with the principle of exchange. In identifying itself, its *life*, the subject

recognizes itself as a wage laborer, at least insofar as it participates necessarily in this role. To complete the reduction, the universalizing tendency of the identification process brings the subject to understand this role as encompassing its totality. The identification is then reflected in and reinforced by the social processes of exchange. The paradox is complete as the logic of identity and exchange touts the liquidation of the subject as the highest form of “subjectivity.” The individuals can *live* only by giving up their claim to a life beyond the narrow confines of fungible wage labor. Here Adorno moves from the dialectical relationship between concepts and their objects to concrete concern for the living human beings via the figures of identity, exclusion, domination, exchange, fungibility, and life. Contra his Habermas inspired critics, he explicitly relates his philosophical concerns to his concrete social concerns.

The question of violence in Adorno’s work contests fundamentally the Habermasian claim that Adorno is unclear about the connection between his philosophical project and his social-political concerns. Adorno traces a direct pathway between the philosophical logic of identity and the violent reduction of the living individual in modern society. It is crucial to understand that, for him, identity and exchange are not merely analogous but are concretely related in an intimate interchange whereby each continuously emerges out of real social processes that serve to maintain the other. The domination of the individual within the system of exchange co-arises with and is essentially the same operation as the identitarian process of conceptualization. Under its domination, the wage worker must devalue and exclude any notion of its *life* that is not ultimately reducible to the categories of exchange. Adorno expresses this moment both in terms of the radical fungibility of all workers and the dissolution of all forms of subjectivity and life that cannot be reduced to the categories of wage labor. As the interchange plays out between domination in the system of exchange and the logic of identity, Adorno argues

that subjects necessarily internalize their own fungibility and accept their identification as mere wage workers. In this way the logic of identity and exchange circumscribe and reduce *life*, violently curtailing the potentiality of what it means to *live*. Whether or not one is convinced by Adorno's account of dialectics, identity, or the evacuation of life under the capitalist system of exchange, Adorno gives a remarkably clear and specific account of the relationship he sees between the identitarian logic of thought and the social processes and conditions of concern to him.

In addition to contesting the Habermasian reading of Adorno, an examination of Adorno's treatment of violence demonstrates the profound similarities between his work and that of Derrida. The two thinkers share a number of sympathies both in their general conceptions of violence and their understanding of its role in the logic of thought and signification. First, they both conceive violence in the form of exclusion as built into the very logic of conceptualization and signification. This violence is a necessary and unavoidable function of the relationship between concepts and their objects. Second, both see this structural violence inherent to the logic of conceptualization as related to empirical violence.

In Derrida this relationship is seen in the always ethnocentric character of logocentric discourse. The localized character of every form of conceptualization necessitates that thinking involve the exclusion of other cultural, linguistic, and conceptual understandings of the world. For Derrida, these exclusions occur most profoundly around the borders of the *ethnos* and most particularly around the border separating the *human* and *the animal*: around the question of *life*.

Adorno is more explicit than Derrida concerning the way in which the structural violence of thought relates to violence in the world. He traces the distinctly Marxist notion that this violence occurs as the exclusion and reduction of the individual human being to the liquidated

subject of wage labor. Yet, Adorno insists that this reduction is fundamentally a reduction of *life* in general, which circumscribes and restricts the ways of *living* and kinds of *being* that are afforded value. Hence, despite their differences concerning Marx, both Derrida and Adorno insist on a tendency of violent exclusion that is structural and unavoidable and they agree that ultimately the expression of this violence occurs around the question of life. In fact, Adorno argues even more explicitly than Derrida that the violent character of the conceptual develops alongside the question of *life*.

Adorno directly connects metaphysical issues with the concrete question of life: “the question of whether it is still possible to live is the form in which metaphysics impinges on us urgently today” (M 112/175-176). The violent logic of dialectics is interwoven with the *lives* of subjects: “Guilt [*Schuld*] reproduces itself in each of us—and what I am saying addresses us as subjects—since we cannot possibly remain fully conscious of this connection at every moment of our waking lives” (M 113/176). To be a subject, to be a creature functioning in a dialectical relation to the world, is to be a creature enmeshed in the guilt of exclusionary violence. Adorno is very careful here to say that he is speaking to us as “subjects,” speaking of the structures implied in our lived existence. He does not tell us what is excluded through our living but only that something or someone will be violently excluded. He is clear that these structures are direct and concrete in their effects. Subjectivity is a *living* at the expense of *life*:

It should be said, at any rate, that the guilt [*Schuld*] in which one is enmeshed almost by the mere fact of continuing to live can hardly be reconciled any longer with life itself. Unless one makes oneself wholly insensitive one can hardly escape the feeling—and by feeling I mean experience which is not confined to the emotional sphere—that just by continuing to live one is taking away that

possibility from someone else, to whom life has been denied; that one is stealing that person's life [...] If we—each of us sitting here—knew at every moment what has happened and to what concatenations we owe our existence, and how our own existence is interwoven with calamity, even if we have done nothing wrong [...] if one were fully aware of all these things at every moment, one would really be unable to live. (M 113/176)

The exclusionary violence of dialectics, outlined in the first section of this chapter, is rearticulated here in terms of lived experience and survival. Living cannot be separated from the violent denial of life. It cannot be separated from “calamity” and violent exclusion. One does violence whether one wants to or not simply by continuing to live. Hence, my existing requires the “predetermined” denial and exclusion of life from others, in the same way that the paradoxical logic of identity makes the appearance of objects possible at the cost of excluding the spatio-temporal specificity of those objects. That this denial is predetermined indicates yet again that the violent exclusion of life is unavoidable. However, simultaneous with the violence committed through our very act of living, is the constraint to “forget” the violence.

Directly following the passage quoted above, Adorno continues:

If we—each of us sitting here—knew at every moment what has happened and to what concatenations we owe our existence, and how our own existence is interwoven with calamity, even if we have done nothing wrong [...] if one were fully aware of all these things at every moment, one would really be unable to live. One is pushed as it were into forgetfulness, which is already a form of guilt [Schuld]. By failing to be aware at every moment of what threatens and what has

happened, one also contributes to it; one resists it too little; and it can be repeated and reinstated at any moment. (M 113/176-177)

If subjects were, at every moment, aware of the violences associated with their continued existence, the guilt that survival entails would make life unlivable. Living requires that one forget the exclusionary violence that enables one to exist. This forgetting perpetuates guilt but at a distance, allowing one a space of livability. The rent for this borrowed space, the fee extracted for survival, is that one always does too little to alleviate the violence one's living perpetuates. To *live* is to "resist too little," repeating a violence of exclusion at every moment, even this one, right now.

This logic of guilt and forgetting rearticulates the abstracting and justifying violence outlined in Adorno's discussion of Aristotle. One is required precisely to abstract away from the material consequences of one's existence, and to naturalize this abstraction by forgetting the violence done by one's survival. Guilt and forgetting, the violence of *living* and the justification of that violence, are both dialectical through and through. One hears the echoes of this claim in Derrida's invocation of Mount Moriah: "I offer a gift of death, I betray [...] Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over those to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably" (GD 68). Do Adorno and Derrida not agree fundamentally in this moment? Living is inexorably tied to the betrayal of life. The paradoxical logic of identity, writing, exchange, reparations, ethnocentrism, and wage labor all point in this direction. Hence, the most convincing but also interesting affinity in Adorno's and Derrida's thinking is that they arrive, despite their differences, at the same spot: the question of *life*. There is much to say here. However, what



emerges immediately from this affinity is that, for both Adorno and Derrida, life is always entangled with death.

One will recall that despite thought's and exchange's tendency toward violence, Adorno finds himself unable to do without them altogether. He must maintain them for two reasons. First because appearance requires identity, and second because without some principle of equivalence there would be no way other than brute force for people to exchange anything at all: "If comparability as a category of measure were simply annulled, the rationality which is inherent in the exchange principle [*Tauschprinzip*] [. . .] would give way to direct appropriation, to violence [*Gewalt*]" (ND 146-147/150. Translation modified). Without a system of exchange, without some system of comparability there can be no *exchange* at all. The practical result of this lack is that every transfer of goods amounts to a violence of pure seizure. Hence, there can be no thinking without the violence of identity, no community without the violence of exchange, and given the link between the logic of identity/exchange and questions of life, no living without the violent denial of life—death.

J.M Bernstein, interpreting Adorno's claim that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly," says, in a remarkably Derridian formulation, "wrong life is life enmeshed in death, which we survive in and as" (Bernstein, A 398). There can be no "right life" because every form of life obeys the autoimmune logic of identity—every life is a life/death. It follows that any form of life, by definition, excludes the possibility of being completely non-violent. Adorno, like Derrida, resists simplistically doing away with violence, whether understood logically, practically, or politically. Nonetheless, Adorno stops short of giving up altogether the language of non-violence. In the next chapter I will explore Adorno's seemingly contradictory insistence on the unavoidability of violence and his retention of the notion of non-violence. Further, I will

connect these concepts to his critique of Husserl, Bergson, and Heidegger, thinkers who, as Adorno has it, attempt to escape, breakout, or move beyond the autoimmune logic of dialectics and, consequently, beyond the necessity of violence. This connection and particularly Adorno's critique of Heidegger helps to flesh out the character of Adorno's concern over life, his relationship to Derrida, and the ultimately ecological orientation of his critical theory. However, I begin with Adorno's strange relationship with violence and nonviolence.

## Chapter Four: Adorno and Critiques of Non-Violence

Adorno has a nuanced relationship with the possibilities of non-violence. For example, in *Minima Moralia* he writes:

The pure unreflective act is violation projected on to the starry sky above. But in the long, contemplative look that fully discloses people and things, the urge towards the object is always deflected, reflected. Contemplation without violence [*Gewaltlose Betrachtung*], the source of all the joy of truth, presupposes that he who contemplates does not absorb the object into himself: a distanced nearness [*Nähe an Distanz*]. (MM 89-90/98)<sup>108</sup>

Adorno here reaffirms the violence of the dialectical relationship between thought and objects. Contemplation is always thwarted in its “urge” to “fully disclose” objects. It fails to capture the object, a failure that, as I argued in the previous chapter, necessitates an unavoidable violence of exclusion in the relationship of thought to objects. To suppose that this is not the case is to “project” violently onto objects. Yet, having affirmed this unavoidable violence, Adorno immediately speaks of a “contemplation without violence.” He describes this contemplation as a way of thinking that would conceptualize the object without incorporating [*einverleiben*] it, respecting, in thought, the difference or distance between the concept and its object. This notion might initially seem contradictory, given Adorno’s commitment to the unavoidability of violence. How can thought be unavoidably violent and yet hold the potential for non-violence? To understand the logic of this claim, one must read the two parts of the quote together.

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<sup>108</sup> *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. New York: Verso, 2005; *Gesammelte Schriften Band 4: Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003.

Given Adorno's commitment to the idea that violence is unavoidable, his claim concerning non-violent contemplation ought not to be taken as a straightforward endorsement of what I called in chapter two a traditional notion of non-violence. Adorno is not arguing that it is possible to move completely beyond or to break out of the violent, identitarian character of thought. Rather, the notion of *non-violence* put forward here is one that would attempt to avoid or resist violence by acknowledging the violence. The possibility of following out the promise of thought, the *hope* of thought to deal justly with its object, would involve identifying clearly in thought the relationship between concepts and objects. As outlined in the previous chapter, a clear articulation of this relation reveals that the logic of thought, as a logic of identity, implies exclusion, hierarchization, and domination. Hence, for thought *faithfully* to represent objects means that thought must acknowledge the truth of its relationship to objects. It requires thought to own up to its violent distortion of its object. Adorno's interest in the possibility of non-violence is a very peculiar one. He is unwilling to abandon the idea that it is possible to avoid violence in the process of conceptualization, for to concede that possibility would deny the truth moment of this process: that there is some identity between thought and objects. Yet simultaneously he resists the notion that *non-violence* is something radically and non-dialectically opposed to violence. This issue of the suppression of dialectics links Adorno's paradoxical conception of non-violence with his critique of "modern" philosophy.

### **I: Non-Violence in Bergson and Husserl**

As far as I know, Adorno never took up explicitly the issue of pacifism nor did he put forward an explicit critique of political or social discourses of non-violence. However, he is very concerned with an attempt on the part of "modern philosophy" to "break out" of the categories of

the conceptual, an attempt to provide access to that which is other than thought. It is, in fact, precisely this attempt that defines “modern” philosophy:

[t]he interest of philosophy in the non-conceptual [. . .] is not new; we can say that in the last generation of philosophers [. . .] interest in this question was very much alive. And whatever products of that generation have any claim to be *modern* are defined by this need. (LND 70/106)<sup>109</sup>

Modern philosophy is an exploration of the non-conceptual and its relationship to the conceptual. Adorno positions this interest as a response to logical positivism: “the universal dominance of causal, mechanical thinking [...] the unsatisfactory implication of cause-and-effect thinking for the desire to comprehend” (LND 70/106). Modern philosophy attempts to address the failure of logical positivism to provide a satisfactory account of what is other than thought. The question of violence involves itself here insofar as modern philosophy addresses the way in which positivism excludes what cannot be reduced to the mechanistic categories of cause and effect. Adorno’s critique of modern philosophy coincides here with his hope that conceptualization may avoid doing violence to its object. He singles out Husserl and Bergson as “two of the most important representatives of this trend,” as they both attempt to articulate the means by which one could access the essence of the world without reducing that world to one’s thinking of it (LND 70/106). But Adorno finds that neither Bergson nor Husserl achieved their aim of providing access to the non-conceptual, as the non-conceptual remains in their thinking “something mental, subjective” (LND 71/108).

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<sup>109</sup> *Lectures on Negative Dialectics: Fragments of a lecture course 1965/1966*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Translated by Rodney Livingston. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008; *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003. Hereafter abbreviated LND.

Bergson fails to formulate a viable alternative to logical positivism because he “dogmatically assumes, willfully, it would seem, a duality of knowledge” (LND 71/108).<sup>110</sup> Bergson divides knowledge into two realms: a conscious realm of classificatory knowledge and a more essential and unconscious realm of pre-conceptual objectivity. He considers the second realm to be the “higher truth” of objects, accessible through a kind of intuition of the affective and temporal experience of the *life* of objects. Adorno argues that Bergson cannot justify this separation of knowledge into these two spheres, insofar as “the so-called intuitions or those images that are supposed to possess a pre-conceptual objectivity in the subject cannot be expressed except through the medium of concepts” (LND 71-72/108). Bergson cannot separate the realm of conscious thinking from the realm of intuition because “intuition” can only be articulated in terms of the thinking subject. His thinking fails, for example, to recognize that the very prioritizing of one realm of knowledge over the other is the seminal gesture of conceptual subjectivity and not a pre-conceptual fact of temporal life. Adorno is equally critical of Bergson's notion of “duration,” arguing that the absolute and non-conceptual character of “duration” cannot be justified except through an act of positing, which is no different in kind from an act of first philosophy.<sup>111</sup> He thus falters in his failure to recognize the dialectical relationship between his two realms of knowledge. Bergson does not see that the expression of pre-conceptual objectivity occurs via the medium of conceptuality. This critique is quite similar in spirit to Derrida’s somewhat obscure critique of Bergson in “Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the limits of Reason Alone.” There Derrida is at pains to show that one cannot absolutely separate religion from technology, faith from reason, except through a gesture

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<sup>110</sup> For a concise account of Adorno’s critique of Bergson see Alastair Morgan *Adorno’s Concept of Life*. New York: Continuum, 2007, 40-44.

<sup>111</sup> See *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique—Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*. Translated by Willis Domingo. Oxford: Blackwell.

of sovereign violence. One cannot, as Bergson would have it, maintain a duality of knowledge without using the force of subjectivity and thus risking the very confusion and violence from which duality was intended to protect one.<sup>112</sup> Adorno and Derrida are both concerned with a certain anti-dialectical dualism in Bergson that attempts to overcome any reference to the violence of the conceptual sphere, while relying on the categories, distinctions, and most importantly the force of that sphere.

Adorno's concern with Husserl emerges in a similar vein, but his critique of Husserlian phenomenology is much more thorough and detailed than his work on Bergson.<sup>113</sup> In particular, he takes issue with Husserl's notion of intentionality. Adorno reads Husserl as attempting to reveal the non-conceptual, objectivity of entities by omitting "everything that is merely individuated, in other words, tied to time and space" (LND 71/107). Through this omission of an entity's accidental elements—the phenomenological bracketing of the world—Husserl hoped to show that the "logical unity of kinds or species" was an objective fact of entities themselves and "not produced by the abstract mental operations of the subject" (LND 71/107). Hence, intentionality reveals the objectivity of objects, those aspects of objects which call thinking rather than being themselves products of thinking. Adorno takes issue essentially with this phenomenological bracketing of the world, not because he thinks that thought is not inherently called by objects, but rather because he does not think that this relationship is in any sense "non-conceptual." His evidence for this claim is that "what gazes out at us when I extract the pure entities from the individuation or the individual phenomena [. . .] is at bottom nothing but the good old concepts of classificatory logic" (LND 72/109). Husserl's project of intuiting the essential characteristics of objects through the relationship of intentionality ends by simply

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<sup>112</sup> FK. It is important to note that in this text Derrida first speaks of a "general logic of autoimmunity."

<sup>113</sup> I am here indebted to Alastair Morgan's profoundly clear account of Adorno's critique of Husserl in *Adorno's Concept of Life*, 44-47.

finding in objects the traditional categories of the mind. This result is not in itself a problem for Adorno, provided that Husserl is willing to give up the notion that these categories are the pre-conceptual essence of objects. But he is not. The result is that Husserl does no more than give “an ontological vindication of the concepts,” showing the essential attributes of the objects to be the universal categories of the concepts. As with his critique of Bergson, Adorno finds here a certain anti-dialectical moment. On the one hand, Husserl argues that there is an intentional and necessary relationship between thought and objects and, on the other, he suggests that this relationship allows a kind of *unmediated* access to objects.

There is again a kinship between Adorno and Derrida. Derrida addresses Husserl in *Speech and Phenomenon* and “*La Phénoménologie et la clôture de la métaphysique.*” What he finds fundamentally at stake is Husserl’s attempt to isolate or protect the “living present” from any metaphysical abstraction. Husserl wishes to present a “theory of knowledge” freed from metaphysical presupposition. This project is thwarted, however, as

phenomenology seems to us tormented [*tourmentée*], if not contested from within, by its own description of the movement of temporalization and of the constitution of intersubjectivity. At the heart of what ties together these two decisive moments of description we recognize an irreducible nonpresence as having a constituting value, and with it a nonlife, a nonpresence or nonself-belonging of the living present, an ineradicable nonprimordially. (SP 6/5)

The effort to unearth phenomenologically a theory of knowledge free from metaphysical abstraction is challenged from the beginning, as “phenomenology” is always already a form of conceptual abstraction. Phenomenology cannot provide access to a pure, unscathed, fully-present phenomenality, because it is constituted by an irreducible non-phenomenological, non-



present, non-living moment that undermines the purity of the phenomenological project. This fundamental non-present is contained in phenomenology's very articulation of the development of time and subjectivity.

Derrida will play out his challenge to the Husserlian project around the issue of the “sign” (*Zeichen*). His dialectically inspired discussion will show that Husserl cannot maintain with any consistency his distinction between indication (*Anzeichen*) and expression (*Ausdruck*). These terms, brought together in the concept of the “sign” (*Zeichen*), tend toward confusion. Yet if Husserl cannot maintain a clear distinction between indication and expression, if, as Derrida says, “the *Verflechtung* which couples the indicative sign to the expression were absolutely irreducible,” then the whole Husserlian project falters. In such a case, there would no way to determine clearly whether those things *intuited from* objects are indeed expressions of the objects or impositions of the mind—the living present of the object or lifeless conceptual abstractions. On Derrida's reading, the distinction between indication and expression falters as Husserl has no means by which to adjudicate between indication and expression except through recourse to these terms themselves. What in the end guarantees the connection between life and expression is nothing but the lifeless tautology that expression is not indication because it is expression. This tautology destabilizes the entire Husserlian project.<sup>114</sup> It is interesting that what is at stake in these earliest works of Derrida is the question of “the living present,” of the non-life in life. This resonates with my claim in chapter three that the deconstructive project was shaped from the start by a concern for life.

Both Bergson and Husserl fail for Adorno insofar as each remains “idealistic,” drawing, albeit in different ways, on some notion of “immanent consciousness” to explain what is other than consciousness (LND 73/107). Their difficulty is that they remain indebted to an implicit

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<sup>114</sup> See in particular chapter two, “The Reduction of Indication.” (SP 27-47/28-33).

notion of consciousness—and the fact that it is implicit is the problem. As a result, both these positions reinstate that which they wish to contest: the basic privileging of subject over object and the reduction of non-conceptuality. Adorno directs the reader to “draw a lesson from this [Bergson’s and Husserl’s failure],” a lesson that is entirely amenable to Derrida, that “[e]very attempt at a breakout [of conceptuality] that is initiated by the subject, out of subjective whim—we might also say: out of subjective freedom of choice—is doomed to futility” (NDL 73/107). Every mode of inquiry that begins from subjectivity, which is to say every mode of human inquiry, will forever be indebted to the sphere of conceptualization. This debt is as inevitable as the proverbial death and taxes, and to deny it in the name of arriving at some form of unmediated non-conceptuality or intuited essence is conceptual self-deception. However for Adorno, Bergson and Husserl go beyond simple self-deception in their failure to acknowledge that their articulations of the non-conceptual are inherently dialectical and based in the conceptual. He finds in them something ideological and ultimately dangerous in that they operates both to reduce the objective world to the categories of the subject and to naturalize this reduction. His critique of Heidegger most emphatically develops this concern for reduction and naturalization.

## **II: Heidegger and the Naturalization of History**

As with Bergson and Husserl, Adorno understands Heidegger’s thinking as emerging from a concern with idealism and the question of the non-conceptual. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno positions the project of fundamental ontology as a response to an “emphatic need, the sign of something missed, the longing that Kant’s verdict on knowledge of the Absolute should not be the end of the matter” (ND 61/69). This “ontological need” results from Kant’s having shut off access to non-conceptuality and having limited cognition. Heidegger worries, according

to Adorno, that by limiting cognition and denying individuals access to things-in-themselves, Kant's system denies humans access to their essence, creating an empty, evacuated notion of humanity. Adorno shares this worry over an evacuation of content from the subject. Furthermore, this concern provides one way of framing Adorno's general worry with phenomenology: "a universal feeling, a universal fear, that our progress in controlling nature may increasingly help to weave the very calamity it is supposed to protect us from" (ND 67/75).<sup>115</sup> Adorno shares the suspicion that by circumscribing the world, instrumental reason has worked to deny individuals their substantive life and to encourage society's control over individuals. However, he finds Heidegger's approach to this shared concern radically opposed to his own.

Adorno's critique of Heidegger's ontology spans nearly four decades during which he consistently maintains that the key problem with Heidegger's thinking is its attempt to overcome, suppress, and immobilize the dialectical logic immanent to it. This guiding principle of Adorno's critique was formulated as early as 1931-32. In "The Idea of Natural History," Adorno argues that Heidegger fails in his attempt to solve the antithesis of "nature" and "history." He maintains that "[e]ven though history is acknowledged to be a fundamental phenomenon, its ontological determination or ontological interpretation is in vain because it is transfigured directly into ontology" (NH 115/350-351).<sup>116</sup> In positing historicity as ontology, Heidegger is able to resolve the antithesis of nature and history showing "historicity" to be, as Susan Buck-

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<sup>115</sup> Adorno states explicitly the kinship between the project of phenomenology and his own work when he writes "[w]e want to adhere as closely to the heterogeneous as the programs of phenomenology and of Simmel tried in vain to do; our aim is total self-relinquishment. Philosophical contents can only be grasped where philosophy does not impose them. The illusion that it might confine the essence in its finite definitions will have to be given up" (ND 13/18). The illusory reign of the subject, the belief that the always finite articulation of subjective could give one access to universal or infinite truth concerning objects must be abandoned in order to precisely proceed toward some grasping of the non-conceptual.

<sup>116</sup> "The Idea of Natural History" Translated by Bob Hullet-Kentor. *Telos* (60), 1984, 111-124; "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte." *Gesammelte Schriften, Volume 1*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996, 345-365.

Morss puts it, “the ontological essence of existence” (Buck-Morss, OND 54).<sup>117</sup> However, this solution is wholly unsatisfying because it remains necessarily abstract or, as Adorno puts it, “[t]he problem of historical contingency can not be mastered by the category of historicity” (NH 114/350). Heidegger’s “solution” falls short as the “extreme factual being” of the world is irreducible to the categories of “historicity.” The historical structures of “life” remains always already irreducible to material life, despite the fact that one can find in any particular example, (Adorno chooses the French Revolution) “every possible element of this structure of life” (NH 114/350). Heidegger conflates the structural elements of an object with the object itself, a move that entraps his thought in the same basic paradox that trips up Bergson and Husserl: namely, that despite his attempt to break ties with the subjective, metaphysical standpoint, he remains implicitly committed to the abstracting force of conceptualization. In more dialectical terms, Heidegger attempts to suppress the dialectical relationship between the subjective and objective, ontology and history, but relies implicitly on the abstracting power of the ontological (NH 112/348). The charge that Heidegger suppresses dialectics is more clearly articulated in “The Actuality of Philosophy,” where Adorno argues that Heidegger breaks with idealism only through recourse to “an essentially undialectical and historically pre-dialectical ‘ready to hand’ (*zurhanden*) reality” (Adorno, AP 123/328).<sup>118</sup> However, Adorno’s most extended critique of Heidegger comes in his last text, *Negative Dialectics*.

Fully a third of *Negative Dialectics* is devoted to a critical examination of Heidegger. Adorno proposes an immanent critique of Heideggerian ontology, since “[w]e have no power over the philosophy of Being if we reject it generally, from the outside, instead of taking it on in

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<sup>117</sup> Susan Buck-Morss. *The Origins of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: The Free Press, 1977. I am indebted to Buck-Morss’s beautifully clear and concise account of Adorno’s early critique of Heidegger over the issue of nature and history 52-57.

<sup>118</sup> “The Actuality of Philosophy.” *Telos* (31). New York: Telos Press, 1977, 120-133; “Die Aktualität der Philosophie.” *Gesammelte Schriften, Volume 1*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996, 325-344.

its own structures—turning its own force against it” (ND 97/104). Adorno aims to show that articulating the relationship between Being and entities in terms of the ontological difference undermines the promise of fundamental ontology to break with a metaphysical, abstract notion of Being. Key to Adorno’s argument is the claim that Heidegger’s insistence on the ontological difference evacuates any content from his notion of Being. Being, then, becomes a mere abstract and ultimately transcendental notion:

If we try to accomplish Heidegger’s distinction of Being from the concept that circumscribes it logically, we are left—after deducting entities as well as the categories of abstraction—with an unknown quantity which nothing but the pathos of its invocation lifts above the Kantian concept of the transcendent thing-in-itself. (ND 98/105)

The notion of the ontological difference attempts to sequester Being from entities and the categories of the concept; but, Adorno contends, in separating it from any materially existing *entity*, this operation circumscribes Being and leaves it utterly abstract and void of content.

Following his earlier texts, Adorno’s critique concerns itself with the denial and suppression of the dialectical relationship between Being and entities that he finds immanent to Heidegger’s position.

Despite his insistence on the ontological difference, in order for the project of fundamental ontology to have anything to say concerning the existence of human beings, Heidegger must remain committed to the dialectical relationship between Being and entities. He must suppose that the exploration of the meaning of Being is related to our existence. If this were not the case, his thinking would from the beginning be nothing but empty idealism, describing some notion of Being that bears no relationship to existence at all. If he wishes to

preserve the power of Being to show us something essential about our existence, Heidegger cannot insist on Being as utterly separate from entities as he does with his notion of the ontological difference. The fundamental tension that drives Adorno's critique is that Heidegger's commitment to the ontological difference renders Being devoid of all determination.

For Adorno, “[t]alk of the ‘ontological difference’ comes down to the tautology that Being is not entity because it is being” (ND 115-116/121). The notion of the ontological difference leads Heidegger, quite logically, to argue that one cannot define Being nor make it into a concept, as this would violate the radical difference between Being and any particular form of existing. In fact any qualification of Being must on this model betray Being, insofar as Being is not reducible to any particular moment of existing. Hence one can define Being only negatively as that which is not an entity or a concept. This failure to articulate Being is the very tautology for which Heidegger castigates Western metaphysics, namely, “that it always left unsaid what is meant by Being as distinct from entity” (ND 116/121). Heidegger's absolute insistence on the dialectically arresting notion of the ontological difference leads him to reenact the logic he claims to overcome. Yet, the price paid for insistence on the ontological difference is not merely that it evacuates all content from the notion of Being but, more profoundly, that it devoids the human subject of content.

By insisting that Being and entities are related fundamentally and that at the same time they are radically different, Heideggerian logic works to reduce all entities to Being. While Being must bear directly on what is most fundamental to the human *Dasein*, it cannot have any material or conceptual content. The resulting logic holds that what is most fundamental to humans is not their material existence but their relationship to the abstract notion of being. To make specific material existence the most fundamental aspect of *Dasein* would amount to giving

particular content to the notion of Being. This Heidegger will not do. For Adorno, then, Heidegger's insistence on the essential character of Being must devalue the material lives of subjects:

The whole construction of the ontological difference is a fake, a 'Potemkin's village.' It is erected solely to permit a more sovereign rejection of doubts about Being, by means of the thesis of entity as a mode of Being to be. As each individual entity is reduced to its concept [. . .] that which makes it an entity as opposed to the concept will disappear. (ND 116-117/122)

If entities require Being as an expression of what is most essential to them, and if Being can have no relationship to the particularities of an entity's material existence, then it follows that all those aspects of the individual entity that are not part of their relationship to Being, all their material content, becomes accidental and disappears in the face of the forceful call of Being. The abstract notion of Being operates to render entities equally abstract. The same reduction was already at work in Heidegger's attempt to resolve the problem of nature and history, for there too he shows the essence of entities as nothing other than Being. The danger of this suppression of dialectics is that it not only reduces entities to the concept of Being, excluding their material existence, but, worse, it ontologizes this exclusion.

Adorno's critique of fundamental ontology presents a system in which every individual entity is identified with the "pure" concept. In such a system history itself appears ontological. "The ambivalence of the doctrine of Being, the fact that it deals with entity and at the same time ontologizes it—in other words, deprives it of all its nonconceptuality by resorting to its *characteristica formalis*—this ambivalence also determines the doctrine's relation to history" (ND 129/134). Heidegger's logic leads to the conclusion that what is essential to humans is their

common grounding in Being. This ground, while necessarily independent from their lived existence, is shown ultimately to be identical to it. By this logic, it makes no difference what kind of state or social system one inhabits. The only matter of import is one's relation to Being. Yet Being has no determinable content: "That history can be ignored or deified, depending on the circumstances, is a practicable political conclusion from the philosophy of Being" (ND 130/135). For Adorno, the repression of dialectics subjugates individuals to the historical and social situations they inhabit, ontologizing those situations as the very essence of Being.

Adorno had identified the same problem in his reading of Bergson and Husserl, insofar as both these thinkers tend toward an anti-dialectical moment. Any attempt to "break out" of the conceptual circumscription of the non-conceptual comes at the risk of reaffirming the very conceptual categories and logic that one set out to overcome. These supposed escapes from the conceptual work by a sleight of thought that obscures rather than severs the dialectical connection between the conceptual and non-conceptual. In all three of the cases explored above, the categories of the conceptual reemerge as aspects of the *non-conceptual*. Thus these attempted escapes from the conceptual in fact operate to naturalize its domination. This domination is spelled out most clearly in Adorno's reading of Heidegger, whose anti-dialectical position ontologizes our history as the history of Being as such and thus ontologizes and naturalizes our historical violence as reflections of Being. Adorno's reading has grave implications for any project that tries to substantiate itself beyond violence or that claims for itself privileged access to unmediated existence, for he reveals such a project to be a disguised and consequently pernicious reenactment of the conceptual violence from which it claims to escape. In this sense, Adorno's critique of phenomenology and ontology returns us to the set of issues and questions with which we ended the previous chapter: violence, exclusion, ideology,



domination, mediation, exchange, fungibility, and life. Adorno is critical of phenomenology and ontology because he reads them as implicit reinstatements of the dominance and violence of the conceptual at the expense the concrete lives of subjects. Here, though, there is cause at least to wonder about the validity of Adorno's critique, particularly of Heidegger.

Only a surprisingly small body of literature has explored the quality of Adorno's reading of Heidegger.<sup>119</sup> In their introduction to the only book length investigation of this dispute currently available in English, Iain Macdonald and Krzysztof Ziarek argue that this paucity can be explained in large part by the fact that dialectics and ontology historically have been understood to be in radical opposition. In addition, the vehemence of Adorno's critique and Heidegger's utter silence has made it is all too easy to dismiss this dispute as a fundamental difference of project or as an essential misunderstanding. Macdonald's and Ziarek's collection challenges this traditional reading. It also highlights the opinion, held even by those generally sympathetic to Adorno, that his reading of Heidegger may not be particularly accurate.

To cite an example of this opinion, Alastair Morgan in his book, *Adorno's Concept of Life*, argues that "the central problem with Adorno's critique [of Heidegger] is that he fundamentally misunderstands the radicalization of ontology that Heidegger proposes" (Morgan, ACL 48). This misunderstanding results from Adorno's misrepresentation of Heidegger's concept of Being as a kind of absolute immediacy, "something primary and immediate beyond subject-object relations" (ACL 48). On this account, the problem with Adorno's critique is that it ignores fundamentally the fact that "Being is precisely that within Heidegger's philosophy that

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<sup>119</sup> The most comprehensive discussions of this debate have yet to be translated into English. See Hermann Mörchen, *Adorno und Heidegger. Untersuchung einer philosophischen Kommunikationsverweigerung* Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981, and *Macht und Herrschaft im Denken von Heidegger und Adorno* Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980. Dieter Thomä, "Verhältnis zur Ontologie: Adornos Denken des Unbegrifflichen," in *Theodor W. Adorno: Negative Dialektik*, ed. Axel Honneth and Christoph Menke. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2006. Iain Macdonald and Krzysztof Ziarek, eds., *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Questions* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008 is, I believe, the only book length encounter with this dispute in English.

is never totally present or immediate” (ACL 48). Adorno makes Heidegger into too much of an ontological dogmatist. Morgan’s reading fits into the camp that sees Adorno’s differences with Heidegger, in large part, as the result of a basic misunderstanding. While I am in some ways sympathetic to this claim that Adorno misunderstands certain aspects of Heidegger’s thought, I am unsatisfied with this explanation.

I would argue that Morgan’s defense of Heidegger comes to show him as, in fact, more dialectical than Adorno paints him. Directly following his statements concerning Adorno’s misunderstanding of Heidegger’s notion of Being, Morgan writes:

This [Adorno’s misunderstanding] is not to negate Adorno’s critique of the ultimate dissolution of every particularity into an ideal concept of Being, which is itself contentless and has no relation to history. Nor does it get around Adorno’s general critique of *prima philosophia*, of an ultimately ahistorical grounding in everyday life. (ACL 49)

Morgan concludes that while Adorno misunderstands Heidegger’s notion of Being as being too anti-dialectical, his ultimate conclusions about Heidegger are more or less correct. One will recall that Adorno’s conclusions are based on his claim that Heidegger suppresses the dialectic inherent in his notion of Being. Here lies a tension in Morgan’s readings, for how can Adorno fundamentally misunderstand this particular aspect of Heidegger while remaining more or less right in his claim that Heidegger suppresses the oscillating, dialectic character of Being?

Morgan seems to be defending Heidegger by arguing that his notion of Being is actually far more dialectical than Adorno maintains. If true, then, on Adorno’s own terms, Being is not an empty, ahistorical notion. Paradoxically, Morgan’s assertion that Adorno *misunderstands* Heidegger works only to vindicate more surely Adorno’s general approach. Clearly acceptance of this

claim leads to all kinds of other problems given that Heidegger is so often explicitly anti-dialectic. Yet, is not Morgan's position indicative of a desire to stop short of completely dismissing Heidegger, a desire to maintain what Adorno might call the *truth moment* in fundamental ontology? It seems to me that Adorno marks this desire as well.

Despite what one might think about Adorno's reading of Heidegger, one can hardly claim that it is dismissive. Adorno was from the beginning of his career interested in following out the project of fundamental ontology. In doing so, he constantly puts two particular questions to Heidegger. The first concerns the possibility that, despite Heidegger's intentions, subjectivity and conceptuality may continue to play an undisclosed role in his thinking. The second concerns a kind of clandestine violence that seems to permeate Heidegger's thinking, particularly in his justifying of certain historical, social, and political consequences as expressions of Being. It is interesting that these questions are not particularly unique to Adorno. They sit at the heart of the debate over Heidegger's relationship personally, politically, and philosophically to National Socialism. Adorno is hardly alone in worrying that phenomenological and ontological thought might contain a certain, undisclosed or disavowed debt to transcendental subjectivity, or that it might, through this debt, come to justify certain historical or social formations. Hence what to my mind is most convincing about Adorno's critique of Heidegger is the way it aligns with other more phenomenologically inspired critiques. In particular, it seems extremely close to Derrida's critique of Heidegger in *Of Spirit*. This collusion further illuminates not just the connection between Adorno's and Derrida's thought but the character of Adorno's concern over the domination of life.

## II: Of Spirit, Of Thought, Of World.

In *Of Spirit*, Derrida traces a tension in Heidegger's thinking regarding the notions of *Geist* in its broad implications as "spirit" and "mind," as well as in the adjectival modifiers spiritual, intellectual, religious, and sacred. Heidegger will from *Sein und Zeit* (1927) to "Language in The Poem: A Placement of Georg Trakl's Poem" (1953) warn of a need "to avoid" (*vermeiden*) terms such a *Geist*, *geistig*, and *geistlich* (Derrida, OS 1/11).<sup>120</sup> One must resist, Heidegger claims, referring to *Geist* in the sacred or religious context of *geistlich* but also in the more "intellectual" or "mental" connotations of *geistig*. Therefore, on the one hand, he cautions resistance to any reliance on the whole brood of terms that would relate to "spirit," to the living presence of the voice, and to the intellectual gathering together of the conceptual. On the other hand, though, he makes extensive use of the notion of "spirit" throughout his work: "he often spoke not only of the word 'spirit' but, sometime yielding to the emphatic mode, in the name of spirit" (OS 1-2/12). Derrida's analysis traces Heidegger's move from rejection and the provisional use of *Geist* in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) to his eventual recuperation of the term in the *Rectorship Address* (1933). Derrida shows Heidegger's seeming attempt, over a twenty five year period, to reclaim the notion of *Geist*, *geistlich*, and *geistig*, as though his thinking could not do without its invocation and "force." (OS 5/18). I cannot here do justice to the whole of Derrida's analysis. However, it seems that he exposes a tension in Heidegger's work that parallels remarkably a similar tension in Adorno's. Both Derrida and Adorno trace Heidegger's attempt to avoid the subjective realm and its ontologizing of Being as he circles around a clandestine recourse to the categories and force of that realm. The degree of this similarity is brought out with particular clarity in Chapter Six of Derrida's analysis.

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<sup>120</sup> *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; *De l'esprit*. Paris: Galilée, 1987. Hereafter abbreviated OS.

Having worked carefully through Heidegger's varied uses and denials of the notion of spirit from *Sein und Zeit* (1927) to *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), Derrida argues that Heidegger comes to two seemingly contradictory conclusions concerning spirit, particularly in its relationship to "world" and to "animals."<sup>121</sup> Heidegger will hold in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* that "the world is already a *spiritual* (*geistig*) world. The animal has no world or any environment (*Umwelt*)" and is thus devoid of any relationship to spirit (OS 47/75-76). Animality is not part of spirit and does not touch spiritual matters, nor is spirit directed toward animality. In short, spirit has nothing to say about *the animal*. This absolute separation of animality and spirit remains "remarkably constant" throughout Heidegger's corpus (OS 54/85). Juxtaposed to this absolute separation, though, Heidegger puts forward in answer to the question "what is the world," the following three theses: "1. The stone is without world (*weltlos*). 2. The animal is poor in world (*weltarm*). 3. Man is world-forming (*weltbildend*)" (OS 48/?). Here "the animal" stands as a kind of median point between that which has and that which lacks world. Derrida points this out as a paradox, insofar as the claim from the *Introduction* "appears expressly to contradict the three theses" (OS 47/75-76). How can it be that animals have no world and no relation to spirit and yet are *weltarm*? Given that, for Heidegger, the "world" is always a spiritual world, if animals are poor in world are they not also at least potentially poor in spirit and, therefore, perhaps within reach of a world after all? How can it be that "the animal does and does not have a world"? (OS 50/80).

Heidegger is strident in maintaining that he does not mean *weltarm* in the sense of a "difference of degree." He is not arguing that animals take part in or have access to the human world or that the difference between the world of humans and whatever world animals may have

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<sup>121</sup> *An Introduction to Metaphysics* did not appear in published form until 1953. However, this material was the subject of a course of university lectures given in 1935.

is a matter of quantity or degree. Heidegger rather insists on a qualitative distinction between the human and animal world. Animals have and inhabit an altogether different world than that of the human *Dasein*. His insistence here rearticulates the ontological difference. Being is other than entities, in the same way that the world of the human *Dasein* is other than the animal world. Yet, Derrida wonders “what justifies this concept of privation once the animal is no longer a species of the human world” (OS 49/78)? If the animal world is utterly distinct from the human, there seems no reason to describe the animal’s relationship to its world as one of privation. The notion of “privation” is a comparison that necessarily introduces relationality, hierarchy, and ultimately anthropocentrism into the world and between humans and animals. In what sense are animals deprived of *their* world unless it is not entirely or actually theirs but in fact belongs to others to whom animals are not, as “privation” suggests, equals?

Hoping to clarify Heidegger’s use of the word *poor* in this context, Derrida turns to the discussion of “poverty” and “privation” in *Sein und Zeit*. This text, he finds, does little to address the problem, since Heidegger makes a distinction there between the privation (*Privation*) of *Dasein* and the privation (*Entbehrung*) under discussion here. The privation (*Privation*) of *Dasein* is already of a different order than the privation (*Entbehrung*) of animals. The distinction between these two privations will not help to clarify the relational call of *Entbehrung*, as that very relationality is already put out of bounds by the alterity between *Privation* and *Entbehrung*. In fact, Heidegger seems in no hurry to resolve this paradox at all, saying that ““metaphysics and essentiality have a logic different from that of the sound understanding of men”” (OS 50/80). Derrida attributes this lack of urgency to Heidegger’s “wariness of Hegelian Reason.” He resists resolving this paradox out of a concern for the way in which the call to resolution tends toward the “dialectical power of absolute reason.” He does not want to stray into metaphysical

abstraction or into dialectics. Yet Derrida cautions that “[i]t would be necessary, precisely around the problem of animality, to reelaborate the question of Heidegger’s relationship to Hegel,” because “[o]nce the differences had been recognized [. . .] troubling affinities might again show through” (OS 50-51/80). This same concern for the way in which Heidegger seems to reestablish the very speculative absolutism that he wants to resist is at the heart of Adorno’s critique. In a fashion not alien to Adorno, Derrida’s analysis begins to show that Heidegger’s unwillingness or inability to address the paradox of *the animal* has everything to do with the way in which his system remains committed, often obliquely, to the priority of the conceptual over the material. However, Derrida first reframes the paradox of the animal as a question of alterity.

Derrida calls up Heidegger’s animal, both poor in world and without world, and reframes its paradoxical condition as a struggle between “two values incompatible in their ‘logic’: that of lack and that of alterity” (OS 49/78). Heidegger, unwilling to abandon either the absolute alterity of the animal and human worlds or the privation of animals in relationship to their world, attempts to maintain simultaneously these two incompatible values. His position then mirrors precisely his unwillingness, cited by Adorno, to abandon either the ontological difference or the essential relationship between Being and entities. Like Adorno’s critique, Derrida’s argues that while unwilling to abandon either the logic of alterity or privation, Heidegger will insist on hierarchizing these logics.

Although positing both a logic of alterity and a logic of privation, everything in his analysis dictates that “privation” remain subservient to the moment of alterity. In fact, Derrida will go so far as to argue that all of Heidegger’s thinking concerning “world” and “spirit” rests on this moment of hierarchy, the supposed superiority of the alterical over the privative. Heidegger remains committed in every way to the absolute alterity of the human and animal

worlds: “It is always a matter [for Heidegger] of marking an absolute limit between the living creature and the human *Dasein*” (OS 54/85). For Heidegger, the ontological difference always wins out over the mediation of the privative. This privileging of alterity reveals itself in a series of supposedly alterical oppositions that, for Heidegger, define the relationship between the human *Dasein* and *the animal*. For example, in a gesture that is remarkably classical in its logic, Heidegger will deny *animals* access to language,<sup>122</sup> *techné*,<sup>123</sup> and, perhaps most importantly, “to entities *as such* and in their Being” (OS 54/85). The animal, in utter opposition to the human *Dasein*, will be that which has no language, art, or access to Being. In identifying this moment where Heidegger, in support of his thinking on the world and spirit, attempts to maintain these absolute and anti-dialectical oppositions, Derrida could not be closer to Adorno. Heidegger’s thinking subsists on the force of its anti-dialectical insistence, its denial and suppression of dialectics. Hence, in a move that is Adornian in spirit, Derrida contends that it is precisely this suppression of the relational logic of the privative in favor of alterity that compromises Heidegger’s thinking.

Derrida would be the first to argue that there is something compelling even necessary in Heidegger’s emphatic call for alterity. In particular, the attempt to break with an anthropocentric, scientific, and political notion of existence requires positing that the “as such” of entities is something different than previously thought.<sup>124</sup> Being is not reducible to the history of metaphysics, anthropology, biology, or social science. Being is not identical to ontology. Nevertheless this insistence on alterity “founders on essential difficulties.” It is still impossible to maintain a notion of poverty dictated wholly by a logic of alterity:

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<sup>122</sup> OS 53/83.

<sup>123</sup> OS 57/89-90.

<sup>124</sup> OS 55/86.



if privative poverty indeed marks the caesura or the heterogeneity between non-living and living on the one hand, between the animal and human Dasein on the other, the fact remains that the very negativity, the residue of which can be read in this discourse on privation, cannot avoid a certain anthropocentrism or even humanist teleology. This is a schema which the determination of the humanity of man on the basis of Dasein can no doubt modify, displace, shift—but not destroy.

(OS 55/86)

Heidegger's insistence that privation mark the animal's relationship to world necessarily and irreducibly introduces relationality into his notions of world. One cannot have privation without mediation, without the "negativity" that would connect what is *poor* to that which is *other than poor*. Recalling the most essential collusion between his critique and Adorno's, Derrida ultimately will name this negativity "dialectics."<sup>125</sup> One cannot, as Heidegger would have it, claim the privilege of the human over the animal or Being over entities without an implicit claim to relationality, insofar as privilege, superiority, privation, and poverty always "imply hierarchization and evaluation" (OS 56/87). Hierarchy itself is always already a relation, a bringing together, and a gathering by force. Heidegger cannot announce the ontological difference or the difference between the human and animal without appealing to mediation, relationality, negativity, and dialectics. His insistence that the difference between the human and the animal remain absolute, unaffected by relationality draws its force from precisely the relational force that it denies. Hence, Derrida comes to the very conclusion put forward by Adorno some two decades earlier: that Heidegger's thinking founders on a denial of the dialectic inherent to it. This undoing strikes to the very heart of Heidegger's project, weighing "upon the possibility of the *onto-logical* as such, upon the ontological difference, the access to the Being of

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<sup>125</sup> OS 57/89-90.

the entity [...] and first of all to the world of man as *weltbildend*” (OS 56/87). The logic of privation and relationality speaks already to the impossibility of dividing absolutely the materiality of the *onto* and the conceptuality of the *logical*. It haunts the ontological difference. It orients what it could mean to be a unique member of a species. It traces the almost imperceptible pause between the world and the force that shapes that world. Hence, Derrida’s claims return us to the central issues of the relationship between conceptualization and the material world, subjects and objects. In fact, Derrida argues that Heidegger’s suppression of dialectics orients a privileging of the subjective at the expense of the objective, a claim that brings us back round to Derrida’s discussion of spirit.

Having explored Heidegger’s inability to address the paradox introduced by the figure of the animal and the logic of privation, we can look to Derrida’s reading of spirit in its relationship to world and the “symptoms that this situation now lets us read in Heidegger’s text” (OS 56/88). The most striking of these symptoms is that, for Heidegger, “[t]here can be no animal *Dasein*, since *Dasein* is characterized by access to the ‘as such’ of the entity” (OS 56-57/88). Heidegger’s absolute separation of the human *Dasein* requires the notion that *Dasein*, its world, and its relationship to spirit is something utterly foreign to animality. Heidegger is emphatic: the animal does not have access to the human world, and the world is fundamentally spiritual, therefore, the animal does not have access to spirit. This claim follows naturally enough from Heidegger’s commitment to a logic of alterity. Animals and *Dasein* live and die in totally separate worlds. Yet, if there is no animal *Dasein*, then conversely *Dasein* is and must be devoid of all animality, devoid of all that is not spirit or reducible to spirit. If we turn this impossibility of an animal *Dasein* on its head, we see that the human *Dasein* cannot, on Heidegger’s account, have access to the animal world, the world that is fundamentally not *of* spirit. Humans cannot

have access to animality, for such access would compromise the utter alterity of the human and animal worlds. It would make *Dasein* at least in part animal, a possibility to which Heidegger is utterly allergic. Hence, everything in Derrida's analysis suggests that the human *Dasein* must be confined to the world of spirit; it is, in fact, nothing but spirit all the way down. Add to this the notion that the "*Geist*" at stake here is necessarily a *Geist* and *geistig*, that relates always in some sense to the mind, intellectualization, conceptualization, and *psyché*. One is then treading in the footsteps of Adorno's claim that Heidegger's thinking remains fundamentally committed to the dominance of the subjective. For Heidegger, the human *Dasein* excludes all that cannot be reduced to the categories of the subject and mind. Here we have moved beyond the scope of Derrida's argument, insofar as Derrida makes no mention of a *Dasein* that appears to be only on the side of the mind. However, this conclusion is in no way alien to Derrida's analysis.

Early in his reading of Heidegger, Derrida remarks that, "manifest" in the three theses from *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, one can find "intact, sheltered in obscurity, the axioms of the profoundest metaphysical humanism" and, he emphasizes, "I do mean the profoundest" (OS 12/28). This contention that Heidegger remains consistently committed to the tenets of humanist metaphysics is one of the key elements of Derrida's reading in *Of Spirit* and in his entire engagement with Heidegger. Heidegger continues stalwartly to privilege the "human" subject, with its powers of reason and conceptualization. More technically, he advances a logic of "gathering" (*Versammlung*) and thus a logic of unity and oneness. One of the sites of this gathering will be "*Geist*" (OS 9, 106-107/24, 174-176).<sup>126</sup> In addition, Derrida indicates in several places throughout *Of Spirit* the resonance between *Geist* and the categories of subjectivity and conceptualization (OS 1, 41/12, 67). This brings us back to the "troubling

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<sup>126</sup> "*Geist* cannot fail to gather this interlacing insofar as, for Heidegger, as we shall verify, it is another name for the One and the *Versammlung*, one of the names of collecting and gathering" (OS 9/24).

affinities” between Heidegger and Hegel, the way in which Heidegger’s thinking comes to incorporate the very privileging of reason, spirit, and human conceptuality that he claims to be avoiding. Derrida sees everywhere in Heidegger’s thought the mobilization of the forces and categories of conceptualization for which Adorno chastises Heidegger. This metaphysical humanism is nowhere more pronounced than at those moments where Heidegger addresses the questions of the “world,” “life,” “humans,” and “animals.” Hence, the stakes of Derrida’s argument bear a striking resemblance to those of Adorno, for whom “life” was always the issue. In fact, Derrida’s critique draws explicit lines between Heidegger’s thinking and a certain naturalizing of the historical world in the shadow of National Socialism, and he sketches a relationship between Heidegger’s articulation of spirit and Nazism.

Derrida links Heidegger’s recuperation of spirit and his clandestine commitments to humanism to the naturalization of the historical and political world and a possible “spiritualization of nazism.” He concludes among other things that: “in a sense which would, to be sure, *like* to think itself not Hegelian, historicity is immediately and essentially determined as spiritual [for Heidegger]. And what is true of history is true of the world” (OS 37/61). Both in his *Rectorship Address* and two years later in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger posits that there is a fundamental link between history and spirit: “Heidegger associates, with a hyphen, the adjectives *geistig* and *geschichtlich*: *geistig-geschichtlich* [spiritual-historicity] is *Dasein* [. . .] *geistig-geschichtlich* is the world” (OS 37/61). There is a fundamental connection between spirit, historicity, the human *Dasein*, and the world. In fact, the world and *Dasein* are nothing but spiritual-historicity. The notion that the “world” of the human *Dasein* is always already a “spiritual” world is here expanded to include history—historicity is spirit. There is a chain of equivocation in Heidegger’s thinking, one that fundamentally links spirit-world-history-*Dasein*

into a kind of relay of identity and equivalence. All of these terms come to appear as reflections of one another. Hence, what will be true of spirit will be true of the world, of *Dasein*, and of history. Derrida's analysis discloses an implicit moment of reduction in Heidegger's thinking of spirit, one in which the historical specificity of "earth and blood," the historical specificity of a certain "Germanness," comes to be equated fundamentally with the spiritual essence of the world and *Dasein*. This seeming naturalization of a distinctly German history and its connection to the "metaphysics of subjectivity" raises and in fact announces, for Derrida, that the "risk" inherent in Heidegger's thinking is justification of not just any history but the history of nazism.

There is a serious and disturbing connection between Heidegger's strange reduction of spirit-world-history-*Dasein* and the justifying of nazism:

In the *Rectorship Address*, this risk [of spiritualizing nazism] is not just a risk run.

If its program seems diabolical, it is because, *without there being anything fortuitous in this*, it capitalizes on the worst, that is on both evils at once: the sanctioning of nazism, and the gesture that is still metaphysical. (OS 40/66)

The diabolical element in Heidegger's articulation of spirit that comes to justify nazism has everything to do with what remains metaphysical in Heidegger, with his commitment to and simultaneous denial of the gathering, reductive power of the subjective sphere. This commitment was expressed clearly in his insistence on hierarchy which takes the ontological difference as primary. The metaphysical gesture always attempts to take itself as primary. It in fact has no substance outside this attempt. Heidegger thus remains metaphysical insofar as he argues that history, the world, and humanity are reflections of a distinctly humanistic "spirit." This metaphysical gesture pushes Heidegger's thinking towards "the worst" for it allows him to justify the historical occurrence of nazism and, more seriously still, it allows him to posit this

history as a necessary reflection of the world as such. Note that what leads Heidegger's thinking toward the worst is not just its seeming justification of the historical occurrence of Nazism in Germany in the 1930's. Rather, it is the way that its equivocation of spirit-Dasein-history-world presents Nazism as reflecting somehow or other a structural necessity in the essence of the world and humanity. Here Derrida's analysis echoes his concern with divine power in Benjamin. There too it was a claim to purity (which is always already a claim to priority) which opened irrepressibly the possibility of the worst: "The temptation to think of the holocaust as an uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence" (FoL 298/145). Derrida also here walks in the path of Adorno's critique of Heidegger which, one will recall, worried over the justification of a certain history as a reflection of the truth of the world and humanity.

The stakes of Adorno's critique of Heidegger, and in truth his critique of phenomenology generally, lay in the tendency of these forms of thinking to naturalize the existing world. This naturalization was part and parcel of the anti-dialectical bent of phenomenology and Heideggerian thought. The anti-dialectical insistence on the ontological difference necessarily identifies entities with Being and violently excludes the material *lives* of entities. This exclusion of *life* emerges as a naturalizing of the categories of the subjective in opposition to the objective as well as a naturalizing of history as the expression of these categories. This naturalizing of history and the subsequent justifying of the world as it appears, for Derrida, connects the critique of spirit to the possibility of the worst and to absolute evil. Adorno reaches the same conclusion and returns us to the issues of non-violence with which we started this chapter.

In his Lectures on Metaphysics, Adorno speaks of the possibility of critical thinking and radical evil:

One will not survive by preserving some so called higher sphere [...] which reflection is not allowed to touch, but by pushing the process of demythologizing, or enlightenment, to the extreme. Only in this, if at all, is there any hope that the philosopher, through his self-reflection, will not end by consummating triviality, the consummation of which is absolute horror. For no matter how one may view the works of Hannah Arendt, and I take an extremely critical view of them, she is undoubtedly right in the identification of evil with triviality. But I would put it the other way round: I would not say that evil is trivial, but that triviality is evil—triviality, that is, as the form of consciousness and mind which adapts itself to the world as it is, which obeys the principle of inertia. And this principle of inertia truly is what is radically evil. I would say, therefore, that if metaphysical thinking today is to have any chance [...] it will have to cease being apologetic and pointing to something one can hold onto and never lose, and think against itself. (M 115/180)

The hope of critical thinking and of philosophy hangs on the possibility of adopting a mode of thought that declines to accept the world as it is. Forms of consciousness that merely mirror the current world, modes of thinking that accept things as they are, these are the seat of radical evil. On the face of it, the notion of “inertia” as radically evil seems odd. In a world full of rape, murder, domestic violence, war, genocide, abuse, slavery, hunger, exploitation, and all manner of other evils, inertia seems to be the least of our problems. But Adorno’s is here referring to a larger claim: that *this* world, with all its violences, is the only possible world. Inertia is radically evil because it justifies implicitly all violence and suffering. The only hope of resisting this tendency of thought toward inertia is, as I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, to think

through in the most dedicated and extreme ways the relationship between thought and the world. Thought must “think against itself,” that is, one must refuse to ignore the violence inscribed in the relationship of one’s thought to the world. The hope and promise of thought resides in thought’s unwillingness to accept as final or beyond question its own characterization of the world. Adorno resists the discourses of phenomenology and ontology not because they remain committed to a notion of conceptualization, but because, by suppressing their inherent reliance on dialectics, they refuse to admit that commitment. This denial then leads them to ontologize and, more terrifyingly, to naturalize the world as it is. It is this deception that neither Derrida nor Adorno can accept. Adorno’s critique of phenomenology and particularly of Heidegger then serves to highlight the nature of his relationship to discourse of non-violence as well as to mark the contours of his concern for life, his relationship to Derrida, and the possibilities of a critical ecology.

### **III: There is No Natural Violence, Only Naturalizing Violence.**

Exploring Adorno’s work from the perspective of its relationship to violence reveals a number of things: First, it clarifies Adorno’s thinking of non-violence as well as beginning to trace what Adorno means by “redemption.” It shows the way in which a “non-violent” thinking would not be one free from violence, but rather one that attempts however problematically to acknowledge its violence. This is, as Adorno says at the end of *Minima Moralia*, “the simplest of all things” and yet “the utterly impossible thing” (MM 247/281). Thought must attempt to fashion perspectives “without velleity or violence, entirely from the felt contact with its object.” It must develop its perspectives from its embeddedness in the world, without the distorting force of expectation, desire, or teleology. Yet, it cannot do without this force. It is “marked [...] by



the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape” (MM 247/281). I have argued that this commitment to the paradoxical and autoimmune character of thought structures Adorno’s work and particularly his unwillingness to sanction a thinking that would claim to act beyond violence. For Adorno, thinking, critique, and action are not non-violent activities. Yet this does not mean, as Drucilla Cornell concludes, that Adorno is left with only a negative, diagnostic position.

Adorno is absolutely clear that one can work to resist violence: “The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” (ND 18/29). The act of thinking, the critical act of following out the relationship between thought and the world necessarily works to address suffering. This is because a truly critical thought does not shy away from its own relationship to violence. Such a position is no magic solution to the question of violence. Thought, even critical thought cannot guarantee that it will alleviate violence. It is as Derrida says in “Violence and Metaphysics” “very little—almost nothing” (WD 80/118). Yet it is not a wholly negative project. It is, for Adorno, a project that necessarily contests the current system of capitalist wage labor. It is a project that contests the relationship of humans to themselves, to each other, and to all other living creatures, insofar as it destabilizes the notion of anthropocentrism. It is a project that attempts to think through what it means to have a positive project at all, and is it therefore not entirely alien to positivity.

Second, it shows that fundamental to negative dialectical method is not only a concern for violence but for the way in which the categories of conceptualization circumscribe and determine violence in opposition to non-violence. Whether in his concern for identity and exchange or his critique of Heidegger, Adorno argues consistently that thinking is always entangled with a determination of violence. The question of naturalization is the most obvious

site of this determination, the circumscribing of what will count as legitimate and not, what will be seen as tolerable and not, are all ways of asking what violence is acceptable and what is not. Hence, Adorno's thinking is throughout an exploration and contestation of violence. In fact, one could say that the question of violence is the driving force of critical theory, marking both its orientation and stakes.

Third, the centrality of violence in Adorno's thinking allows one to clarify the connection between Adorno's philosophical and metaphysical project and his political and ethical interventions. As I argued in Chapter Four, the detail with which Adorno marks the concrete dimensions of his critique of identitarian logic, particularly though the notions of exchange, domination, and fungibility fundamentally contests the longstanding critique of Adorno as problematically metaphysical, theological, or aesthetical. This is not to suggest that there is not important work to be done to develop the exact political and social nature as well as possibilities of critical theory. This project is in small part and attempt to do just that. However, it is clear that Adorno does not fail to provide a clear picture of the logic that connects his critique of identity to his concern over suffering and violence. In particular, it is the exclusion, distortion, and destruction both of living human beings and the possibilities of life. It is the moment of identity that determines what forms of *life* can be recognized as *life*. It is the logic that determines who or what gets included in the community of *the living*. This focus on life and the violence done to life both in the logic of identitarian thinking and the system of capitalist wage labor, however, does more than merely answer certain of Adorno's critics. It also exposes the relationship between Adorno's work and Derrida's.

Fourth, I have argued that the question of violence, tracing the modes, figures, and operation of violence in both Derrida's and Adorno's writings, allows one to see great

similarities in their modes of inquiry. This similarity rests primarily on two shared axioms. First, that there is no form of thinking, signification, or action that does not, by its very logic, entail violence, which is to say the violent exclusion of that which is other than thought. There is no breaking out or getting beyond this violence. Second, the stakes of this violence have everything to do with life and the possibilities and denial of life. Violence always circles more or less closely living and surviving. I have attempted to show how these two axioms arise in their work in ways that constantly overlap and intersect. One sees this intersection in the way in which they both articulate the logical violence of identity and writing as emerging through the figures of exclusion and the justifying or naturalizing of that exclusion, the way in which the Adorno's critique of ideology and Derrida's critique of logocentrism emerge as fundamentally critiques of primacy and origin, and the way in which Adorno's emphasis on the self-destructive character of the subject's relationship to his own moment of objectivity mirrors Derrida's notion of autoimmunity. However, one also sees this intersection in their profound concern for life. Both their projects are oriented toward the question of *life*. Hence, I have argued that if one were to ask the question, "why does Derrida's and Adorno's work proceed in the way it does?" "Why do they remain consistently critical of thinkers that do not proceed in a deconstructive or immanent manner?" "Why must we worry about the way that we philosophize at all?" The answer to each of these questions would inevitably return us to the figure of life, of life affirmed or life denied, of what it means to live or continue to live in this world, here and now. Hence, one finds in Adorno's work the very orientation towards ecology that I marked in Derrida's at the end of Chapter Three.

To take up Adorno's concern for identity, exchange, and naturalization returns us to the question of life. This question will certainly involve the question of human life, of what human

life has become under industrial capitalism and contemporary culture. However, it will also involve the question of non-human life, the circumscribing of *life* in the broadest sense. There is a way in which critical theory calls always already for a challenging of the categories of the *animal* and the *human*. Hence, we see here the “gleam” of the “critical ecology” that Derrida suggests at the end of his Frankfurt. We can see now why Derrida would claim that “the most crucial paths in the future reading of Adorno” must lead to “what we call in the singular [...] the *Animal*” (Derrida, PM/F 180/54). It is the terrifying reduction of life to the singular, the claim that *this* is the only form of life there is or the only form of life that matters that Adorno constantly thought against. Yet, although we can see here the reason that Derrida would claim that Adorno’s work, along with his own, calls for a new “critical” or “deconstructive ecology,” we have yet to develop the exact character or implications of that ecology. In addition, we have yet to discuss the many differences between Adorno’s and Derrida’s thinking, difference which I will argue are more complimentary than divisive. My conclusion addresses these two issues.

**Conclusion:  
Toward a Deconstructive and Critical Ecology**

“Fascism begins when you insult an animal,  
including the animal in man”<sup>127</sup>  
--Jacques Derrida

This project has had three aims. First, I wanted to expose the way that questions of violence and life shape fundamentally the character and orientation of Derrida’s and Adorno’s projects. It is my contention that their thinking is, in a general sense, inspired by and directed toward a concern for the entanglement of life with violence. Tracing this entanglement offers a means to explore and articulate the interconnection between their theoretical concerns and their ethical, social, and political engagements. I have thus been at pains to show that noting the various places where violence emerges in their work, particularly as it relates to questions of life, contributes to the scholarly debate surrounding their *practical* thinking. Secondly I have sought to demonstrate how their shared concern for violence and life constitutes a remarkable affinity between Derrida’s and Adorno’s works. I find a marked continuity between the deconstructive endeavor and critical theory, a continuity that encompasses many of the central figures and concerns of both these modes of inquiry. Thus, for example, I have argued that there is an important intersection between the critiques of Heidegger by Adorno and Derrida over the issue of Heidegger’s disavowed commitments to the force of subjectivity and the categories of conceptualization. This is but one of the many points at which my project has marked a resonance between Adorno’s and Derrida’s thought. My third purpose returned me to Derrida’s suggestion at the end of his Adorno Prize Address that an important future path of inquiry into Adorno’s work will explore the role of *the Animal*. Inspired by that suggestion and in light of the

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<sup>127</sup> F 181/56.

prominent role in the thinking of both men of questions concerned with life and animality, I end this project by outlining what one might call a “critical” or “deconstructive” ecology.

I find that the thought of Derrida and Adorno is ecological through and through and that it contributes to the growing conversation on violence, environmentalism, and ecology that can be heard across the sciences and humanities. In developing this argument, allow me to revisit briefly the similarities I have traced in Derrida’s and Adorno’s thought and to address a number of significant differences. I am interested in the way these thinkers diverge on questions of sovereignty and ideology along with the series of related concepts: legitimacy, naturalization, law, and history. I maintain that this divergence is complementary rather than divisive and therefore does not disrupt the fundamental affinity between their works.

I have argued that Derrida and Adorno share an interest in the way in which all practices and systems of signification, meaning, and thought emerge and operate through a logic of exclusion. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida names this logic “reparatory violence.” It marks both the delimiting of the originary difference that establishes the possibility of appearance and the protective “morality” that works through hierarchization to protect appearing against non-appearing, presence against absence, the inside against the outside, and non-violence against violence. Reparatory violence is the irreducible “economic moment,” the moment of exclusion that produces and justifies *this* object or *this* world, here and now, while excluding other possible appearances of the object and the world (G 7-8/17). Similarly, Adorno argues that the process of conceptualization works by excluding the unique spatio-temporal aspects of an object and simultaneously naturalizes this exclusion by attributing the abstracted elements of the concept to the object as its essence. Dialectics, like reparatory violence, names a paradoxical double logic that allows for appearance but only at the price of violent exclusion. This basic logic of

exclusionary violence, I have argued, orients Derrida's and Adorno's projects in that both deconstruction and critical theory take shape as immanent critiques of such logic. This is not to suggest that deconstruction and critical theory are reducible to one another. However, they do emerge in relationship to a common concern and, more importantly, they articulate this concern in a remarkably similar fashion. The centrality of exclusionary violence to the orientation and development of Derrida's and Adorno's thought marks a fundamental affinity in their work. This shared concern for the necessity of exclusionary violence also links each of their projects to a critique and rethinking of the discourses of non-violence.

Chapters two and four explored Derrida's and Adorno's critiques and appropriations of the notion of *non-violence* and their resistance to discourses of non-violence, understood as attempts to demarcate powers or spaces *free* from violence. This resistance emerges from their mutual worry that establishing the *purity* of the *non-violent* forecloses the question of violence. To identify clearly a non-violent space or force assumes a claim to know what violence and non-violence are. Such discourses, therefore, presuppose an answer to the question of violence which for Derrida and Adorno is impossible given the irreducibility of exclusionary violence.

Derrida traces this impossibility via the figure of sovereignty, showing that discourses of non-violence can substantiate their closure of the question of violence only through recourse to an unjustifiable sovereign *decision*. I argued that one can understand Derrida's notion of "sovereignty" as primarily a *deciding* on and *establishing* of the border and consequently the character of the *violent* and the *non-violent*. The Schmittian notion of the sovereign as "he who decides on the exception" is, thus, interpreted by Derrida in terms of the violence of this

“excepting.”<sup>128</sup> To decide on the exception decides which violence will be condoned, which is to say, it separates illegitimate from legitimate force or separates violence from force.

Adorno traces this impossibility through the notion of dialectics and ideology. The discourses of non-violence can, he argues, foreclose the question of non-violence only by suppressing the dialectic between the violent and non-violent. I traced this concern through his critique of Bergson, Husserl and particularly Heidegger. The sticking point for Adorno is the inherently anti-dialectical character of claims to purity whether understood as the purity of human access to the non-conceptual or the purity of a non-violent space or force. He maintains that with the suppression of dialectics comes an ideological reduction of the objective world to the categories of the subjective. This reduction is another way of talking about the foreclosing of the question of violence. Ideology establishes the primacy of thought over objects in a way that justifies thoughts domination of and violence towards objects. Where there is ideology, there is an implicit separation of the violent from the non-violent, a separation of what is primary and superior from what is secondary and inferior.

Hence for both Adorno and Derrida, discourses of *pure* non-violence render themselves untenable through their claim to have established a clear separation of the violent and from the non-violent—to have halted, through sovereignty or conceptualization, the dialectical relationship between violence and non-violence. However, the crucial issues in the stakes of this resistance to non-violence lies in the way suppression of the question of violence tends toward the *worst* violence, a point which warrants further clarification.

Chapter Four shows that the *worst* is associated for both Derrida and Adorno with a certain justification or naturalization of the world as it is. This concern harks back to the critique

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<sup>128</sup> Carl Schmitt. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985, 5.



of non-violence, where it showed up as an issue regarding the attempt by discourses of non-violence to justify or naturalize certain notions of violence and non-violence by putting an end to the question of violence. Derrida associates this move with the “silence” and “darkness” of the *worst*.<sup>129</sup> Writing in his essay on forgiveness, of a “new *cosmopolitics* of the cities of refuge,” Derrida says:

[l]et us not proffer an example [of the victims of violences worldwide], for there are too many; and to cite the best known would risk sending the anonymous others back into the darkness (mal) from which they find it hard to escape, a darkness which is truly the worst and the condition of all others” (CF 6).<sup>130</sup>

The “worst” is tied irreducibly to the darkness and silence of unannounceability. Every acceptance of an exclusive or absolute interpretation of an event or of the world “risks” calling down this darkness and silence. This risk occurs, as Derrida says in *Writing and Difference*, every time a “discourse” attempts to “reappropriate” its violence.<sup>131</sup> What leads the discourses of non-violence toward the worst is their attempt to foreclose the question of violence, to offer some exclusive content to the figure of violence, and thus to reappropriate their own moment of sovereign *decision*.

Adorno is even more explicit concerning the character of *worst*, defining it as “a principle of inertia [*Prinzip der Trägheit*]” (M 115/180). To accept *this* world as it is constitutes the *worst*, for acceptance justifies implicitly all the violence and suffering of *this* world. The

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<sup>129</sup> See WD 130/191.

<sup>130</sup> *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Translated by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. New York: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>131</sup> “Discourse, therefore, if it is originally violent, can only *do itself violence*, can only negate itself in order to affirm itself, make war upon the war which institutes it without ever being able to reappropriate this negativity [...] *Necessarily* without reappropriating it, for if it did so, the horizon of peace would disappear into the night (worst violence as previolence). This secondary war, as the avowal of violence, is the least possible violence, the only way to repress the worst violence, the violence of primitive and prelogical silence, of an unimaginable night which would not even be the opposite of day, an absolute violence which would not even be the opposite of non-violence: nothingness or pure non-sense” (WD 130/190-191).

discourses of non-violence, by attempting to put an end to the question of violence, ask us to accept that the question of violence has been solved. Derrida and Adorno then resist the discourses of non-violence as mere reappropriations of violence replete with the invitation to accept violence unquestioningly. However, as I have argued, the real stakes of their concern for the worst and worry over the exclusionary violence that undergirds it are everywhere tied to the question of life.

For both Derrida and Adorno, the exclusionary violence of the “reparatory” or of “dialectics” was from the start entangled with *life*, was violence to *life*. Derrida insists that logocentrism is inescapably bound up with ethnocentrism and that the critique of “presence” was always a critique of the “living present [*présent vivant*]” (SP 6/5). That violence and life are interwoven is nowhere clearer than in Derrida’s notion of sovereignty. I have contended that sovereignty is one of the names Derrida gives to the power of identity. It is the *force* that determines the inside from the outside and, consequently, the violent from the non-violent. In so far as it is a *decision* on violence, it demarcates who or what belongs on the inside, marks whose or what’s suffering or death counts as an ethical issue, and which *life* can be sacrificed with impunity. In another instance, his 2001 interview with Elisabeth Roudinesco entitled “Violence Against Animals,” he says, “[a]ll the deconstructive gestures I have attempted to perform on philosophical texts [...] consist in questioning the self-interested misrecognition of what is called the Animal in general, and the way in which these texts interpret the border between Man and the Animal” (FWT 63).<sup>132</sup> Indeed all of Derrida’s work and, in fact, every deconstructive operation bears on the question of *life*. It asks for an accounting of the terms, concepts, and logic by which a text delimits the border between *the human* and *the animal*. This delimiting is necessarily

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<sup>132</sup> Derrida, Jacques, and Elisabeth Roudinesco. *For What Tomorrow... A Dialogue*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.

violent insofar as it is always a “self-interested misrecognition.” Every deconstructive gesture interrogates the logic by which the creature called *human* defines itself in opposition to *the animal* and shows this logic necessarily to be violent and self-serving. This namer of animals, this Adam, simultaneously names himself and establishes his character as the creature who will have dominion over what is other than *self—animal*. Derrida names this “self-interested misrecognition” sovereignty and establishes the direct bearing on life of this question of violence.

Adorno's work also exhibits this co-arising of concerns for violence and *life*. His assertion that the purpose of philosophy is to “address suffering” already implies a concern for life, for only living, animate objects seem to suffer. This concern is clearer in his tracing of the logic of conceptualization and the relationship between subjects and objects. What he finds at stake in the ideological bent of thought is the domination of objectivity by subjectivity. In its inescapable tendency to take itself as primary in relation to all objectivity, thought attempts to dominate objectivity by reducing all objectivity to itself, including the objectivity that is the living subject. He maintains that the logic of thinking always tends toward violence against the *living* subject or against what is *living* in the subject. He locates this violent reduction of *life* in the social figures of “exchange,” “wage labor,” and in the “experience” of fungibility. He traces how the logic of identity and exchange violently circumscribes and reduces *life* to the categories of the “wage laborer.” He finds that where there is identity and exchange, there is always a reduction of *life*, a shoring off of the forms, modes, and expressions in which *life* can appear. *Life* as such becomes limited. Fundamentally at stake in both Derrida's and Adorno's analyses then is the question of violence to life and the many forms that this violence takes.

However their shared concern is expressed in very different terminological and conceptual lexicons. In addressing violence, Derrida emphasizes terms such as “writing” and “sovereignty” which leads to a very different conceptual and terminological constellation than does Adorno’s emphasis on “dialectics” and “ideology.” Derrida’s use of “sovereignty” relates immediately to a lexicon of subjectivity, ipseity, decision, legitimation, law, the nation-state, and God. Adorno’s notion of “ideology,” on the other hand, relates more immediately to dialectics, identity, exchange, conceptualization, domination, naturalization, history, and capitalism. As a result of this difference, Derrida’s work articulates a much more developed critique of political sovereignty and law, while Adorno expounds a more thorough critique of ideology, the culture industry, and perhaps most obviously capitalism. Much has been made of these differences both by those who see continuity in Adorno’s and Derrida’s projects and those who see a fundamental impasse between their thinking. It is outside the purview of this project to take up all the ramifications of these differences. However, I would contend in light of their overarching concern for the entanglement of violence with life, that these differences can be read generally as complimentary rather than divisive.

Despite their very different terminological and conceptual lexicons, I have tried to show that Derrida’s and Adorno’s thinking is oriented and inspired by a fundamental assertion: there is no form of thinking, signification, or action that does not, by its very logic, entail the violent exclusion of life. The brevity of this claim is deceptive, for as I have argued, Derrida and Adorno contend that this assertion calls into question all of its requisite parts. It encompasses questions of what is meant by violence, life, thinking, action, human, animal, exclusion, sovereignty, ideology, and a host of other things. Thus from the perspective of this shared commitment, I would argue that there is nothing inherently contradictory in the differences

between the terminological lexicons of Derrida and Adorno. For example, I find much in Adorno's critique of "Herrschaft" in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or "autonomy" in *Aesthetic Theory* that resonates with Derrida's critique of sovereignty.<sup>133</sup> Additionally, Derrida's concern for the "violence of economy" would, I think, move him closer to an Adornian style critique of capitalism.<sup>134</sup> I do not mean to reduce the differences that would certainly emerge in these analyses. Rather, my contention is that, insofar as Derrida's and Adorno's thinking remains committed to an immanent critique of the entanglement of life and violence, their projects offer one another resources rather than obstacles. This also is true *within* the very lexicon of their own work, which brings me to the question of my own *choices* within this project.

In tracing the question of violence in Derrida's and Adorno's thinking, I have been led to privilege certain terms and certain texts over others. I was directed in these choices by Derrida's suggestions at the end of his Adorno Prize Address and by the desire to explore as clearly as possible what seemed to me the fundamental role of violence in their critical approaches. In the case of Derrida, I started from some of his earliest texts, outlining the role of violence from the beginning of his thinking. Out of the themes I discovered there (exclusion, ethnocentrism, animality, the unavoidability of violence) I proceeded to explore the question of violence in Derrida's corpus more generally. Interestingly, my reading of Adorno proceeded in almost the opposite direction, beginning with his final text and looking back to some of his first writings. I chose this path because *Negative Dialectics* is Adorno's clearest and most sustained articulation of his project as a whole.

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<sup>133</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullet-Kentor. Edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

<sup>134</sup> See Catherine Malabou's "Economy of Violence, Violence of Economy (Derrida and Marx)"

My purpose was to illustrate the essential role questions of violence have for negative dialectical method and critical theory more generally. I maintain my chosen *modus operandi* has been appropriate and effective, but I acknowledge that it came at a price. It excluded certain terms and texts which were passed over completely or appeared only briefly. I dealt hardly at all with Adorno's extensive writings on art and music or Derrida's explicitly political texts, *Politics of Friendship* and *Specters of Marx*. These omissions resulted from the sovereign and ideological gesture of my own analysis and were made practically for the sake of manageability. Clearly I have not given an exhaustive or complete account of violence or life in Derrida's or Adorno's work. I could have picked other terms, other trajectories, which would have benefited and suffered in other ways from this sovereign and ideological gesture. My own process thus bears out the claim of Derrida and Adorno regarding violence and life: that *it* (life, thought, the world) could be otherwise, that insofar as something is at all, some *life* is excluded. One can always start from other terms or sites of engagement. Yet upon closer examination every site is always different than it appears, leading one to proceed differently than intended. Neither Derrida nor Adorno pretends to escape the gravity of this uncertainty or this tendency toward violence against life. Yet, they refuse to take these unavoidable limitations as a justification for doing nothing. They insist, in fact, that something must be done. This returns us to their commitment to acknowledging the unavoidability of violence in order to discover the truth that the logic of exclusionary violence is productive as well as destructive, positive as well as negative, active as well as passive. Before turning to sketch a critical ecology, it seems worth lingering with this question of *passivity* (can one ever do anything else?).

As I emphasized at the beginning of my reading of Derrida and Adorno, the unavoidable character of exclusionary violence means that there is always violence. Violence against life, the

exclusion of *life*, cannot be done away with through some power or force of *decision* or *conceptualization*. All such attempts draw their power to identify and demarcate the possibility of *non-violence*, the possibility of their success, from the violent logic of identity or sovereignty from which they seek to escape. This was the guiding theme of Derrida's and Adorno's resistance to the discourses of non-violence. They remind us constantly that violence is going to happen whether one wants it to or not. Given the unavoidability of violence, every act carries within it a profound passivity that exists as an irreducible inability for any act to secure itself beyond failure. On the one hand, it is crucial to remain aware of this passivity, this limit to action, this possibility for failure lest we repeat, or worse, extend violence. On the other hand, both Derrida and Adorno insist that we must not refuse to think and act, for refusal would tend toward the silent and dark inertia of the worst. What are we to do with this paradoxical imperative? How are we to understand this *passivity* that amounts to violence within every action? To answer that question, both Derrida and Adorno begin by associating passivity with the past, finitude, and history, all terms that relate to limiting, circumscribing, and bounding action.

Speaking of passivity in relation to speech in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes:

This passivity is also the relationship to a past, to an always-already-there that no reactivation of the origin could fully master and awaken to presence. This impossibility of reanimating absolutely the manifest evidence of an originary presence refers us therefore to an absolute past. That is what authorized us to call *trace* that which does not let itself be summed up in the simplicity of a present. (G 66/97)

Derrida relates passivity to the “past [*passé*]” and to an “absolute past [*passé absolu*].” Passivity marks a fundamental limit to activity’s claim to presences, completeness, and ahistorical absoluteness by showing its relationship to a finite history and the history of the finite as such. Passivity limits the ability to “reactivate” the possibility of a fully present mastery or control. It shows something in all activity that escapes being “summed up” by *that* activity, here and now. Hence, passivity marks the limit of any particular action and the utter limit of the sovereign pretences of activity as such. It is important to note that passivity does not mark the destruction of all possible action, but rather shows that actions are never as absolute, final, and decisive as they would claim to be. Thus to follow out the figure of passivity as fundamentally challenging the identitarian and sovereign pretenses of action requires rethinking the relationship between passivity and action in terms of its connection to the past, finitude, and history.

In “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida describes this rethinking of the possibility of action as a “combating” violence with “a certain other” violence. He says, “this *vigilance* is a violence chosen as the least violence by a philosophy which takes history, that is, finitude seriously; a philosophy aware of itself as *historical* in each of its aspects [...] aware of itself, as Levinas says in another sense, as *economy*” (WD 117/172). Here Derrida articulates more clearly a form for critical activity. He argues that such activities require a “vigilance” that acknowledges “finitude.” Such vigilance holds onto an explicit awareness of action’s historical nature. It is a constant reminder that all action is limited or made finite by the fact that it is historical through and through. Every action is finite in that it occurs here and now, in a certain location, having a certain history, speaking a certain language. Every action is determined by things it did not choose or decide, relationships it did not pick or determine. Vigilant action calls for awareness of all these things.



Derrida also describes this kind of vigilant activity as being conscious of itself as an “economy.” Recall from chapter one that Derrida describes reparatory violence using the term “economy.” Hence critical activity may also be understood as action that requires the recognition of its own exclusionary violence. On this account, vigilant action never ceases posing to itself questions of violence, the question of its own violence, and the question of the very categories of violence as such. Such action never ceases asking about its own violence, but also about the very nature of activity, passivity, decision, action, etc. Clearly it does not give up the categories of decision, activity, passivity, etc. Rather it relentlessly challenges both itself and the category of action. Discussing the autoimmune and always violent character of performatives, Derrida writes in *Rogues*:

What must be thought here, then, is this inconceivable and unknowable thing, a freedom that would no longer be the power of a subject, a freedom without autonomy, a heteronomy without servitude, in short, something like a *passive decision*. We would thus have to rethink the philosophemes of the decision, of that foundational couple of activity and passivity, as well as potentiality and actuality. It is thus rational, legitimately rational, to interrogate or deconstruct—without however discrediting—the fertile distinction between constative and performative. (R/V 152/210. My Italics)

Given the always violent nature of all claims to activity, action requires that one “think [...] something like a passive decision.” Derrida is unwilling to give up the language of activity altogether, unwilling to give up the lexicon of “decision.” Instead, he argues that we must rethink it along a different path. To return to *Writing and Difference*, this is a path related to “finitude” and “history.” Understanding passivity as related to finitude allows one to see this “passive

decision” as something like a historical *activity*, a *deciding* that is open to be acted upon, augmented, and changed. This *decision* admits that its scope is limited fundamentally not just by other decisional forces but by its own history. As Adorno describes the possibility of philosophy in *Negative Dialectics*:

Disenchantment [*Entzauberung*] of the concept is the antidote of philosophy. It keeps it from growing rampant and becoming an absolute to itself [...] philosophical content can only be grasped where philosophy does not impose them. The illusion that it might confine the essence in its *finite* definitions will have to be given up. (ND 13/24. My Italics)

To counteract the tendency of critical thought toward violence involves refusing its tendency to take itself as absolute. To disenchant the concept is to deny thought the illusion that its definitions could be anything other than finite. Disenchantment thus becomes another name for passivity, in the sense that it functions to limit the identitarian and sovereign tendencies of thought.

I have argued that for Derrida and Adorno the unavoidability of exclusionary violence, the irreducible passivity at the heart of action, should be understood in many ways as a more emphatic call to action. It is a call for critical activity that challenges all within action that would blind it to its finitude and history, all that would convince it of its unconditional sovereignty. A “passive decision” therefore is one that by its nature calls for ever more vigilant action. Having established the necessary link between violence and life, having shown that violence to life is unavoidable, we come now to the concern for ecology inherent in the idea of vigilant action and in the thought of Derrida and Adorno as a whole.

Ecology is about coexistence. It is about how existing things relate to one another and to their environment at large. It concerns itself with the innumerable relationships between living and non-living things. Thus, my claim that Derrida's and Adorno's thinking is inherently ecological says no more at the start than that their thinking is immanently concerned with relationships involving *life*. Their shared claim that there is no form of thinking, signification, or action that does not entail the violent exclusion of *life* amounts to the claim that there is no form of thinking, signification, and acting that is not ecological—concerned with coexistence and the violence of coexistence. This broad assertion of course brings up questions regarding the very categories of living thing, ecology, coexistence, violence etc. It is thus the case that to call their thinking ecological in no way limits its scope to the scientific, sociological, or academic discourses of Ecology. It does, however, suggest that they might have something to offer those discourses and, perhaps, those discourses have something to offer their thinking as well.

To that end, let us look at the how this inherent ecological orientation aids in developing the character of *vigilant action*. Put simply, the ecological dimension orients *vigilant action*, insofar as such action emerges only within an ecological mode of thinking. Recall that the concern for *vigilant action* came out of a commitment in both Derrida and Adorno to the unavoidability of violence. Recognition of the sovereign and identitarian character of all performativity led them to rethink the meanings of *activity* and *passivity* in order to begin developing a *response* to the dangers and violences of sovereignty and identity. I have outlined their connection of passivity to the past, finitude, and history, a move that reveals the *passivity* at the core of all performativity and establishes that this passivity limits and disrupts performativity but does not destroy it. This understanding leads to the notion of *vigilant action* as a kind of *deciding* open to its *limitations*, open to the way it is oriented beyond its control. In the context

of ecological thought and a basic concern for the unavoidability of violence, the *limitations* and *openness* of vigilant action can be seen as directly related to questions of life.

*Vigilant action* is action oriented by and toward questions of life. For a performative to be *vigilant* in challenging its inherent identitarian and sovereign dimensions, it must be vigilant of questions of *violence to life*. The force of this claim does not reduce all performativity to questions of life but marks that questions of life are entangled in all performativity. On Derrida's and Adorno's accounts, the very distinction between passivity and activity, constative and performative always demarcates life and violence. The fact that one does not think of it this way does not make it not the case. Hence what makes *vigilant action* "vigilant" is that it takes the question of life as its central concern. Stated slightly differently, *vigilant action* asks continuously, "What fuels my life? On what do I live?" Derrida and Adorno both suggest that when a system or structure of meaning, signification, or action fails to acknowledge *that* it eats and to recognize *what* it eats, that system is doomed to a repetitive and ever intensifying cycle of the violence however vigorously it may contest against violence. Was this concern not the very stakes of their critiques of Heidegger in particular? Derrida and Adorno are pointing out that the question of *life* resides at the root of the ability to question as such. It sits at the heart of every attempt to determine what is *human* and *other than human*. Human, animal, self, speech, writing, concepts, techné, mourning, laughter, nakedness, love, community, ethics, politics, thinking, music, mimesis, and on and on constitute questions whose every determinable answer must perpetrate some violence against *life*, by deciding who or what is counted among those whose *life* has meaning. There is something painfully obvious about this fact. Obvious yet profoundly necessary (and perhaps under-theorized). One wonders what might happen if we

follow Derrida and Adorno here. What might we see? What new questions might appear from even the slightest attempt at this kind of *vigilance*? Who or what could it hurt?

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